

GOOD PRACTICE

Prague

A City's journey: from reactive to proactive and strategic approach in newcomer inclusion



GOOD PRACTICE ID

Essential information

Title

A City's journey: from reactive to proactive and strategic approach in newcomer inclusion

City, Country

Prague, Czech Republic

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Contact person

Geti Mubeenová, Regional coordinator of strategic management of adaptation and integration, Department of National Minorities and Integration, Prague City Hall Geti.Mubeenova@praha.eu

City context

Prague is both the capital city and a semi-autonomous region of the Czech Republic. The city of 1.4 million inhabitants is divided into 22 independent administrative districts, each led by its own mayor, which makes coordination across the city complex. While Prague had experienced a gradual increase in international migration over many years, integration policies were not mandatory across city districts, resulting in uneven approaches to inclusion.

At national level, the Czech Republic had relatively limited experience in receiving large numbers of refugees compared to some other European countries. Prior to 2022, migration policy focused mainly on labour migration and international students rather than forced displacement.

One important existing asset was the Czech Integrated Rescue System, a legally established coordination mechanism bringing together regional authorities, municipalities, police, fire rescue and emergency medical services. Although not specifically designed for migration management, this system proved fundamental in coordinating the city's initial response.

Drivers for change

Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to the arrival of a large number of displaced people in the Czech Republic, with Prague becoming the main destination due to its economic opportunities and relatively open political environment. Unlike some countries, the Czech Republic had no national quota system for distributing refugees across the country, meaning people could choose where to settle. As a result, around 350,000 Ukrainian refugees passed through Prague during this period, with more than 100,000 still living in the city today.

The scale and speed of arrivals highlighted the need not only for an immediate humanitarian response but also for longer-term governance arrangements capable of supporting social cohesion and integration.

The Journey

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Stage 1: Early response and managing initial needs

The city's immediate priorities focused on coordinating emergency support, ensuring access to essential services and managing the large number of displaced people.

The Region activated the Integrated Rescue System, requiring all 22 city districts, together with police and fire services, to follow common procedures and shared objectives. This enabled rapid coordination despite Prague's otherwise decentralised governance structure.

The city of Prague also established a dedicated municipal humanitarian budget, which still exists to this day, to finance immediate support measures while international organisations, including UNICEF, UNHCR, WHO and IOM, provided significant financial and operational assistance.

Finally, NGOs and volunteers significantly contributed to the city's emergency response.

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Stage 2: Adaptation and learning

As immediate needs became more stable, Prague recognised that emergency measures alone would not support longer-term inclusion.

The city introduced a **coordinated approach to adaptation and integration**, initially as a pilot, bringing together municipal departments, NGOs, international organisations and other stakeholders around shared responsibilities rather than isolated projects.

International funding, particularly from UNICEF, enabled Prague to pilot new approaches while encouraging a broader understanding of social cohesion. The experience also highlighted the potential to extend measures developed for Ukrainian newcomers to other residents with similar needs. For example, Prague introduced preparatory language classes ("Year Zero") for newly arrived Ukrainian teenagers before entering mainstream education, drawing inspiration from practices observed in Berlin.

Prague also increased its own **staff capacity**: 32 staff were hired to deal with the arrival peak in 2022 (project-based funding).

Stage 3: Consolidation and embedding change into city systems

In 2025, Prague definitely moved to a long-term strategic approach.

Prague used the experience of the initial response to strengthen its **permanent municipal capacity for integration**. While 32 project-based staff were recruited during the initial response, city staff successfully argued for retaining and institutionalising part of this capacity after project funding ended. By 2026, six full-time coordination posts had been integrated into the municipal administration and form the **Regional Coordination structure**, working across the Departments of Social Affairs, Education, Health Care, and National Minorities and Foreign Nationals. This provided Prague with a **permanent cross-departmental coordination capacity**, connecting municipal departments and their respective integration and adaptation activities.

The city also **substantially increased its own investment in integration**. Annual municipal funding rose from approximately €166,000 to €850,000, while maintaining a dedicated humanitarian budget for people under temporary protection (€ 800,000). The long-term objective is to gradually merge these funding streams into an integrated approach serving all residents.

A third important development was **strengthened advocacy and cooperation between political representatives, municipal experts and civil society**. The experience of the initial response created stronger links between politicians responsible for particular policy areas, municipal officers, NGOs, experts and academics. Prague moved towards a more participatory approach, creating spaces for these actors to contribute to shared solutions and longer-term strategies. This also strengthened the municipality's capacity to advocate for the needs of newcomers and for inclusive approaches at a time when responsibilities were increasingly shifting towards regional and local authorities.

Where is the city today?

Prague is now focusing on embedding inclusion across all municipal policies rather than treating integration as a separate policy area through the adoption of a new integration strategy. A key objective is the **mainstreaming of integration**: recognising that people with migrant backgrounds are represented across all population groups – including children, older people and people with disabilities – and ensuring that all municipal departments consider their needs within their regular work.

The city continues to strengthen support for its 22 districts by providing guidance, data and methodological support to help the districts better understand local needs and develop more coherent approaches.

What enabled progress?

Several factors enabled Prague's transition from reactive to proactive responses:

- the existence of the Integrated Rescue System, providing a ready-made coordination framework;
- bridging the experts (from NGO sector to public sector and vice-versa), know-how and using the data-based approach;
- strong municipal political commitment, including the creation of a dedicated humanitarian budget;
- substantial support from international organisations;
- willingness to transform temporary projects into permanent municipal structures;
- investment in permanent staffing and cross-departmental coordination;
- a deliberate shift towards participatory governance and mainstreaming.

Obstacles and lessons learnt

The city faced several important challenges, including fragmented governance across 22 autonomous districts, and dependence on short-term project funding.

A key turning point was the decision not to treat the response as a temporary humanitarian effort but as an opportunity to strengthen long-term municipal governance. Rather than allowing successful initiatives to end with external funding, Prague invested in permanent staff, increased municipal budgets and institutionalised coordination mechanisms. Another important shift was moving from refugee-specific responses towards broader, inclusive policies benefiting all residents with similar needs.

All this required sustained, often invisible advocacy by city staff towards politicians. They closely followed political priorities, highlighted the risks of inaction, and presented concrete policy options that made it easier for politicians to support and publicly own new measures. This advocacy also helped frame refugee support as part of Prague's broader municipal identity.

Recommendations to another city – the dos and the don'ts

DO'S

1. **Find innovative solutions that are built up on deep understanding of the topic.** Innovation does not necessarily mean starting from scratch. In crisis situations, both in the short term and long term, it has proven effective to build on tried-and-tested processes that already work, to which new solutions are added that are tailored to current needs.
2. **Cooperate and coordinate.** Both during the crisis and in its aftermath, it is important to understand the role of each stakeholder within the wider ecosystem. Try to involve everyone according to their needs and objectives, and also define a specific role for coordination. In an environment where many stakeholders are involved (the state, local authorities, politicians, non-governmental organisations, volunteers, international organisations, etc.), it is essential to have someone who monitors the long-term common objectives on which there is consensus. Make sure you know who is in charge of what.
3. **Sustainability, smart solutions and evaluation.** Crises often last longer than originally anticipated. You should therefore aim to develop solutions that are sufficiently flexible and simple, whilst also delivering a significant impact. This will enable you to tackle the tasks at hand in a long-term and sustainable manner. Through ongoing evaluation, you can better allocate resources and capacity over time.

DON'TS

1. **Don't wait and expect it "to sort itself out somehow".** It might, but it will most probably not be beneficial for the vulnerable or marginalised people.
2. **Don't stay on your own** – participation and cooperation with others will help you navigate the solutions more easily than relying on your own.
3. **Don't be afraid to ask for help.**

