



Small Municipalities and Ukrainian Migrant Crisis

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6.1 INTRODUCTION

Following the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, millions of Ukrainians fled their homes, seeking refuge within other portions of Ukraine or in other countries. Czechia became the third most impacted country after Germany and Poland, with nearly 600,000 Ukrainian refugees seeking temporary protection (European Council, 2024); it also ranked first in terms of Ukrainian refugees per 100,000 inhabitants. Currently, almost 350,000 Ukrainian refugees remain in the country (Ministerstvo vnitra, 2024). Very shortly after dealing with one crisis—Covid-19—Czechian municipalities had to cope with the onslaught of another, one brought on by the daily arrival of thousands of refugees.

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Although an invasion of Ukraine had been imminent, the state and regional leadership had not had enough time to prepare for such a sudden influx of refugees into the country. Initially, refugee assistance was swiftly organised with massive support from NGOs and volunteers, who quickly created databases to connect helpers with those in need. The state also established assistance centres in each of the 14 regions of the Czech Republic to provide Ukrainian refugees with a single contact point that could arrange necessary paperwork for residence, health insurance, and employment registration (Jelínková et al., 2024a, b).

At present, the refugee crisis has affected almost all municipalities in the Czechia, including the small ones that are the focus of our research; most had no prior experience with foreigners or migrants. Some have tried to help only financially or by supporting various material collections, while others have been much more actively involved. In some municipalities, the population increased by a third overnight, and small municipalities without any or with only a small support infrastructure had to find ways to cope with this sudden influx.

This chapter examines how small municipalities have coped with the crises, managing new and unexpected demands on municipal governance while maintaining their normal operations, often with very limited resources.

Our research questions were:

1. What was the national framework adopted for coping with migrants from Ukraine, and what was the expected role of municipalities?
2. What problems did small municipalities in Czechia face at the beginning of and during the crises?
3. How did the municipalities cope with problems?
4. To what extent did organisations from the higher tiers of public administration help small municipalities cope with problems?

The data for this chapter were obtained through semi-structured interviews with mayors. As small municipalities in Czechia often lack an administrative apparatus, mayors often serve as their primary administrators. As such, this chapter explores the perceptions of both the political and administrative leaders of these small municipalities.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. First, we characterise the Ukrainian migration crisis and then summarise the studies about local responses to it. Second, we briefly outline the situation in Czechia in

regard to the arrival of refugees and summarise the framework adopted by the national bodies for coping with the migration from Ukraine. We then elaborate on the experiences of small municipalities and the impact of the migration crisis on them based on our research. Finally, we discuss the approaches of small municipalities in dealing with the crisis and what can be learned from them.

6.2 LOCAL RESPONSES TO MIGRATION CRISES: WHAT CAN BE FOUND IN LITERATURE

The war in Ukraine has led to one of the largest human displacement crises in recent history, with millions fleeing to neighbouring countries and many more displaced internally. As of June 2022, there had been more than 7.3 million border crossings from Ukraine and 2.3 million return crossings; almost two years later, almost 6 million Ukrainian refugees are registered across Europe and another half million in other parts of the world (UNHCR, 2024).

The influx of Ukrainian refugees into Europe was not the first migration crisis that Europe has had to face in recent years. Many European cities have dealt with previous refugee crises, such as the Syrian one in 2015 and the Afghan one after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis has markedly differed from that of previous crises. For instance, whereas the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 strained the EU due to disagreements over redistributing refugees, the Ukrainian crisis has prompted a more unified approach. The EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive for the first time on 3 March 2022. It allows unlimited admission of refugees with immediate and automatic acceptance of their status, bypassing the lengthy asylum process, and grants refugees access to essential services and a work permit for up to three years. The activation of this directive thus reflects a greater concern for the Ukrainian people compared to the refugee populations of previous crises. Martín (2022) summarised the reasons for the different approaches taken by many EU countries: the European war, a significant Ukrainian diaspora in many European states, cultural and ethnic similarity, and shared borders with four EU members. All these factors, as well as broad support across political parties and from most of the population, have not only led to increased interest and involvement in helping refugees but also enabled and facilitated assistance from higher authorities.

The topic of Ukrainian migration and integration is addressed in many articles that explore it from different perspectives. For example, Grossi and Vakulenko (2022) compared immediate forms of support (humanitarian, military, financial, and other) from several national governments, finding that governments have the ideas and tools to address the immediate impacts of human-made disasters like in Ukraine but often lack the capacity and long-term strategies to do so cost-effectively and responsibly. Still, only a few studies focus on the local-level management of this migration crisis. Some papers examine the experiences of large Polish cities that saw an influx of Ukrainian war refugees (Błaszczuk et al., 2024; Podgórska et al., 2024; Wojtasz, 2022) or compare responses at different government levels (Madej et al., 2023). Another study compared approaches towards Ukrainian war refugees across four bigger and four smaller Polish cities (Bielewska et al., 2024), while a study focused on the Italian context investigated multilevel governance in connection with the Ukrainian migrant crises and discussed policy failure in this country's reception of Ukrainian refugees (Bassoli & Campomori, 2024). Other studies that examine the responses of European municipalities to this crisis include Haase et al. (2024), who studied the local responses of five European cities, and Hegedüs et al. (2023).

Regarding the Czech Republic, Jelínková et al. (2023, 2024a, 2024b) addressed the topic of Ukrainian migration and integration at the state and local levels. For example, one of these studies (Jelínková et al., 2024a) discusses the overall unpreparedness and inability of Czechia's Ministry of Interior (the body responsible for migration and integration) to respond immediately during the first phase of the crisis. This study finds that after a short period of noticeable chaos, the ministry quickly assumed its leading role in dealing with Ukrainian refugees but continued to face shortcomings, including a reluctance to involve other actors in the integration process, limited data utilisation, and a lack of strategic vision (Jelínková et al., 2024a).

Many authors have discussed multilevel government and its limits in managing the migrant crisis (Dimitriadis et al., 2021; Sakhanienko et al., 2021; Bielewska et al., 2024; Podgórska et al., 2024; Bassoli & Campomori, 2024). Among these, Bielewska et al. (2024) indicated that the primary challenge in such crises is ensuring cooperation between different levels of government. Alongside adjustment procedures, such cooperation generates benefits as well as costs for societies and economies. Coordinated efforts by all government levels and civil society are essential for achieving

better results and efficiency. This study also highlights examples from other European countries to demonstrate that municipalities, which bear the cost of failed integration, are keen to develop effective local integration programmes; still, they rely on regional, national, and European frameworks for these efforts (Bielewska et al., 2024).

Notably, few investigations have focused on how small municipalities, which often operate without any bureaucratic apparatus, have coped with the influx of refugees and the migration crisis. Among this narrow body of literature, Tjaden and Spörlein (2023) examined the role of subnational contexts and policies in the integration of migrants and refugees in decentralised countries. They concluded that geographic location plays a relatively modest role in shaping refugee integration outcomes and that the roles of districts and local-level policy implementation matter considerably more than those at the state level.

Błaszczyk et al. (2024), Jelínková et al. (2023), or Bassoli and Campomori (2024) discussed how the rather chaotic first phase of the crises is connected with a discrepancy between the narrative about the state as a guarantee of stabilisation and the delegation of duties and tasks to lower (local) levels. Rijavec and Pevcin (2021) had previously described what could be regarded as an example of this (i.e. the migration crisis of 2015–2016) and noted a lack of dialogue between government levels: While the national level aimed to meet the EU's expectations and awaited instructions, the subnational level complained and sought information.

Regarding chaotic leadership and unpreparedness, these were mentioned as factors in studies focused on, for example, Poland and Italy. According to Bassoli and Campomori (2024), the national-level reaction has been far slower than those of the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the municipalities, which faced waves of increasing pressure from citizens from the very first days of the conflict. Due to this social pressure and a lack of adequate institutions and procedures, local authorities shouldered the burden of organising the reception of war migrants and reacted quickly and flexibly to solve arising difficulties by efficiently mobilising and allocating resources (Błaszczyk et al., 2024). After addressing the immediate crisis, local authorities then handed over the daily management of receiving Ukrainian war migrants to specialised actors while retaining their oversight. Per Błaszczyk et al. (2024), the agile management of Ukrainian refugee reception at the local level was not a feature of the existing system but an ad hoc response to an unexpected problem. The city's resilience relied on the flexibility to address emerging challenges, an

organisational culture focused on a higher purpose, and the smooth cooperation of diverse parties, all of which were facilitated by previously developed social capital resources.

Błaszczyk et al. (2024) identified three main types of actors in the cities involved in the refugee reception process: local authorities such as various City Hall departments, municipal budget units, and enterprises had the requisite resources and crisis management capabilities; NGOs contributed both their experience in supporting diverse groups and their extensive networks (including connections with municipal bodies); and grassroots volunteers—residents driven by a sense of duty to help Ukrainian war migrants—also provided crucial support. Concerning this third type of actor, Bielewska et al. (2024) also highlighted the significant involvement of civil society through voluntary work, humanitarian aid, transport, and accommodation. Informal networks and individual resources were both mobilised to organise assistance in smaller cities and communities within larger cities. Municipalities in Czechia prioritised good cooperative relations in the municipality, support from the state, and cooperation with the regional authority and the non-profit sector (mainly with Centres for the Integration of Foreigners and the Fire and Rescue Service), although this cooperation was not always free of problems or tensions (Jelínková et al., 2023).

A study that categorised actors through multilevel governance revealed that informal grassroots responses to crises differ significantly from institutionalised, hierarchical actions, with institutional actors often viewing unstructured responses as threats, which hinders resource mobilisation and integration and, in turn, resilience potential (Boersma et al., 2019; Drabek & McEntire, 2003). However, the networked nature of grassroots, non-governmental, informal, and resilient initiatives enables them to use informal knowledge and atypical resources, avoiding bureaucratic pathways, thereby ensuring that they can respond promptly, creatively, and effectively (Rast et al., 2020). Past collaborations between local authorities and NGOs, including personal connections, can lead to faster and more efficient cooperation and effective implementation of activities, even without formalisation (Błaszczyk et al., 2024).

Although Jelínková et al. (2023) found that regional and local governments were highly important in migrant integration, local-level involvement was largely dependent on the mayor and the local political climate. This indicates that decisive leadership and a results-oriented organisational culture (i.e. valuable social capital) enabled efficient action despite

structural gaps. Social capital was found to be crucial for the resilience-building actions of bonding, bridging, and linking (Aldrich & Meyer, 2014; Błaszczuk et al., 2024). According to Błaszczuk et al. (2024), effective actions and goal achievement can be facilitated within organisational and private networks through the mobilisation of resources that ensure quick and efficient responses to challenges.

In refugee crises, local government officials have directly participated in coordinating the work of volunteers, creating information and support points for refugees, and providing local government resources, particularly during the first weeks (Madej et al., 2023; Jelínková et al., 2023). However, the responses of small and bigger municipalities to such crises have differed significantly, as the former are often characterised by a homogeneous population and a lack of ethnic networks, which translates to no experiences with migrants or their integration. Still, assistance to migrants from smaller cities or municipalities tended to be more individualised, and the needs of refugees were fulfilled through direct help from their municipal offices, which contrasts the more institutionalised assistance from larger municipalities (Bielewska et al., 2024).

Błaszczuk et al. (2024) identified three main phases in refugee reception activities according to their differing dynamics of action, leadership and responsibilities, and degree of formalisation. The first phase is characterised by a direct response to an emerging threat in the form of a spontaneous, bottom-up reaction, primarily utilising individuals' resources. In this phase, authorities and public institutions provide support to grass-roots initiatives; procedures and leaders emerge from social self-organisation driven by a common goal. The second phase relates to the framing of the migrants' reception by local and regional authorities. At this stage, public institutions assume the responsibility for organising reception activities. This phase aims to rationalise operations by clearly dividing tasks and responsibilities, but activities remain in emergency mode. Swift task completion is prioritised, even though it often exceeds institutional competences and utilises informal or semi-formal solutions. Municipal (regional) authorities lead and coordinate refugee reception efforts by taking political responsibility and mobilising, managing, and allocating resources. Finally, the third phase is characterised by the stabilisation and professionalisation of operations (i.e. the entire reception system, not only individual activities), the delegation of tasks and control of their implementation, and the distribution of funds (Błaszczuk et al., 2024).

6.3 DYNAMICS OF MIGRATION FROM UKRAINE TO CZECHIA AND NATIONAL FRAMEWORK AND MEASURES

The Czech Republic's migration and integration policies have evolved significantly since the country's independence in 1989. Initially, the focus was on managing the transition from a country of emigration to one facing increasing immigration, driven by economic growth and EU membership in 2004. In July 2014, the Czech government approved the Strategy of Migration Policy of the Czech Republic. This national strategy outlined key national- and EU-level principles and goals, focusing on the importance of legal migration, migrant integration, the elimination of illegal migration, and the flexibility of the national asylum system. In collaboration with other central bodies (e.g. the Police of the Czech Republic and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport), the Department of Asylum and Migration Policy (OAMP) within the Ministry of Interior is responsible for migration policy, analysis, and implementation.

In 2015, the Coordination Body for Management of National Border Protection and Migration was established as a central inter-departmental expert body. Chaired by the Vice-Minister for Interior, this body includes representatives from all relevant ministries and manages the Analytical Centre for Protection of State Borders and Migration (ANACEN). This Coordination Body also serves as a platform for discussing future directions in Czech migration policy and publishes annual migration reports.

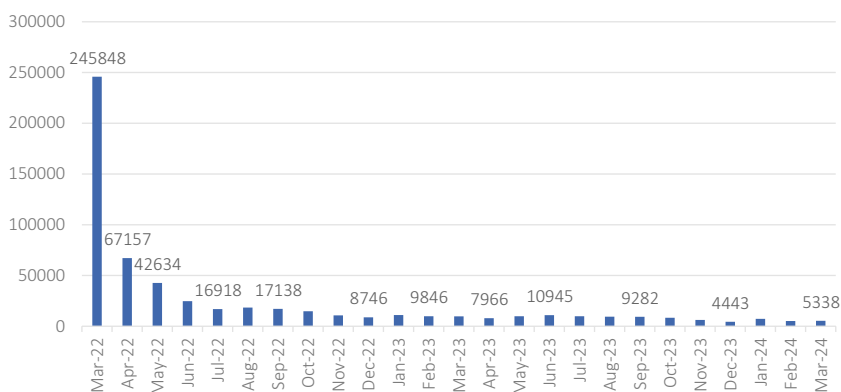
In 2016, the government approved an updated 'Concept for the Integration of Foreigners'. The Ministry of Interior coordinates this concept and annually submits a Report on the Situation in the Field of Migration and Integration of Foreigners in the Czech Republic to the Czech government to monitor the fulfilment of integration objectives. The ministry also established 18 regional Centres for the Support of Integration of Foreigners (CPIC) to aid in the integration process.

Under current legislation, municipalities and regions in Czechia have few direct obligations related to migrant integration, making their role challenging (Heriban Kalíková & Čerychová, 2020). They cannot control the number or origin of immigrants in their areas, yet growing diversity places increasing demands on them. Local governments, which are the closest to migrants and the majority population, are vital in ensuring that newcomers and natives live well together and understand each other. Regions and cities respond based on mapping and identification of needs,

particularly by announcing various subsidy or grant programmes. The regional advisory platforms, regional integration centres, and NGOs that focus on language courses and other assistance to migrants also play crucial roles in regional integration efforts.

Since the beginning of the military attack on Ukraine in February 2022, thousands of refugees have arrived in Czechia, many of whom have remained (350,000 in April 2024). Others have later continued onwards to other countries or gradually returned to Ukraine. The first days and weeks were especially challenging, as thousands of refugees arrived when no one was prepared for them. As of March 2024, almost 250,000 Ukrainian refugees had asked for temporary protection in Czechia. The monthly increase in the number of applicants for temporary protection is shown in Graph 6.1.

This situation has placed significant pressure on the Czech state. Initially, help for refugees was swiftly organised with extensive backing from NGOs and numerous volunteers. Although the Ministry of Interior was unprepared and unable to respond immediately to such a large influx of refugees, it soon—after a brief period of evident confusion—took on its



Graph 6.1 Monthly increase in applicants for temporary protection, Feb. 2022–April 2024. Source: Czech Ministry of Interior, Konsorcium nevládních organizací pracujících s migranty <https://migracnikonsorcium.cz/cs/data-statistiky-a-analyzy/uprchlici-z-ukrajiny-v-datech/#uprchlici-cr-pocty>

leadership role (Jelínková et al., 2023). An emergency was declared on 3 March 2022 to support measures related to the influx of refugees. The Czech Republic issued special long-term visas for Ukrainian refugees that permitted them to stay in the country, and the Ministry of Interior established the National Assistance Centre for Help to Ukraine, along with a dedicated website (www.nasiukrajinci.cz), to provide information to refugees and those willing to help. Regional assistance centres were initially managed by cities, regions, and NGOs but were later taken over by the ministry in April 2023. Passed in March 2022, the Lex Ukraine law provided temporary protection for refugees, full access to the labour market, free health insurance, social benefits, and reimbursement for temporary accommodation. It has since been amended multiple times to alter the law's benefits and accommodation allowances.

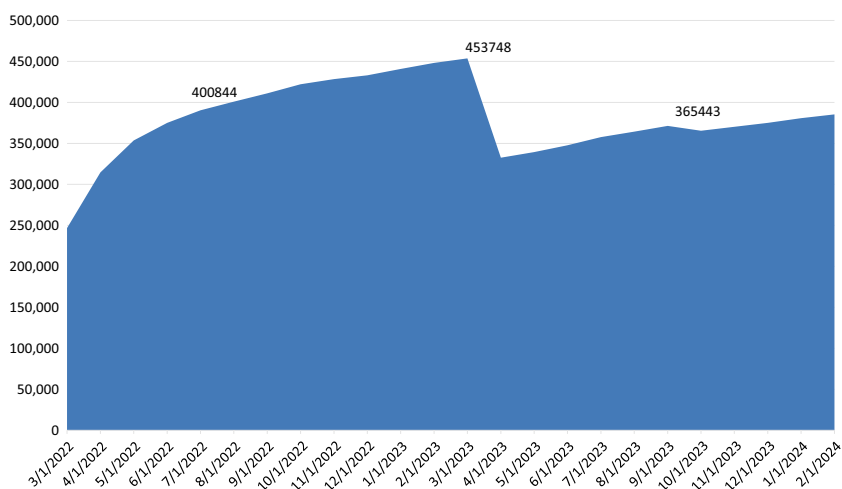
The Czech government also published Strategic Priorities for Medium- and Long-term Crisis Management in March 2022. In line with these priorities—legal status, digital management, housing, employment, education, healthcare, and integration, to name several examples—it appointed key coordinators to ensure that they were met. Through these efforts, refugee children were granted access to education on the same basis as Czech children through the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport. Local governments could apply for special grants to assist refugees, and large cities created dedicated websites to aid them. The Association Union of Towns and Municipalities provided information, promoted national programmes, and helped solve specific problems like the insolvency of Sberbank, where some small municipalities had deposits.

As of 2022, there was widespread public support in Czechia for accepting migrants from countries invaded by Russia, with many volunteers assisting refugees. According to research by CVVM (2023), more than two-thirds of the population supported accepting Ukrainian refugees in 2022, compared to less than half in 2018. Although the refugee waves of 2011–2015 had minimal impact on Czechia compared to other European countries, they nevertheless generated significant public concern about migration and migrants (see Jelínková, 2019; Krobová & Zápotocký, 2022). Migration issues are a prominent topic in Czech political discourse, especially pre-elections; negative attitudes towards migration and refugees are part of the electoral agenda for many Czech populist political parties. Despite these concerns, the share of foreigners in the Czech population in 2021 (before the influx of Ukrainian refugees) was well below the European Union average of 5.8% (Eurostat, 2022).

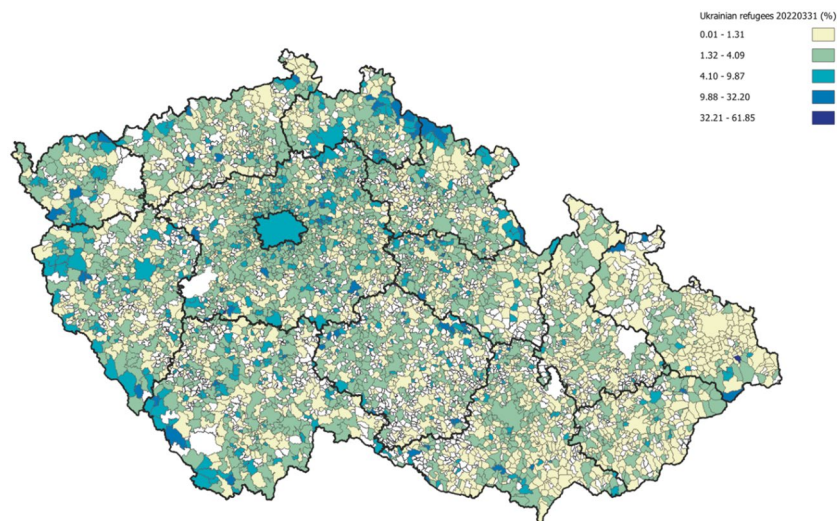
Czechia has long been a key destination for Ukrainian migrants, primarily for economic reasons. By 2021, nearly 200,000 Ukrainians were legally residing there, predominantly western Ukrainian men working in low-skilled jobs in the construction, service, and agriculture sectors (Leontiyeva, 2014). Family ties, social environments, and family policies all significantly influenced Ukrainians' choice to seek refuge in Czechia after the 2022 Russian attack.

A 2022 survey by the Czech Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs revealed that 79% of Ukrainian refugees who came to Czechia after the Russian attack in February 2022 were women with children, nearly half of the adult refugees were under 45 years old, and only 4% were seniors (Klimešová et al., 2022). This survey also found that 35% held university degrees and another 14% had higher vocational education. The largest portion of the refugees (34%) originated from central Ukraine, particularly from the capital, Kyiv, and the surrounding region. Notably, only 30% had immediate family members already residing in Czechia.

Graph 6.2 illustrates the cumulative number of Ukrainian refugees who requested temporary protection in Czechia till February 2024. The two significant decreases observed in April and September 2023 are attributed



Graph 6.2 The number of refugees with temporary protection in Czechia in total Source: Czech Ministry of the Interior, <https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/informativni-pocty-obyvatel-v-obcich.aspx>



Map 6.1 Share of Ukrainian refugees in municipalities in Czechia, 31 March 2022. Source: Czech Ministry of Interior, <https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/informativni-pocty-obyvatel-v-obcich.aspx>

to the process of extending temporary protection and verifying the individuals' presence.

Relatively few refugees were heading to their friends and relatives; others arrived in various locations due to decisive factors such as available accommodation capacities. Regional centres were pivotal in ensuring the housing, food and essential supplies. Map 6.1 shows that refugees have appeared in most Czech municipalities, regardless of their size, and that small municipalities have taken in a significant portion of them. Notably, however, the distribution of refugees within the municipalities gradually evolved as they sought more permanent accommodation and employment over time.

Only a small number of municipalities had any previous experience with migrants and their integration. In Czechia, the most attractive destinations for migrants are traditionally large cities (Prague, Ostrava, Brno), attractive spa towns (Karlovy Vary, Jáchymov, Poděbrady, Teplice) and towns with large, mainly foreign economic investments (Plzeň, Mladá Boleslav, Pardubice) (Bernard & Mikešová, 2014).

In the first few months after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the surge of migrants prompted regional governments—except for those with large cities—to adopt a crisis-oriented approach to the situation during their first involvement in migrant settlement (Jelínková et al., 2023). In addition to regional crisis teams, volunteers and civil society organisations also provided aid. Other important contributors were firefighters, who initially managed transportation and later assisted with the registration of Ukrainians in Czech municipalities. In smaller municipalities, local governments and their mayors have been pivotal in managing such crises (Jelínková et al., 2023).

A survey of Czech municipalities on how they managed integration and coexistence with Ukrainian refugees was conducted in 2023, one year after the start of the war, and it found that municipal approaches varied widely, ranging from very active to outsourcing to disinterest (Jelínková et al., 2024b). Per this survey's findings although smaller municipalities are no longer discussing problems because refugees have either integrated or moved to larger towns, other municipalities regarded numerous legislative changes as problematic due to incomprehensibility or tardiness. This indicates widening differences between larger and smaller municipalities. The operation of crisis staff, which had recent experience in cooperation due to the pandemic and, in turn, well-established parameters, was also an important factor in the response to the refugee crisis in 2022. Managed communication within the community (and later, with the refugees themselves) through various social networks and the actions of NGOs as well as churches and regional assistance centres in dealing with migrants were also identified as significant factors. The existence of a coordinator—often someone active in the village, associations, or previously settled residents of Ukrainian nationality—who acted as a mediator between refugees and those wanting to help was mentioned as essential in managing the refugee wave, especially in the beginning. The original activities intended to provide basic needs and subsequent assistance in dealing with institutions were mostly replaced by efforts to deal with the individual situations of Ukrainian refugees in 2023 (Jelínková et al., 2024b).

6.4 METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The chapter discusses why and how qualitative data were collected from twenty-four interviews with representatives of small municipalities, primarily mayors. The interview method was chosen to address the study's

research questions by investigating how small Czech municipalities adapted during two recent significant crises: Covid-19 and the migrant crisis. The previous chapter describes this study's methodology in more detail, as the same methodology was used for both studies.

When selecting municipalities for interviews, we focused on those with high shares of Covid-19 patients and those with high shares of migrants from Ukraine at the beginning of each crisis. The share of migrants in the small municipalities in our sample varied from 1.1% to 22%, with an average of 10.6%. Those municipalities with the lowest proportion of Ukrainian refugees were significantly affected by Covid-19 and had to deal with another crisis shortly thereafter, although it may have affected them to a much lesser extent. Therefore, in our interviews, we were interested in exploring how coping with the earlier crisis contributed systemically to solving new problems. The municipalities with the highest proportion of refugees in the first months after the start of the war had the most experience in coping with the Ukrainian crisis and were the main source of information for our research.

As in the study described in the previous chapter, we transcribed the interviews and analysed them using MAXQDA software and qualitative content analysis, as described by Kohlbacher (2006) and Mayring (2014). Initially, two researchers independently coded two interviews and then discussed the resulting codes with a third researcher. This process led to the development of a coding structure that we then applied to the remaining interviews.

6.5 COPING WITH THE MIGRATION CRISIS IN SMALL MUNICIPALITIES

The migrant crisis and the influx of Ukrainian refugees to the Czech Republic after February 2022 impacted each of the municipalities we interviewed in different ways. Only a very small portion had any previous experience with the integration of foreigners; for most, it was a completely new issue that they had to address. Many municipalities have benefitted from their experience with the previous Covid-19 crisis by highlighting the actors to whom they can confidently turn when dealing with various situations.

The small municipalities are divided into three groups according to the situation in their municipality and their approach to the crisis: The first

consists of municipalities that already had extensive experience with Ukrainian or other foreign workers before the February 2022 refugee wave; the second consists of those that lacked previous experience with migration yet managed to provide short-term and long-term accommodation for incoming refugees, leading to a significant increase in the number of people in the municipality; the third includes those that lacked previous experience with migrants and dealt with the migration crisis more marginally, either by assisting specific citizens who provided accommodation or through financial or humanitarian aid collections.

The first type of municipality has experience with labour migration. In such cases, Ukrainian workers have been living and employed in the municipality for quite a while, especially in areas such as agriculture, construction, hotels, and spa services. The number of Ukrainian citizens in these municipalities increased significantly in the immediate aftermath of the attack on Ukraine as refugees fled to their relatives or acquaintances. These municipalities were hindered by the lack of existing systemic measures at higher levels that were supposed to assist them, and their mayors—who had to deal with the situation in the very first days—regarded the initial crisis management by the state and the regions as chaotic and unhelpful. Some even mentioned throwing obstacles in their way if they tried to solve problems. Ultimately, municipalities were left to rely on their specific strengths and solutions:

While the newspapers were writing that there might be a wave of refugees, we already had 300 new people in the village, and no one could help us. Of course, bureaucracy was throwing obstacles in our way because we had to take personal risks. ... So, we simply had to help ourselves, not alone, but together. Basically, about fifty people got activated, give or take, who started to help, and the school principal took the risk upon himself regardless of what would happen, and somehow, we managed more or less on our own. The only thing that surprised us was the bureaucracy. (Mayor 19)

Although the main leader for solving the situation was oftentimes the mayor, who coordinated on-the-ground efforts to address problems, active citizens, various volunteer associations, and some local companies that employ or house foreign workers were also important players in managing the crisis in the municipalities. One interviewed mayor indicated that a company oversaw all or most of the crisis management agenda and actively participated in solving specific problems. Still, the mayors

generally considered the term ‘crisis system’ too strong to describe efforts to cope with the crises in their municipality. They instead tackled most of the problems as they came and with the capacities they had:

[A crisis system] is virtually unrealistic for that village. There is no organisation in that village. It consists of one mayor, one vice-mayor (both performed their duties only part-time), seven councillors, and one employee. Looking for a system there is pointless since everyone has their own job and responsibilities. The only system in place is the one maintained by the single clerk we have. We handled everything on an ad hoc basis, addressing needs as they arose. (Mayor 19)

The second type of municipalities were also, by necessity, actively involved in addressing the migration crisis, although their form of involvement differed significantly from the first type. These municipalities often became engaged a few days after the war began when assistance from higher levels of local and state government became more coordinated. In this type of municipality, the municipalities themselves, as well as companies and individuals, responded by providing accommodation (e.g. recreational buildings that were vacant due to seasonality or ongoing Covid-19 risks or vacant municipal buildings like gyms or, in one case, a former children’s home) for refugees who were not heading to their relatives. In some instances, refugee accommodation was temporary or short-term, lasting until refugees found other housing; in others, this accommodation has been longer-term, with Ukrainian refugees residing in a village throughout the period.

The arrival of refugees in these municipalities was often coordinated by regional authorities, enabling municipalities to better prepare for the situation, even if it was new to them. As such, these municipalities addressed the implications of having more residents rather than directly coordinating the accommodation, which was overseen by regional centres. Small municipalities where people know each other possess a heightened sensitivity to changes and stronger social control; in such cases, cohabitation with foreigners has led the municipal administration to deal with minor issues such as the use of public spaces and parking. For example, one mayor had to address local discontent when stores did not meet the increased demand:

Suddenly, out of nowhere, there was a higher demand, so I just don't know, at half-past eight in the morning, there was no bread in the store, but our citizens, generally, they take this very badly. (Mayor 14)

Another said that each group had to get used to the other:

It took a while to get those kids acclimated, too. They just behave differently than kids here, but now they are learning Czech and are totally fine. The beginning is always hard. (Mayor 9)

Several municipalities have made their buildings available for use to assist refugees. These buildings have been used as temporary or longer-term accommodation, as storage for humanitarian aid, and to provide a location for the education of Ukrainian children. Some of these municipalities were very proactive, and their mayors detailed the modifications required for facilities that were often not immediately suitable for accommodating. These efforts frequently involved active citizens and associations, particularly members of the volunteer firefighters' association within the municipality:

Over the weekend, volunteers painted and helped with everything, and that was the driving force (two active citizens). The charity supplied some beds. We looked for some furniture, and I can say that today it's all good there. (Mayor 8)

Assistance to refugees in these municipalities depended mainly on the support of the local population and the initiative of specific individuals. The mayor was frequently the main coordinator of all activities:

In the beginning, we turned the firehouse into a food bank. We went to S. to the food bank, brought supplies, and people brought in donations. Volunteers, mostly members of the fire department, set up two or three spaces that we thought we could use. We called in plumbers and electricians to get everything done. Everyone brought something from home that they didn't need, which was very helpful. We arranged three to four apartments like that. When the Ukrainians arrived, we went with them to the bank, along with our fire chief, to take care of everything that was needed. (Mayor 20)

Such assistance involved increased financial costs for the municipalities due to investments, and some municipalities also took advantage of this situation by attracting new citizens and filling vacant buildings:

We can't complain about financial suffering because we have a contract with the county, which pays for our accommodation in places where no one would otherwise live. That's a positive. Of course, we've had some expenses for modifications, and we'll have more in the future, but I'm not worried about that. (Mayor 1)

In the first year of the crisis, the state provided a financial incentive for the accommodation of refugees. However, as one mayor noted, these state contributions should have been regionally differentiated—they have, in some cases, encouraged private individuals to provide accommodation to refugees via the state contribution rather than to local citizens, which has driven up prices.

The third type of municipality in our typology was the least affected by the migration crisis, although it was still involved in its resolution. In this crisis, the primary role of such municipalities was to relay information from higher authorities to citizens who were more interested in helping, particularly those who were accommodating refugees. The municipalities also organised financial aid and collected food and other supplies for refugees. The management of the municipality was often contacted by citizens who needed to solve problems related to refugee accommodation and dealt with issues such as the increased amount of waste in cases where several people were accommodated in a single house and related compensatory payments.

6.6 CRISIS MANAGEMENT, COORDINATION, AND COMMUNICATION TOWARDS SMALL MUNICIPALITIES

Respondents often distinguished between different phases of the crisis. The first phase was associated with chaos and almost non-existent measures at the national level and with municipalities taking charge of the situation, particularly in the first municipality type. Although the other types were less critical, most of these municipalities have been involved in coping with crises in the second phase of the crisis, when the Ministry of Interior and regional centres assumed its leading role in dealing with Ukrainian refugees and started to coordinate solutions.

According to our respondents' statements, it was not always clear whether the key actor in crisis management was the municipality with extended responsibilities or the region. Crisis management law stipulates that municipalities with extended responsibilities ('ORPs')—especially their mayors—are expected to coordinate crisis management within their legally defined administrative districts that encompass several municipalities. The interviews suggest that crisis management practices vary based on specific experiences and prior cooperation within territories; mayors often mentioned specific individuals with whom they cooperated at various administrative levels, and the nature of this cooperation determined its form.

When a municipality with extended responsibilities had a history of assisting smaller municipalities, it was usually helpful during crises as well. Conversely, mayors accustomed to cooperating with regional bodies or other channels often contacted a mayor from a neighbouring municipality due to their previous experience. This cooperation was not one-sided. The interviews indicate that regional bodies also actively reached out to municipalities to identify available capacities for accommodating refugees. Later, in some cases, municipalities acted as a control body through which the region verified reported data from private accommodation providers to issue subsidies.

Interviewees viewed municipal authorities with extended responsibilities or regional entities as essential sources of information in the context of crisis management. Municipalities often turned to these authorities or regional migration centres for assistance in problem-solving. In other cases, they tried to cope with the situation by themselves using their sources. As such, the strength of small municipalities lies precisely in individual commitment and local knowledge of whom to turn to when facing problems and how to solve specific issues:

When something was needed to help the Ukrainians, we announced on Facebook what was needed, and within half an hour, we had a queue in front of the office. Volunteers were found to sort and distribute the donations. When there was an excess of something, we adjusted the request on Facebook, and the same response occurred. (Mayor 19)

However, this form of problem-solving, characteristic of the first phase of the crisis, is not sustainable in the long term, as the mayors were aware. Due to personal ties, it often worked longer in small municipalities than in

larger ones; in smaller ones, the local leadership frequently got involved in addressing the individual problems of specific refugees, such as finding a school or doctor, rather than dealing with systemic issues.

Most municipalities lacked sufficient data on the number of refugees within their territory. This varied somewhat by region, as some mayors reported having information from crisis management, while others did not. The mayors of some municipalities mentioned that they only received general information about the numbers and that it was often several months late, particularly regarding the mandatory enrolment of children in elementary schools. Some searched for information in databases published on the Ministry of Interior website, but they often found the numbers to be incorrect and higher than the actual situation: ‘So, I really have no idea where they [migrants] could be. But realistically, I think there aren’t that many of them here’ (Mayor 17).

Although the relevance of the data is debatable, the transmission of information on the number of foreigners in the municipality generally improved significantly over time during the migration crisis. Municipalities with previous extensive experience with foreigners found communication with the responsible authorities and the transfer of information before the crisis to be particularly problematic. The provision of financial assistance to each refugee arriving in a municipality is one example of a problem-solving initiative that also obtained information about the refugees and supported local entrepreneurs, as refugees could only use the financial voucher to purchase food within that municipality:

As a municipality, when a lot of refugees arrived, we gave everyone who came 2000 CZK to shop in local stores. We have two local grocery stores. They were not allowed to buy alcohol or cigarettes. This support was provided in the form of vouchers. We spent about 120,000 CZK and 86,000 CZK were reimbursed. There was a high turnover. (Mayor 5)

Not all municipalities collected information on the number of refugees, but for many, this information was essential, particularly in small municipalities where people know each other well and there is more social control. Familiarity fosters a sense of security that can be eroded by a higher number of newcomers to the village. In such cases, a greater awareness of specific individuals in the village can be helpful:

It's not that I mind not knowing the specific number and location, but if you know, you know who to go to if there's a problem to get things straightened out. Those that stay here, I keep an eye on the street where I live, and the young man who rents that one floor there, so I keep an eye on whether they go to work so they don't cause us trouble. (Mayor 10)

In these communities, individualised assistance and concern for the specific problems of refugees operated on the same principle. One mayor, for instance, printed materials for teaching Ukrainian pupils or informed them about activities for refugees and personally took them to a community centre in a nearby town:

The community centre in B. was running a programme for refugees, so I showed them how to get there; I went with them and showed them where it was. (Mayor 10)

6.7 CONCLUSION

Following the Russian invasion in February 2022, the Ukrainian refugee crisis posed significant challenges for Czech municipalities, particularly smaller ones with minimal prior experience in migration and integration. Unlike larger cities that quickly implemented systematic crisis management strategies, small municipalities relied heavily on ad hoc solutions and local resources characteristic of their larger counterparts, especially in the first phase of the crisis (Błaszczyk et al., 2024). Their responses varied widely, from the provision of financial support and material collections to temporary and long-term accommodation. This study provides insights into the adaptive strategies employed by these municipalities and the broader implications for public administration and crisis management.

Our findings align with those of Bielewska et al. (2024), who noted that small municipalities rarely speak of crisis management in systemic terms but instead focus on immediate, practical solutions to specific problems. This ad hoc approach is driven by necessity, as these smaller localities lack an established administrative apparatus. The individual commitment of local leaders, particularly mayors, was crucial in managing the initial stages of the crisis. These findings are consistent with those of Jelínková et al. (2024a), who highlighted the initial chaos and lack of preparedness at higher administrative levels, which forced local authorities to rely on their resources and ingenuity.

The research revealed significant differences in how small municipalities and larger cities handled the crisis. Small municipalities, characterised by close-knit communities and strong social ties, relied heavily on local social capital. The personal involvement of mayors and local leaders was essential, as they often knew the residents personally and could mobilise community resources quickly and effectively. This personalised grassroots approach contrasts with the more institutionalised responses seen in larger cities, as described by Błaszczyk et al. (2024) and Podgórska et al. (2024).

The study also highlights the challenges of multilevel governance in managing migration crises, as discussed by Dimitriadis et al. (2021) and Bielewska et al. (2024). The cooperation between different levels of government was often challenging, with small municipalities reporting chaotic and insufficient guidance from national and regional authorities at the beginning of the migration crisis. This lack of coordination, especially in municipalities with many refugees, increased the administrative burden on local officials, who had to navigate the crisis largely on their own. As the crisis evolved, higher levels of government gradually assumed more control, and the cooperation between various administrative levels improved.

A key insight from this study is the role of local social capital in crisis management: Effective actions and goal achievement were often facilitated by the mobilisation of resources within local networks, allowing for quick and efficient responses to challenges. This finding aligns with the conclusions of Aldrich and Meyer (2014), who emphasised the importance of social capital in enhancing community resilience.

The involvement of NGOs, volunteers, and community organisations was pivotal in the crisis response, resembling patterns observed in other European countries, and in the initial stages of the crisis, other crucial actors were grassroots volunteers and residents driven by a sense of duty to help Ukrainian refugees. This mirrors the findings of Grossi and Vakulenko (2022), who noted the immediate forms of support provided by national governments and the significant role of civil society in crisis response.

Nevertheless, our study also indicates the potential limitations of relying solely on grassroots efforts. Although local initiatives were crucial in the initial response, the long-term sustainability of such efforts is questionable, as the lack of systematic support and coordination from higher levels of government can lead to burnout among local leaders and volunteers. This underscores the need for a more integrated and well-coordinated

approach to crisis management, as advocated by Boersma et al. (2019) and Drabek and McEntire (2003).

Ultimately, this examination of the Ukrainian refugee crisis has highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of small municipalities in managing large-scale humanitarian emergencies. Their ability to adapt quickly, mobilise local resources, and provide personalised assistance was critical in the early stages of the crisis, but there is an evident need for better-prepared and more responsive public administration systems at all levels of government. These small municipalities' experiences offer valuable lessons in resilience and community mobilisation and underscore the importance of multilevel governance in effectively managing future crises.

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