

Conference Report

Cities, Migration, and Integration:

Challenges, Responsibilities, and Inspiration

Date: 14 May 2019, 09:00 – 17:00

Venue: Kaiserstejn Palace, Malostranské náměstí 23/37, 110 00 Prague 1

The international conference was co-organised by the Consortium of Migrant Assisting Organisations, the Association for Integration and Migration, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Prague Office, and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) under the auspices of the Mayor of Prague, Zdeněk Hřib.

The number of foreigners coming to the Czech Republic has been steadily increasing over the past years and our society, therefore, faces the challenge of their integration. Given the currently favourable economic climate and labour market shortages, the number of foreigners will continue to grow in the upcoming period, making this challenge even more urgent. Comprehensive integration policies require the cooperation of a wide spectre of actors at various levels of governance – including, perhaps most importantly, the local level. Integration at the local level – at the place where migrants reside, work, and spend their free time is an indispensable prerequisite of a successful integration policy. It has consequently become increasingly important for local actors – municipal and regional officials, local NGOs and volunteers, social workers, businesses – to become actively involved in the process of integrating newcomers.

Responding to this situation, the main goals of the conference were to discuss current challenges, roles, responsibilities, and obstacles of individual actors involved, to search for inspirational practices, and to define a path forward. It aimed not only to introduce innovative approaches and functional models of engaging diverse actors in the integration of foreigners at the local level, but also to bring these actors to the event and provide a platform for dialogue and networking. The importance and relevance of the topic was confirmed by the high interest that the conference aroused. While aiming to attract some eighty to one hundred participants, one hundred and fifty persons arrived. Among the conference attendees were international guests and representatives of municipalities, state administration, employers, civil society organisations, migrant associations and academics.

The conference took place in two formats: plenary meetings and debates in working groups. This format enabled discussion of the most pressing challenges in greater detail, achieving a fruitful exchange of best practices and information. The first plenary meeting brought keynote addresses by international and Czech speakers dealing with migrant integration in the context of multilevel governance. Pablo Rojas Coppari, Migration and Freedom of Movement Adviser at the OSCE/ODIHR, introduced the recently published “Local Authorities Migrant Integration Guide” (ODIHR/OSCE). The document aims to increase local authorities’ awareness of their role in the integration process and help them develop strategic documents. He underscored that integration always takes place at the local level, and municipality representatives are therefore suitable coordinators of integration policies. Thus, they should play a more active role in shaping national policies in the field integration. Jan Braat, Senior Adviser on Integration from the City of Utrecht, introduced Utrecht’s integration model and stressed that inclusive policies must always aim to work with the majority population as well, because integration is a two-side process. He further noted that participation of migrants and a wide spectre of the majority population, as well as regional cooperation and networking, are crucial for successful integration policies. Jan Janoušek, Migrant integration specialist of the City of Prague, then discussed the experience with the multilevel governance approach in the Czech context.

Ensuing working group debates focused on the implementation of evaluation processes of local integration policies, a participative approach to integration policy, ways to engage migrants, mapping the situation at the local level, and methods of working with data. Speakers from the first plenary session were joined by other international guests, including Deputy High Commissioner for Migration, Vasco Malta, from Portugal or integration policy specialist from Berlin Senate, Kai Leptien. The necessity of fact-based policies drawing on comprehensive mapping and monitoring, data gathering and their context-sensitive interpretation was stressed throughout the debates as a key for setting strategic documents. Furthermore, the need for meaningful evaluation of existing policies, priorities, and projects was highlighted by speakers as necessary for the integration process. Relating the debates to the Czech context, we could see that this field is underdeveloped and that the transfer of good practices from abroad would be a welcome contribution to local authorities and non-governmental organisations.

The afternoon conference block focused on the social integration of foreign workers and the role of municipalities and employers in the process. The second plenary discussion was opened by Vít Rakušan, Mayor of Kolín, Member of Parliament and Chairman of STAN party. Rakušan talked about Kolín’s experience with the integration of foreign workers coming in large numbers in a short period. He outlined various obstacles that the city faced in providing the newcomers with housing, social services, or healthcare. Further, he discussed the role of individual actors in calling for more active support and assistance from the national government for fast-growing industrial regions. Rakušan

emphasised that the state must adequately set conditions to encourage migrants' willingness and motivation to integrate and that close cooperation of local authorities with employers is necessary for planning and prediction of migration trends. Amil Sharifov, Coordinator of Refugee Work and Integration at the City of Erlangen, noted that successful integration is never a coincidence, but requires a thorough and cross-sectoral integration strategy at the local level and intercultural openness of institutions. Tyler Golden, Head of People at Mews Systems, shared her own experience with integrating into Czech society and discussed what role in the integration process employers can play, as well as the obstacles they face when hiring foreign workers. Birgit Köbl, Head of Partnership in the ReDi School from Munich, then introduced an inspirational model of the role that the non-governmental sector can play in connecting cities with employers and providing necessary services.

The working-group debates which followed the panel elaborated on these issues in more detail, discussing the practical implementation of good practices from abroad and next steps forward. While there was a consensus that integration of foreign workers at the local level is a very complex issue requiring close cooperation of various actors; national and local authorities, employers, NGOs and migrants, the question of who should have which role in the process remains a troubling one. Differences and conflicts in individual actors' views and perspectives on the matter were visible throughout the debates, since the majority of actors suggest that the others should assume more responsibility and bear the financial burden of integration policies. The conference thus manifested that a continued and more intense dialogue between actors involved is needed so that they can better understand what real competences, possibilities, and space for action each of them have, and which obstacles they face.

Networking among experts from different areas and backgrounds that will enable a dialogue between civil society actors, Ministry of Interior, municipalities, employers and other relevant players, are crucial at the current stage. Clarifying and finding a consensus on the roles of individual actors, harmonization of their approaches, and establishing cooperation are difficult but necessary tasks. The non-governmental sector should not stand aside, but become actively engaged in providing a platform for dialogue, looking for synergies, and importing good practices from abroad. It should also work on increasing interest and awareness of the necessity of integration among not-yet involved actors – particularly some municipalities and employer, as well as migrants and migrant associations. From this perspective, the conference was a great contribution to the current debate and should be followed by similar events and advocacy meetings. One of the main lessons learned for the Consortium of Migrant Assisting Organisations and the Association for Integration and Migration, therefore, is that a commitment to the field of integration should stay high on their agenda.

Next steps for the Consortium of Migrant Assisting Organisations and its member organisations

- Network with and among experts from different areas and backgrounds – civil society actors, Ministry of Interior, municipalities, employers and other relevant players – and provide a platform for dialogue, exchange of ideas, good practices, and negotiations.
- Deepen expertise in integration at the local level, bring in inspirational practices and models from abroad, and motivate local authorities to enter cities’ and regions’ networks and platforms existing at the EU level.
- Assist local authorities in mapping the field, gathering and analyzing data on integration and migrant populations, drafting strategic documents on integration, and evaluation mechanisms – provide them with expertise, prepare informational materials and guidelines, and cooperate on joint projects.
- Promote multi-level governance and the mainstreaming of integration to achieve cross-sectoral and comprehensive integration policies.
- Enter into dialogue with employers, engage them, and raise their awareness on benefits of integration. Assume greater responsibility in connecting them with local authorities.
- Work on enhancing migrant participation, engage migrant associations in various processes, and promote participatory models of integration.