

THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN THE INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES IN THE V4 COUNTRIES

Edited by Béla Soltész



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1. Introduction

The social integration of beneficiaries of international protection (BIPs)¹ – including recognized refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection and beneficiaries of temporary protection – has not been a traditional item on the social policy agenda of the Visegrad countries, with the exception of Czechia where it has deeper historical roots. As these countries joined the European Union in 2004, their legal and policy frameworks concerning asylum and integration were harmonized with the EU acquis, nonetheless, the topic was not a policy priority. When it became a policy priority, however, it did so in a very politicized framework. The refugee crisis of 2015-2016 made forced migration a crucial topic of the political discourse in an increasingly securitizing manner, most importantly in Hungary, but also in the other three V4 countries.

Yet, policies and discourses about migration and asylum evolved on a national level and focusing on the nation-state as a level of analysis and intervention, leaving little room to local differences. Despite the fact that the settlement of beneficiaries of international protection is rather uneven in the territory of all four countries (they prefer to stay in big cities), local governments have had little to say about the newcomers whose integration, at the end of the day, was a task related to local communities.

Local level integration policies generally evolve around practical issues such as labor market participation, access to health and social care, education and housing; these fields are monitored by the indicators of the NIEM project on the national level.² However, the legal sphere of action for local level policies is very restricted compared to national level policies, for example, they have little or no power about the entitlement of a BIP to access a given service, namely, the right to receive certain subsidies or benefit from certain services. On the other hand, it is reasonable to suppose that locally conceived integration policies are less ideologically driven than those that

1 While this analysis focuses on beneficiaries of international protection (BIPs), policies in the V4 countries impacting the lives of BIPs are often the same integration policies that are introduced for other foreigners. These are listed and analyzed here even if their target is all immigrants or foreigners in a given city or country; their assessment, however, is carried out from the perspective of their relevance for the BIPs residing there.

2 Alexander Wolffhardt, Carmine Conte and Thomas Huddleston (2020): *The European Benchmark for Refugee Integration: A Comparative Analysis of the National Integration Evaluation Mechanism in 14 EU Countries. Evaluation 1: Comprehensive Report*. Available at: <http://www.forintegration.eu/pl/pub>.

are put forward by political parties on a national level. Therefore, the study and analysis of local-level integration policies in the Visegrad countries is of unquestionable relevance.³

This analysis, developed in the framework of the V4NIEM project by authors from all four countries, endeavors to give an overview of the possibilities and limitations of local authorities in the topic of the integration of BIPs. It continues the comparative approach set by the project's previous publication, "Asylum Seekers and Beneficiaries of International Protection in V4 Countries (Updated Report)", issued in 2019.⁴ The focus is on local level policies related to beneficiaries of international protection. The "local" level is understood, most importantly, as municipal administration (LAU), however, reflections about the regional levels (NUTS2 and NUTS3) are also added where relevant.⁵

The short analyses of the role of local governments in the integration of BIPs in each Visegrad country are structured as follows. First, a very short overview presents the geographic distribution of refugees in the country with a focus on the large cities and, if relevant, on cities with a particular migration-related feature. Second, the legal and policy context of local level refugee integration is outlined, including the legal competences of subnational levels in policy areas that affect the integration of refugees and the level of their actual involvement in these policies. Third, a brief assessment of the municipal involvement in refugee integration listing existing strategic documents and municipal practices based on the NIEM integration dimensions (if relevant: housing, employment, health, education, etc.). Some of the noteworthy local practices in refugee integration are described for all four countries. The country chapters are followed by a summary and a set of policy recommendations.

With this overview, the authors would like to set the stage for further research and advocacy activities among partners from the Visegrad countries with the hope of contributing to the better social inclusion of beneficiaries of international protection.

3 Soltész, Béla (2019): *Youth migration and local governance in the Danube Region. Challenges and novel approaches*. YOUNIG Working Papers, No. 4. Available at: http://www.interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/approved_project_output/0001/32/a8afd33b12e8e57a0735556acc260449908d8621.pdf.

4 *Asylum Seekers and Beneficiaries of International Protection in V4 Countries* (Updated Report, 2019). V4NIEM project output, available at: <http://www.forintegration.eu/pl/pub>.

5 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/national-structures>.

2. Country chapters

2.1. Czechia

2.1.1 Overview of the geographic distribution of beneficiaries of international protection in the country

The available data from the Alien Police Department, though inaccurate, signal that of Czechia's 14 regions, four display a proportionally significant number of residing BIPs. Of the approximately 2,000 BIPs living in Czechia, roughly 30% reside in the country's capital, the city of Prague, while three other regions host between 10% and 15% of the BIPs each. One of these is the South Moravian region where Brno, the country's second largest city, is located. Brno is home to one of the four Integration Asylum Centers (IACs) that provide temporary shelter (up to 18 months) to recent BIPs who have entered the nation-wide, centrally coordinated State Integration Program (SIP) for BIPs.⁶ Another significant region is the Central Bohemian region surrounding Prague, providing easy access to the city while offering more affordable living opportunities. The Ústecký region, which is located in Northern Bohemia along the borders with Saxony (DE), has its fairly sized BIP population located in two cities, Teplice and Ústí nad Labem. The latter city, like Brno, hosts one of the IACs. The remaining two regions where IACs are located show only a slightly more significant number of BIPs residing in the vicinity of their Centers. Besides the aforementioned four regions, the remaining ten each show a population of BIPs between 1-3% of the total. Though the distribution of IACs influences the subsequent stay of BIPs, other common pull/push factors have a significant impact which is ultimately enabled by the freedom of movement BIPs in Czechia enjoy. Finally, even though Prague does not host an IAC, it is the location of the biggest SIP counselling center in country, employing three stable social integration workers who work with SIP-enrolled BIPs not residing in IACs (for reference, each of the IACs employs one).

⁶ Spatial distribution of IACs and other asylum facilities as well as other useful information about the SIP can be found on the homepage of the Refugee Facilities Administration of the Ministry of the Interior - <http://www.suz.cz/en/>.

2.1.2 Legal and policy context of local refugee integration

The pivotal role in the integration related agenda for both migrants and BIPs lies with the Ministry of Interior, specifically, its Department for Asylum and Migration Policy and Refugee Facilities Administration. These, to a great degree, conduct planning, coordination and implementation of the migrant and BIP related agenda. The legally non-binding Concept of Integration of Foreigners (“Concept”)⁷ in pair with the State Integration Program (SIP), which is anchored in the Act on Asylum⁸ and government resolutions⁹, are the key policy documents underlining the integration of BIPs. While the Concept covers most of the migrant groups in Czechia (including BIPs) as its target groups, the SIP focuses solely on BIPs. In very simplified terms, the SIP can be thought of as the primary reference set of instruments for more recent BIPs (12-24 months upon granting of protection, depending on their entry into the SIP), while the policies and instruments the Concept is tied with are more relevant for their time in Czechia after that time passes and their individual SIP plans are concluded.

The SIP in itself is implemented by the General Provider of Integration Services, which is currently the Refugee Facilities Administration of the Ministry of Interior, though it can and does subcontract some of its services to other subjects (notably NGOs). The SIP, both in its legal underpinning and day-to-day operations, counts on the cooperation of municipalities.¹⁰ In its conceptual document, it foresees cooperation of municipalities in the area of housing, employment and the provision of social services. This cooperation, though, cannot be mandated and is executed with various levels of success. In any case, SIP case workers, when providing integration assistance to their clients, are experienced in dealing with local institutions and authorities. In the South Moravian region and in Brno, SIP staff have been also invited to the process of the creation of foreigner-related plans and strategies. On the incentive side, the SIP includes subsidies for municipali-

7 The latest concept, titled *Concept of Integration of Foreigners – In Mutual Respect*, is from 2016. Full text is available at <https://www.mvcr.cz/migrace/soubor/kic-2016-a-postup-pri-realizaci-kic-2016-usneseni-vlady-c-26-2016-pdf.aspx>.

8 Title IX of Act no. 325/1999 Coll. on Asylum.

9 The current version of the SIP was approved through Resolution of the Government No. 954 on 20.11.2015. On 16. 1. 2017 it was updated through Resolution of the Government No. 36.

10 Article 8 of the Annex “Zásady” to Resolution of the Government No. 36 approved on 16.1.2017.

ties that finance the stay of BIPs at social service facilities for the disabled and elderly. This subsidy covers the costs of their stay as well as provides funds to municipalities for investment in public infrastructure. Before 2019, additional SIP subsidy schemes for municipalities were also available; these conditioned the awarding of infrastructure development funds on the provision of municipal housing to BIPs.¹¹

Regarding the Concept, it explicitly states that it is the task of regions and municipalities to actively support the integration of migrants (including BIPs),¹² though again, there is no legal obligation for regions and municipalities to take part in this process. The instruments set in the Concept that are designated to operate on the regional/local level are mostly under the control of the Ministerial bureau. This is true for the 14 now state-budget financed (previously AMIF) Centers for Support of Integration of Foreigners that are operational in ten regions that are run by the Refugee Facilities Administration (RFA). However, the remaining four Centers are either under the control of the regional governments (Prague, South Moravian region) or NGOs and financed through AMIF, regional public funds and other resources.¹³ In case the Centers are not run by the RFA, they still have contracts with the Ministry of Interior regulating the minimum scope and standards of services they provide, though they retain freedom in how and in cooperation with whom they implement them and also have the freedom to provide additional services. Centers include BIPs among their target groups and deliver and organize services such as language and social orientation courses, interpretation services, intercultural work, legal and social counselling and public events. Centers also inform local actors, including regions and municipalities, on the possibilities of financing integration activities and, through the so-called Regional counselling platforms, coordinate and network local stakeholders who, in turn, can encourage municipal and regional governments to take their own action. For example, in the case of the City of Prague, the platform proved to be important in the process of designing and updating regional strategic and action plans for the integration of foreigners.

¹¹ As municipal housing has been chronically unavailable in Czechia, the system proved to be largely ineffective.

¹² Chapter 7 of the Concept of Integration of Foreigners.

¹³ Further information about the Centers is available here: <http://www.integracnicentra.cz/?lang=en>.

Another instrument envisioned in the Concept is the state financed grant scheme run by the Ministry of Interior, now called “Municipal projects for the support of integration of foreigners at the local level.” These grants can be obtained by municipalities for up to 90% financial coverage of projects they design with BIPs as a supplementary target group (BIPs cannot be the sole target group). These can include, for example: provision of Czech language courses for children and adults; courses for teachers; translation services; employment of intercultural workers as municipal staff and intercultural staff trainings; social field work; analytical work; legal and social counselling; creation of information materials; awareness raising activities and campaigns. In 2019, 16 municipalities¹⁴ utilized these grants in the total value of approximately EUR 700,000. Other financing options for municipalities and the institutions they control, though limited in volume and accessibility, include mainly state budget grants from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (for the teaching of children with non-Czech mother tongue and school staff trainings) and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (for the provision of social and related services), EU funds administered by ministries (related to ESF and AMIF), or funds from particular regional governments that have themselves set-up grant instruments. A noteworthy case is Operational Program Prague – Growth Pole,¹⁵ administered by the City of Prague itself, which has become a significant resource for financing integration measures at Prague schools. In almost all cases, BIPs are not the sole target groups of the implemented projects; their integration needs are mainstreamed into migrant or even generally oriented projects.

Nevertheless, even if municipalities do not have any specific duties to participate in the integration of migrants or BIPs, they do have number of legal obligations towards persons on their territory. These include duties in the provision of social services and related awareness among migrants;¹⁶ serving the specific education needs of children with non-Czech mother tongue in pre-, primary and secondary schools where municipalities are the

14 For reference, there are 6,000+ municipalities in Czechia.

15 More information about the Program, funded from ESF, ERDF and 50% co-financed by the City of Prague can be found here: <https://www.penzeproprahu.cz/eng/>.

16 Act No. 108/2006 Coll. on Social Services.

educational authority;¹⁷ and in certain cases, also in taking care of “creating conditions for the development of social care and for satisfying the needs of its [municipal¹⁸] citizens. Satisfying primarily the needs for housing, protection of health, transport and communications, information, education and training, overall cultural development and protection of public order.”¹⁹ Municipalities should in this respect also prepare strategic documents that reflect the needs of migrants – municipal citizens.

2.1.3 Assessment of municipal involvement in refugee integration and good practices

The preparation of relevant strategic documents as well as an overall pro-active stance towards migrants and BIPs at the municipal level is still relatively rare, though in past years improvements have been noted. Municipalities often lack the know-how, funds, qualified staff or general political incentive to prepare adequate plans and projects. The lack of political will is often due to the relative invisibility of migrants in public space and/or the unfavorably politicized nature of the topic, while any steps towards taking a more proactive stance are often conditioned by the presence of burning issues and/or conflicts on the local territory. On the other hand, if a municipality is determined to address its migrant population needs, it has a number of options. Aside from the (limited) external financing possibilities, municipalities always have the option of reaching out for other kinds of assistance from other actors such as State Integration Program staff, Centers for Support of Integration of Foreigners, the National Pedagogical Institute and its Regional support centers, NGOs or the Ministry of Interior itself. Recently, a multi-stakeholder partnership, including three regions and Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, led by two NGOs and Charles University published a 200+ page detailed, easy-to-use manual for municipalities and their staff on how to deal with the integration of migrants and BIPs, with topics ranging from financing and strategic planning to individual integration dimensions and a chapter specifically devoted to BIPs.²⁰

17 Act No. 108/2006 Coll. on Pre-school, Basic, Secondary, Tertiary Professional and Other Education.

18 The wording of the legal definition of municipal citizens creates ambiguity which can result in leaving BIPs and other third-country nationals (TCNs) outside the definition.

19 Act No. 128/2000 Coll. on Municipalities (Local Government).

20 The full manual can be found (only in Czech) on the webpage of NGO SIMI (Association for Migration and Integration), one of its main co-creators: https://www.migrace.com/cs/regularizace/mesta-a-inkluzivni-strategie/integracni_manual.

At the municipal level, the most ambitious strategy to date has only recently been officially approved in the aforementioned city of Brno. The city's Strategy for the years 2020-2026 is now waiting for its first Action plan for the years 2021-2023 to be finalized in spring 2021.²¹ Directed at all foreigners residing in the city and aiming at all dimensions of integration, it is built on four process-oriented priorities: the creation of a multi-stakeholder integration and networking platform; data collection, evaluation and awareness raising; formulation of adequate integration tools and solutions; integration services quality assessment and the development and support of public participation. The element of a participatory approach has also been present in the strategy's elaboration and with specific focus on migrants themselves, as mediated by intercultural staff employed by the city. Brno, in this way, capitalizes on its long-term involvement in the field and its close cooperation with the regional government, local Center for Support of Integration of Foreigners and other local stakeholders. Its effectivity in dealing with the Center is partly owed to the fact of its belonging to the region's government organizational structure, bringing it closer to regional institutions and thereby allowing it to work more efficiently and with a greater scope of possibilities.

Developed municipal approaches are linked to a handful of other proactive municipalities across the country with a number of Prague districts standing out. Prague 3, for example, includes foreigners (and BIPs) as a target group in its multi-year communal plan for the development of social and related services and it, among others, provides services such as language and social orientation courses for children and adults, runs information campaigns, offers counselling and organizes cultural events. It does so making use of its own, regional (City of Prague), Ministry of Interior and EU funds (Prague – Growth Pole). Prague 14, besides offering a similar scope of services, has been running its own grant scheme supporting cultural, sport and leisure projects, as well as low-threshold clubs and educational projects with foreigners as one of the target groups. Along with Prague 7 and Brno, it also employs its own intercultural workers.

The Prague districts, just like Brno, benefit from support at the regional level, as the City of Prague has had a dedicated strategy for the integration

21 Full text of the strategy (in Czech, English version will be published early 2021) is available at: https://socialnipece.brno.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/MMB-Strategie-integrace-cizincu%CC%8A-ve-me%CC%8Cste%CC%8C-Brne%CC%8C_FINAL-2.pdf.

of migrants since 2014, now updated for the years 2018 through 2021. Besides providing finances to NGOs and its districts, employing dedicated staff, organizing its own various projects and coordinating actors and stakeholders (together with the local Centers for Support of Integration of Foreigners), Prague has since 2017 its own Committee for the area of the integration of foreigners which serves as advisory and initiating body to the city Council, its main executive body. This now 17-member committee consists of key local stakeholders, including a district councilor from Prague 7, political and other district representatives, NGO representatives (including one migrant NGO), an IOM representative as well as a representative of the Ministry of Interior. One of its notable achievements has been convincing the Department of Education and responsible regional politicians to address the need to set-up a permanent part-time staff position for the agenda of children with a non-Czech mother tongue at the Department. Additionally, under the framework of Regional counselling platforms (see above), two special platforms were set-up. One consists of district and City representatives in the field of integration and the other in the area of the education of children with a different mother tongue. Both serve as communication hubs where experience and good practice are shared while maintaining an up-to-date flow of information between and among district (municipal) and regional administrations.

2.2. Hungary

2.2.1 Overview of the geographic distribution of beneficiaries of international protection in the country

The number of beneficiaries of international protection living in Hungary is around 3,000. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Interior, on January 1, 2019, there were 3,590 beneficiaries of international protection (1,658 recognized refugees and 1,932 beneficiaries of subsidiary protection) living in Hungary.²²

There are no publicly available data on the geographical distribution of BIPs in Hungary, although studies on the geographical distribution of

22 The numbers refer to the beneficiaries of international protection holding valid ID cards issued by Hungary. The statistics of the Ministry of Interior have not been published since 2019 (i.e., the latest data publicly available on the website of the refugee authority referred to 2018). The refugee authority, the National General Directorate for Aliens Policing provided these data upon request.

foreigners²³ and the experience of NGOs facilitating the integration of foreigners²⁴ in Hungary underline that most of Hungary's foreigners, including beneficiaries of international protection, live in Budapest (population: 1,752,286²⁵). The reason for this concentration can be the same as why Hungarians also choose the capital for their home (about 20% of Hungary's total population live in the city): the economic and employment opportunities are the best in Budapest. Until 2016, BIPs also lived in settlements where refugee reception centers operated. Following the closure of the main reception centers – the biggest reception center in Debrecen (the second largest city in Hungary; population: 211,340²⁶) in 2015, and the second biggest center in Bicske (population: 11,497²⁷) – the opportunities, including the presence and activities of (non-governmental) organizations helping applicants for or beneficiaries of international protection, ended there, further encouraging BIPs to move to Budapest.

2.3.2 Legal and policy context of local refugee integration

Hungary is a unitary (non-federal) state organized on a decentralized basis – local governments have been operating independently since 1990. Since 2011, though, with the adoption of the Fundamental Law and the new legislation on local governments,²⁸ the country has become more centralized.

While the Fundamental Law of Hungary recognizes local governments and stipulates that local governments shall function to administer public affairs and exercise public powers at the local level²⁹ and that local governments and state organs shall cooperate to achieve community goals,³⁰ it does not spell out that local public affairs shall be administered on local level as a general rule.

23 Central Statistical Office, Áron Kincses- *A Magyarországon élő külföldi kötődésű népesség területi jellegzetességei, 2011–2017* (Spatial characteristics of the foreign population in Hungary), in *Területi Statisztika*, 2019, 59(5): 463–497.

24 Source: interviews with social workers of Menedék Hungarian Association of Migrants, September 2020.

25 Source: Central Statistical Office, www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/hnk/hnk_2019.pdf.

26 Source: Central Statistical Office, www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/hnk/hnk_2019.pdf.

27 Source: Central Statistical Office, www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/hnk/hnk_2019.pdf.

28 Act CLXXXIX of 2011 on Local Self-governments.

29 Section 31, paragraph (1) of the Fundamental Law of Hungary.

30 Section 34, paragraph (1) of the Fundamental Law of Hungary.

Local governments operate on two levels, the municipal and the county level. They have mandatory and optional competences.

County local governments are not relevant because as from 2010-2012, the competences of local governments have decreased. This centralization brought the establishment of county (or metropolitan, in the case of Budapest) government offices. The government offices are territorial units of the central government responsible for the majority of public services on the medium level; many of those services used to fall within the competences of local governments. The public authority tasks of the government offices that can be relevant in the integration process include the issue of ID documents and social security numbers, providing social security services and family benefits, free legal assistance, and employment or naturalization issues as well.

These changes limited the role of county local governments to territorial and rural development and coordination.

The mandatory competences (and tasks) of municipal local governments are defined in the legislation on local governments.³¹ The non-exhaustive list contains primary healthcare, kindergarten, cultural services (libraries), child welfare services and care, social services and care (including providing social assistance on the local level), housing/housing assistance on the local level, care and rehabilitation of homeless people, etc. Additional mandatory tasks can be given by an Act but, as a general rule, only if funding for their implementation is also provided. In addition, the local government can undertake optional tasks as well.

In the field of the integration of foreigners and, in particular, BIPs, local governments play a less significant role.

The recognition of a foreigner as a beneficiary of international protection is the first essential step in the process of integration. In Hungary, the asylum authority, the National Directorate General for Aliens Policing, is the centralized national authority responsible for refugee affairs and for immigration issues (issuing residence permits, immigration control). Unlike its predecessor – the Immigration and Asylum Office (between 2000 and 2017, the Office for Immigration and Nationality) – the National Directorate General for Aliens Policing is a police organization. The National Directorate General for Aliens Policing has seven territorial units, regional directorates.

³¹ Section 13 of Act CLXXXIX of 2011 on Local Self-governments.

Refugee affairs, however, are managed centrally; the Refugee Directorate decides on the asylum application and is responsible for the reception of asylum applicants and BIPs.

Hungary has not established a specific strategy on the integration of foreigners. In 2013, Hungary's first Migration Strategy (for the years 2014-2020) was adopted by the Government.³² Chapter VI of the Migration Strategy deals with integration, including that of BIPs.

The Migration Strategy calls for the development of a specific Integration Strategy and outlined a few basic principles for the future integration strategy, for instance, it envisaged integration programs in Budapest and other cities of Hungary hosting foreigners aiming at an integration network across the country, although none of these have yet been established.

Thus, the frameworks of cooperation among central and local governments and of an integration network have already been elaborated – should there be political will, they can easily be established.

2.2.3 Assessment of municipal involvement in refugee integration and good practices

In the absence of an integration strategy for foreigners, and for BIPs in particular, the integration of BIPs in Hungary is based on the provisions of Hungarian legislation granting equal rights with those of nationals.

In addition, local governments have the competence to adopt local strategies or action programs.

So far, no local integration strategies or action programs have yet been adopted, but there have been some initial steps taken.

A Migration Roundtable was operating in the framework of the Municipality of Budapest Capital involving local government officials and representatives of civil society organizations working with migrants. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Municipality of Budapest implemented a project aimed at adopting an Action Program for integration (unfortunately, the action program could not be adopted due to political reasons).

In 2017-2018, IOM and the Municipality also implemented a project that resulted in the development of Migrant Information Desks where BIPs and other migrants residing legally in Budapest could receive information on

32 Government Resolution No. 1698/2013. (X. 4.) Korm.

their rights, obligations and other information concerning their daily lives (on public transport, administration, rules and customs, holidays, etc.). Moreover, information was also provided regarding the organizations assisting migrants in Budapest.

In 2016-2018, the Budapest Methodological Social Center (an organization of the Municipality of Budapest whose tasks involve, e.g., providing housing for the homeless) implemented a project that provided temporary housing for BIPs. Besides assistance in housing (help in finding an independent and safe housing solution, contacting landlords, concluding rental contracts, dealing with housing-related duties, etc.), the project included counselling and case management by social workers.³³

Following the granting of international protection, refugees and BIPs do not receive any assistance towards their integration in Hungary; there are no social orientation or Hungarian language courses provided by the central or local governments.

In addition, local governments do not receive any financial support for the additional tasks that may occur while implementing their mandatory competences with a view to BIPs – there is no additional support for general practitioners working in primary healthcare treating BIPs, nor is there support to kindergartens or social workers of the family assistance services working with refugee or BIP families. Any trainings are provided by civil society organizations alone.

Until July 2018, the Menedék Association³⁴ provided migrant-specific, intercultural conflict-management training programs for social workers, administrative officials, child protection officials, teachers, health-care workers, police officers and security guards where social workers from family assistance services (who were involved in the integration contract that operated until 2016) worked. These training projects were financed from EU funds; thus, since the government no longer launches calls for proposals from NGOs in the field of integration within the framework of AMIF, it has been impossible to continue the project.

33 More about the project: www.bmszki.hu/en/eu-projects, “AMIF PROGRAM- Housing program for recognized refugees and people with subsidiary protection status”.

34 <https://menedek.hu/en/activities/trainings>.

2.3. Poland

2.3.1 Overview of the geographic distribution of beneficiaries of international protection in the country

According to the statistics of the Office for Foreigners, there were 2,776 beneficiaries of international protection in Poland in January 2021 (with recognized refugee status or subsidiary protection). After receiving the decision on granting protection, the person obtains the right to move and settle anywhere within the country. A majority of BIPs are settled in the capital city of Warsaw and the Mazovian Voivodeship. This is likely related to the proximity of the administrative offices (Office for Foreigners) and Board Guards involved into the asylum procedure, three migrant centers and a significantly wide range of social organizations. Two other main locations are Lublin and Białą Podlaska, which are home to reception and migrant centers where people find accommodation during the asylum procedure. Although the migrant population is increasing in other cities such as Krakow or Gdańsk, BIPs still remain a small group. For example, in 2020, only one individual integration program was realized in Krakow, while eight such programs were implemented during 2016-2019.

2.3.2 Legal and policy context of local refugee integration

Although Poland has no strategic and unified policy concerning migration and the integration of migrants and beneficiaries of international protection, elements of integration policies are dispersed among institutions on the central and local administration levels and are regulated by various acts of law. Only central institutions are de facto involved in the policy-making process, while the local administrations take on the burden of implementation, often without sufficient guidelines or appropriate evaluation mechanisms.

The integration of BIPs is defined in Chapter V (Art. 91-95) of the Act of March 12, 2004, on social assistance (Journal of Laws of 2019, item 1507 as amended)³⁵ and the ordinance of the Minister of Labor and Social Policy of April 7, 2015, on providing assistance to foreigners (Journal of Laws of 2015, item 515 as amended).³⁶ On the central level, the Ministry of Family and Social Policy is responsible for the elaboration of integration policy for migrants and coordination of the integration of BIPs in particular, whereas imple-

³⁵ <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20040640593>.

³⁶ <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20150000515>.

mentation and supervision of individual integration programs (IIPs) rests on regional and local government structures – voivodeship (region) and powiat (country/district) administrations.³⁷

The BIP integration programs are run by the social welfare centers (OPS) or powiat (country/district) family support centers (PCPr) competent for the place of stay of the given person.³⁸ Concerning implementation of IIPs, the voivodeship (region) administration is responsible for public assistance (both financial and non-financial) and for supervision of services provided by the social assistance organizational units.³⁹ The absence of a national migration and integration policy affects the effectiveness of the implementation process. Concerns regarding the lack of funding or specialized staff are widely noted.

Responding to the lack of a harmonized approach concerning integration policy, and faced with a lack of funding, the municipal governments, individually or in cooperation with social organizations, may provide ad hoc projects subsidized from the European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) targeting asylum seekers and BIPs. According to the ranking list of the European Projects Implementation Centre of the Ministry of the Interior and Administration, there were 21 projects that received AMIF funding under the recruitment process in 2019. The majority of projects either submitted or positively evaluated are conducted in the Mazovian Voivodeship. It is worth mentioning that projects targeting economic migrants prevail. For example, the project "Support for the integration of foreigners in Mazovia" is carried out by four NGOs: the Polish Migration Forum Foundation, Foundation for Somalia, Foreign Language Teaching Foundation "Linguae Mundi" and Caritas Polska in partnership with the Mazovian Voivodeship. Within the project, the organizations present a diverse offer of adaptation courses, social orientation and Polish language courses, assistance and support to migrant mothers (as psychological assistance or

37 The Act of 24 July 1998 introduced the state's fundamental three-tier territorial division – administratively Poland is divided into voivodeships (regions), poviats (counties/ districts), and gminas (communes). According to the Central Statistical Office, on 1 January 2020, there were 16 voivodeships, 314 poviats and 66 cities with powiat status, and 2,477 gminas in Poland, <https://stat.gov.pl/en/regional-statistics/classification-of-territorial-units/administrative-division-of-poland/>.

38 Szalc K., Pachocka M., Pędziwiatr K., Szalańska J., *Integration Policies, Practices and Experience: Poland country report*, <https://respondmigration.com/wp-blog/refugee-integration-policies-practices-experiences-poland-country-report>.

39 Piłat A., Potkańska D., *Local responses to the refugee crisis in Poland. Reception and integration*, Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw 2017.

birth courses), etc.⁴⁰ “Open Pomerania. Integration in action” is realized by the Immigrant Support Center in Gdansk. The project includes cooperation with the local administration and health care and educational institutions and serves migrants directly. The Center ensures counselling and legal assistance on such issues as legalization of stay and work, provides specialized psychological support and organizes Polish language courses.⁴¹

The project “#AKTYWATOR WLKP – Support for the integration of migrants in the Wielkopolska Region”, realized by the International Organization for Migration in partnership with Poznań City Hall and the Centre for Migration Studies at Adam Mickiewicz University/Migrant Info Point, provides, inter alia, legal advice, career counselling and Polish language courses.⁴²

2.3.3 Assessment of municipal involvement in refugee integration and good practices

Following current migration trends, Polish cities are facing increases in diversity which have mobilized municipal authorities to implement policies for better managing integration. It is important to mention that the integration of BIPs in itself is not the issue prioritized by municipal stakeholders, although it is incorporated as a complementary element to mainstreaming diversity or anti-discrimination policies. Strategic documents elaborated by city councils of some major voivodeship capitals – namely, Warsaw (#Warszawa2030) Wrocław (Strategy Wrocław2030) or Lublin (Lublin’s Development Strategy for 2013-2020) – implicitly refer to all “new residents” and their needs within the local community. Gdansk is the only city in Poland which has elaborated a policy framework focused specifically on residents of the city with a migration background – its Immigrant Integration Model. The document was adopted in 2016 and since then it has become a roadmap for actions and programs of public institutions in the city in such areas as “education, culture, social assistance, housing, counteracting violence and discrimination, local communities, employment, and health.”⁴³

40 According to the description on the website of the project- *Informacje o projekcie “Wsparcie integracji cudzoziemców na Mazowszu”*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/uw-mazowiecki/informacje-o-projekcie-wsparcie-integracji-cudzoziemcow-na-mazowszu>.

41 The project „Open Pomerania- integration in action” of the Immigrants and Immigrants Support Center, <http://cwii.org.pl/projekty/#1579472121257-246394fd-d005>.

42 According to the Migrant Info Point website 2020- 2022 | #AKTYWATOR WLKP- Support for the integration of migrants in the Wielkopolska Region, <http://migrant.poznan.pl/en/work-in-poland/>.

43 Immigrant Integration Model, <https://app.xyzgcm.pl/gdansk-pl/d/20170691579/immigrant-integration-model.pdf>.

Concerning integration, local governments also establish advisory bodies to the city halls and work on enhancing inter-city cooperation. In 2012, the Social Dialogue Commission on Foreigners was appointed to the Mayor of Warsaw. The Commission brings together migrant and diaspora organizations and NGOs that provide assistance to migrants, asylum seekers and BIPs. The Commission provides City Hall with consultation and opinions on the needs and interests of diverse communities in Warsaw. Thanks to cooperation with municipal authorities and civic organizations, the Warsaw Multicultural Center was created. The Center is under the joint coordination of four NGOs (The Pro Humanum Association, the Foundation for Somalia, the Armenian Foundation and the Polish-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce)⁴⁴ and the Social Communication Center of the Warsaw City Hall. The Warsaw Multicultural Center serves migrants individually but also supports integration activities by running mini-grants, ensuring space and logistic support to migrant and social initiatives and organizing educational, cultural and social events.⁴⁵

The city of Gdansk was the first municipality to establish a council dedicated solely to “immigrants” – the Council of Immigrants to the Mayor of Gdańsk – in 2016. The term of the Council is two years, and in 2020, the III Council of Immigrants will be convened.⁴⁶ The Council gathers members with various migration backgrounds and experience. The consultation and advisory board is responsible for integration-related issues and policies, elaborates recommendations for public institutions and takes part in implementation of the Immigrant Integration Model.

In 2016, the City Council of Kraków adopted the “Open Kraków” program which aims to raise awareness about the city’s multicultural society, to enhance the participation of ethnic and national minorities and to shape “a tolerant attitude” towards migrants and minority communities. Thanks to the program, the Information Point for Foreigners was established, and integration initiatives such as multicultural festivals, educational and informational activities are organized regularly. The program’s interdisciplinary team is responsible for implementation and coordination of the program.

44 Centrum Wielokulturowe, <https://centrumwielokulturowe.waw.pl/o-nas/>.

45 The Warsaw Multicultural Center, <https://centrumwielokulturowe.waw.pl/en/>.

46 The recruitment of members for the III Council of Immigrants was to take place until September 30, 2020; as of the writing of this paper, the results were not yet announced: <https://www.gdansk.pl/wiadomosci/trwa-rekrutacja-do-iii-kadencji-gdanskiej-rady-imigrantow-i-imigrantek-do-30-wrzesnia,a,179018>.

The team includes representatives of minorities and migrant communities, academia, local authorities and civic organizations.⁴⁷

Only a few problem-oriented programs mention recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection as target groups. The City of Warsaw is currently elaborating its program of municipal housing policy #Mieszkania2030. The program aims to eliminate the risk of homelessness among vulnerable groups, including BIPs. Although limited in scope, Lublin, Warsaw and Gdansk provide housing assistance specifically addressed to recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection within a sheltered housing city scheme.⁴⁸ For one year, the City of Warsaw has been providing five apartments, while Lublin and Gdansk have been providing three and two sheltered apartments, respectively. The improvement of educational programs, language courses and orientation programs are mentioned as operational goals in the Wrocław Strategy for Intercultural Dialogue for 2018-2022. Reinforcing attitudes of openness to diversity and, at the same time, building up a sense of belonging are among the goals found in Warsaw's Community Program (Program Wspólnota⁴⁹). The Program responds to the operational goals of the #Warsaw2030 Strategy of empowering local communities and increasing dialogue and cooperation among residents with different backgrounds. In October, the Center for Social Communication of the Warsaw City Hall held a public consultation on the Program.⁵⁰

As has been mentioned earlier, local governments in Poland do not consider the integration of recognized refugees and BIPs as a priority but, rather, incorporate it into mainstream policies intended to enhance diversity, integration and inclusiveness among local residents. The burden of task-oriented programs and direct assistance falls on civic organizations. Two examples were chosen to present this differentiation: the program "Standard minimum in Integration" as a roadmap for integration policy adopted by the local governments in the Gdańsk-Gdynia-Sopot Metropolitan Area and the initiative "Refugees Welcome Poland" as a bottom-up, task-oriented initiative realized by Foundation Ocalenie.

47 Interdisciplinary team, http://otwarty.krakow.pl/open_krakow/227979,artykul,team_members.html.

48 Mikulska-Jolles A., *Who does what in the field of migration and integration in Poland?* <https://pl.boell.org/en/2019/05/13/who-does-what-field-migration-integration-poland-stakeholder-analysis>.

49 The Program is part of Strategy #Warsaw2030.

50 According to the schedule of the Center for Social Communication of the Warsaw City Hall, <http://2030.um.warszawa.pl/program-wspolnota/>.

In May 2020, 56 local governments in the Gdańsk-Gdynia-Sopot metropolitan area announced the first-in-Poland document – the Standard Minimum in Integration⁵¹ – and the more detailed Guide to Integration in Pomerania.⁵² These documents include a four-step strategy for public institutions involved in the multi-dimensional integration of migrants. Although the document does not target BIPs directly, it should be mentioned as an example of good practice as a complex, long-term and multidimensional strategy on integration. It is expected to have a positive effect on all migrant groups in the region. The strategy covers dimensions such as vocational training, access to legal assistance and Polish language courses, as well as issues such as security, training for officials who provide services and assistance and the creation of poviats migration units to monitor issues related to the adaptation and settlement of migrants in the area.

Task-oriented programs that are directly focused on improving the integration of BIPs are still for the most part provided by social organizations independently or in partnerships with local administrations. Refugees Welcome Poland⁵³ is run by Foundation Ocalenie.⁵⁴ The foundation joined the bottom-up initiative Refugees Welcome in 2015 and has been running the program in Poland hoping to improve access to housing for BIPs. Ocalenie provides an online platform connecting BIPs with local residents who want to rent them a room.

51 <https://www.metropoliagdansk.pl/metropolitalne-wiadomosci/metropolia-integruje-imigrantow-aktualizacja/>.

52 <https://www.metropoliagdansk.pl/upload/files/Przewodnik%2520integracja%2520imigrantek%2520i-%2520imigrant%25C3%25B3w.pdf>.

53 <https://refugeeswelcome.pl/>.

54 Foundation Ocalenie is a non-governmental organization based in Warsaw. Since 2000, Ocalenie has been conducting a wide variety of social and educational projects, providing free-of-charge assistance and consultations to migrants, asylum seekers and BIPs: <https://ocalenie.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/EN.png>.

2.4. Slovakia

2.4.1 Overview of the geographic distribution of beneficiaries of international protection in the country

In Slovakia, there is little public statistical data on foreigners, especially regarding their place of residence in the country. The Border and Foreigners Police Office of the Slovak Republic (UHCP) provides public semi-annual statistics of foreigners residing in the country, but the data do not contain their place of stay. This is one of the factors local governments as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are facing.

Based on the statistics of the UHCP, as of June 30, 2020,⁵⁵ there were 120 valid stay permits on the basis of subsidiary protection and 287 on the basis of granted asylum in Slovakia. The official statistics, however, do not include their place of stay. After receiving a decision on granting protection, the person has the right to move and settle anywhere within the country.

Since assistance in the integration of BIPs is provided by NGOs implementing projects co-financed by the state budget and the EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), some data about BIPs' geographical distribution can be gleaned from their statistics. Based on data from Marginal, an NGO which implemented an integration project until December 2019, of the 180 BIPs participating in the project as of that date, almost 47% were staying in Bratislava and about 30% in Košice (Marginal has offices in both cities), while the remaining participants were distributed throughout the country. Experts agree that BIPs prefer to stay in a city where they can find help and support from supporting organizations.⁵⁶

2.4.2 Legal and policy context of local refugee integration

The integration of BIPs, their status and rights are laid down in the Asylum Act.⁵⁷ The legal status of municipalities is addressed in the Municipal Establishment Act,⁵⁸ which stipulates the original competences of municipalities

⁵⁵ Statistical overview of legal and illegal migration in the Slovak Republic, https://www.minv.sk/swift-data/source/policia/hranicna_a_cudzinecka_policia/rocnky/rok_2020/2020-I.polrok-UHCP-SK.pdf.

⁵⁶ Currently, integration assistance for BIPs is provided by the Slovak Humanitarian Council's Project Rifuigio (implementation period January 1, 2020–December 31, 2021; supported with EUR 935,999.99 – 75% AMIF, 25% state budget (Ministry of Interior). Participation in integration projects is voluntary.

⁵⁷ Act no. 480/2002 Coll. on Asylum (zákon č. o azyle).

⁵⁸ Act no. 369/1990 Coll. on Municipal Establishment (zákon o obecnom zriadení).

(all competences affecting local life of and in the municipality). The legal status of Self-Governing Regions is regulated in the Self-Governing Regions Act,⁵⁹ which stipulates the original competences of regions. The distribution of state competences is laid down in the Act on the transfer of some competences from State administration to Municipalities and Superior Territorial Units,⁶⁰ which is the most important act laying down the mechanism of decision-making. Besides those mentioned above, there are many more specific laws governing competences and procedures in various fields of policy.

Objectives and strategies regarding the integration of foreigners, including BIPs, can be found in two strategy documents: the Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic with a view to 2020⁶¹ and the Integration Policy of the Slovak Republic.⁶² While regions and municipalities are encouraged to create their own local integration strategies, as of the Summary Report on the Status of Fulfilment of the Objectives and Measures of the Integration Policy of the Slovak Republic for 2017, which is the most recently published summary report, only the Kosice region has created its own regional integration strategy.⁶³ As is found in the Kosice regional integration policy, for self-governing regions, there is a need to map the characteristics of the population of foreigners – their situation and problems – in the region and to improve and intensify the cooperation of regional self-governing bodies and other actors of integration policy, including the foreigners themselves. Although the strategy has not been applied in practice, it is an initial attempt to summarize the challenges of integration on the regional level.⁶⁴ Among strategic documents, it is also worth mentioning the Strategy of

59 Act no. 302/2001 Coll. on Administration of Superior Territorial Units (zákon o samosprávnych krajoch).

60 Act no. 416/2001 Coll. on the transfer of some competences from State administration to Municipalities and superior territorial units (Zákon o prechode niektorých pôsobností z orgánov štátnej správy na obce a na vyššie územné celky).

61 Migračná politika Slovenskej republiky s výhľadom do roku 2020, https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/slovensky/ministerstvo/integracia-cudzincov/dokumenty/migracna_politika.pdf; this should be replaced with a new migration policy, which is currently in development.

62 Integračná politika Slovenskej republiky, <https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/slovensky/uvod/informacie-cudzinci/integracna-politika.pdf>.

63 Regional Integration Policy - Cestovná mapa riadenej migrácie v Košickom kraji https://app.otvorene-strategie.sk/repozitar/download?id_suboru=2648.

64 A few other municipalities have their own strategies, for example, the cities of Košice, Svidník, Martin and Banská Bystrica; these strategies, however, have also not been applied.

Labor Mobility of Foreigners,⁶⁵ which underlines the need of cooperation with self-governments in the integration process in preparing their own local integration policies that will become an important tool for maintaining social cohesion, the prevention of social conflicts and the prevention of segregation and ghettoization.

2.4.3 Assessment of municipal involvement in refugee integration

There is a dual system of public administration in Slovakia: 1) the state administration and 2) autonomous regional and local self-governments. The framework of self-government in Slovakia is organized within two dominant levels – the regional level, represented by eight Self-Governing Regions (regions) and the local level, represented by municipalities (Bratislava and Košice are further divided in self-governing city districts). A municipality and a region are independent territorial and administrative units comprising persons who are permanently residing on their territory. Municipalities and regions, therefore, often overlook the needs of people who have only temporary residence (such as those with subsidiary protection). Local and regional self-governments also perform several tasks on behalf of the state administration.

Responding to the lack of systematic regulation of the integration of foreigners, competences and elements of integration are spread among institutions on the central and local level and are regulated in various acts of law, for the most part, based on the provisions of legislation granting equal rights with nationals. In their contacts with local offices, BIPs (and foreigners in general) emphasize the low availability of information for foreigners as well as the language barrier, as the vast majority of information is provided at individual offices or websites in the Slovak language. Foreign language versions of information on the websites are geared towards tourists, not residents. The lack of professional capacities is another barrier; employees at various offices and departments of regional self-government have little (or no) experience in providing services to foreigners.⁶⁶

65 <https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/slovensky/uvod/informacie-cudzinci/strategy.pdf>

66 Findings from the results of research of Project KapaCity- Support for the integration of foreigners at the local level. Duration: January 2018- December 2020. Project applicant: Human Rights League. Project partners: Centre for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture CVEK, Milan Šimečka Foundation, Marginal. Donor: The project is co-financed by the European Union from the Fund for Asylum, Migration and Integration, Home Affairs Funds.

Experts point out that the biggest challenges foreigners face are in the following areas: housing, social services and social support, healthcare, education and language. These policy fields are presented in brief below.

Concerning housing, despite of the fact that the Asylum act stipulates the duty of the state to grant the municipality a contribution for the procurement of accommodation of BIPs or a contribution towards the development of municipal infrastructure, these provisions do not apply in practice, and municipalities do not benefit from any special financial contributions from the state. BIPs belong to “disadvantaged groups in the housing market” and are allowed to apply for rental apartments designated for social housing which are provided by municipalities and cities in accordance with the Act on Subsidies for Housing Development and Social Housing.⁶⁷ Municipalities themselves determine the rules and mechanisms for allocating social housing. Unfortunately, there is a chronic problem with the lack of these apartments; moreover, the condition of residence in the municipality for many years to be eligible for social housing is impossible for BIPs to meet. While the intervention of non-profit organizations (in the position of a tenant) has been discussed as a solution to this problem, experts stress that it needs a systematic long-term solution which NGOs cannot provide. In Slovakia, there are currently seven apartments owned by a municipality (five in Košice and two in Bratislava) which are rented by NGOs and subleased to BIPs.⁶⁸ Municipalities also provide their competency in the area of soft loans provided by State Housing Development Fund⁶⁹ and checking compliance with the contractual conditions.

Concerning social services and social support, municipalities and regions are competent in the establishment and control of social dormitories, facilities for the elderly, care service facilities, emergency housing facilities, temporary childcare facilities, etc., and providing basic social counselling. If a BIP, whose entitlement to receive social service in the territory of the Slovak Republic results from the Social Services Act,⁷⁰ requests it, the social service is provided under the same conditions, without discrimination and at the

67 Act no. 443/2010 on Subsidies for Housing Development and Social Housing (zákon č. 443/2010 Z. z. o dotáciách na rozvoj bývania a o sociálnom bývaní).

68 These apartments are not social apartments as stipulated in Act Nr. 443/2010 Coll.

69 Act no. 150/2013 on State Housing Development Fund (zákon o štátnom fonde rozvoja bývania).

70 Act no. 448/2008 Coll. on Social Services.

same quality level, as is provided to Slovak citizens. BIPs have also the right to material need benefits and allowances. They can also apply for a one-off benefit to cover part of the extraordinary expenses of members of the household who are provided with assistance in material need. The provision of this one-off benefit is decided by the municipality in which the members of the household have their residence.

In the area of healthcare, municipalities exercise their competences in establishing outpatient departments, first aid stations, hospitals and medical centers of the first type and home nursing agencies; regions establish hospitals of the second type, they manage such non-state healthcare as psychiatric hospitals and dental services. Both beneficiaries of subsidiary protection and persons who have been granted asylum are eligible for the provision of healthcare to the extent such health care is regularly covered under the public health care insurance, but only recognized refugees are public health insured like Slovak persons. In practice, two basic problems are encountered – the language and cultural barrier and the doctors' inability to report of healthcare procedures to insurance companies for persons with subsidiary protection and, thus, refusing to provide health care. In cases where specialized health care is denied, the self-governing region will specify a specialist doctor who is obliged to provide health care.

Concerning education, municipalities play a considerable role. They establish pre-school and primary schools, school clubs, language schools and children's leisure centers, and oversee the obligation to fulfil compulsory school attendance. Regions establish secondary schools, basic art schools, language schools (except for those next to grammar schools) and children's leisure centers. Free education at the primary and secondary school level is granted to all children holding a residence permit.⁷¹ All foreigners with residence permits are granted education to the same extent as Slovak citizens. To remove language barriers in primary and secondary schools, basic and expanding state language courses are organized for foreign children. According to the findings of school inspections in 2020, the schools, however, are not prepared for teaching the children of foreigners.⁷² That is why the role of NGOs is crucial, especially in language courses. Currently, SHC, Marena and IOM provide free language courses for foreigners.

71 The School Act no. 245/2008 Coll. (zákon o výchove a vzdelávaní).

72 https://www.skolaefektivne.sk/33/skoly-nie-su-dostatočne-pripravené-na-vyucbu-cudzincov-tvrdia-inspektori-uniqueiduchxzASYZNbZPk5Wr5xNIEPTLiUlzvuCMFZIEQXm-Uc/?uri_view_type=4.

Concerning good practices implemented in Slovakia, the City of Nitra should be mentioned. It has established the COMIN community center which supports the social inclusion of foreigners coming from third countries and citizens of EU Member States who have been granted temporary or permanent residence in the city. The project is supported by the ACF - Slovakia program, which is funded by the EEA Financial Mechanism 2014-2021 and co-financed by the city of Nitra. They help their clients to overcome barriers and provide services at their First Contact Point. They offer social and legal counselling to foreigners, assistance in crisis situations and basic language education for foreigners requiring intercultural orientation.⁷³ The city of Nitra is the only city in Slovakia providing a first contact point to foreigners as a free service accessible to everybody residing in its territory.

Another good practice stems from the “KapaCity” project aimed at supporting the integration of foreigners – third-country nationals – at the local level. It operates in three cities – Bratislava, Trnava and Banská Bystrica – and in the Košice self-governing region in cooperation with Union of Towns and Cities of Slovakia.⁷⁴ The aim of the project is to develop the professional capacities of local governments, to transfer good practice at the local, regional and national levels and abroad, and to develop the communication skills of local governments so as to support the integration of foreigners at the local level and help it become a stable part of their integration activities.⁷⁵ The combination of four key non-governmental organizations dedicated to migration and integration in Slovakia helps make it possible to create an effective basis for supporting local governments in their efforts to integrate foreigners living in their localities into society, strengthen their voices and improve mutual coexistence. The activities that are part of the project are focused on mapping needs, training local government employees, providing information about foreigners, sharing good practice from abroad and many other activities aimed at the effective integration of foreigners, such as, for example, welcome packages, on-line training tools, etc.

73 The project Creation of a Community Center for Job and Knowledge Mobility in Nitra is supported by the ACF- Slovakia program, which is funded by the EEA Financial Mechanism 2014-2021. The administrator of the program is the Ekopolis Foundation in partnership with the Bratislava Open Society Foundation and the Carpathian Foundation. The project is co-financed by a grant from the city of Nitra; <https://comin.sk/en/about-us/>.

74 Note: not all the cities and towns are members of this Union.

75 KapaCity- Support for the integration of foreigners at the local level. <http://cvek.sk/aktualne-projekty/>.

3. Conclusions and policy recommendations

While the legal, political and social determinants of the local-level integration policies of beneficiaries of international protection show differences in the Visegrad countries, there are, nonetheless, important similarities that are worthy of mention.

Very importantly, while nationally the number of BIPs is low in all four countries, sizeable populations are found in some municipalities. BIPs typically settle in the capital and/or other larger cities or where a reception center is located. On the one hand, this means a potential human capital for local development, while on the other, these people might need specific and tailor-made municipal services – designed for BIPs where necessary, or for foreigners in general where possible. The legal frameworks related to the competences of local governments show considerable differences among the observed countries, but competences of varying breadth and depth exist in housing, education, healthcare and social care in all four countries.

Some good practices have been identified on the local level (in at least one V4 country) which can be broadly categorized as:

Documents and strategies (a community development plan, integration strategy, etc.);

Committees and councils (a stakeholder roundtable, a multidisciplinary team for integration);

Implemented projects (EU or locally co-funded, focusing on, inter alia, intercultural communication, professional counselling [legal, social], language learning, raising awareness, improvement of employment or entrepreneurship opportunities, improving access to housing and healthcare etc.).

In Czechia and Slovakia, these policy items are embedded in a national level policy framework. The Concept of Integration of Foreigners and the State Integration Program in Czechia are together relatively complete and overarching policy documents that create a space for local level integration policies of foreigners. Pretty much the same can be said about Slovakia's "Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic with a view to 2020"⁷⁶ document and the Integration Policy of the Slovak Republic, although these documents are less specific in this aspect. Neither the Concept of Integration of Foreigners in Czechia nor the policy documents in Slovakia focus specifically on BIPs but, rather, on foreigners in general.

⁷⁶ Soon to be replaced by a document titled "Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic with a view to 2025".

In Poland, there is no strategic and unified policy regarding the integration of foreigners on the national level, although a progressive and exploratory set of committees and councils exist in several Polish municipalities that work together with foreign communities in order to improve social integration.

Finally, in Hungary, there is also no existing integration mechanism on the national level, and local level actors do not engage in substantial activities related to BIPs, either. In the absence of central and local government activities, such work is carried out mostly by NGOs.

The European Union, through its Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), is a key player in shaping local level integration policies for BIPs. Its role is especially important in Slovakia and Hungary. In the latter case, it is almost exclusively EU funds that are, or have been, financing local level efforts in the field.

Bearing in mind the differences and similarities, a set of recommendations can be listed that apply to all Visegrad countries to some extent. Very importantly, policymakers in local governments should be aware that the “equality on paper” of BIPs in national legislation (i.e., that they enjoy the same rights as national citizens) is not enough for their successful integration. It is, therefore, important to have local level strategies and action plans focusing on foreigners in general, identifying the points where BIP-specific topics need to be addressed. The establishment of interdisciplinary advisory bodies such as councils and committees including BIPs can be crucial in this work, including their involvement in the phases of implementation and evaluation of integration policies.

At the same time, BIP integration policy should not be perceived as a policy area on its own. Rather, it is a complementary to other social policies of local governments (e.g., social security policy, housing policy or policy directed to elderly residents) since the number of BIPs is not high, and many of their needs are similar to the needs of other disadvantaged local social groups. Finding the connection between specific needs and mainstream local policy agendas is the ultimate goal of the advisory bodies mentioned above.

Concerning strategic planning, local governments should be involved in the development and implementation of national integration policies, since in all four Visegrad countries the vast majority of BIPs live in only a handful

of cities (capital cities, regional centers and cities where reception centers are located). To incorporate the special needs and objectives of these cities is crucial for national level strategies as well.

Not only national, but also EU level actions should include local level stakeholders. Municipalities and local NGOs supporting the integration of BIPs should be involved in the development of the national AMIF work programs, and state and EU budgets should provide funding for integration projects implemented on the local (municipal) level. The state budget (either from national or from EU sources) should finance additional tasks of local governments of municipalities hosting large numbers of foreigners.

Finally, cooperation between municipalities is crucial: a V4 network of municipalities could be established to facilitate the exchange of experience and best practices in the field of the integration of BIPs.