

How decentralization works in migration policy

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The phenomenon of [decentralization](#) has been one of the hottest topics in public policy and public administration for decades.

For the purposes of this article, we define decentralization as a transfer of responsibility for planning and management, and the acquisition and allocation of resources at lower levels of government. The theory is that decentralization can contribute to democracy, it also means more efficiency, more accountability of politicians, more involvement of citizens, and less corruption.

Critics argue that decentralization can be [inefficient](#), that it reduces the capacity of the public sector to deliver, that it involves [high coordination costs](#), and that in some places it can increase corruption. We are now seeing a wave of empirical studies, but they are producing highly contradictory results. We know even less about how decentralization works in migration policy.

The experience of the Czech Republic can serve as a lesson. The Czech Republic has been described as a [champion of decentralization](#). I

n fact, there are 6,254 municipalities, most of which have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. By the way of comparison, neighboring (and similarly sized) Austria has 2,103 municipalities and Spain, which is many times larger, has 8,112.

This state of affairs is the subject of major debates about the effectiveness of government and is often criticized by international organizations (e.g. OECD). The decentralized administrative structure has been put to the test in the context of the Ukrainian crisis. The Czech Republic has received nearly [500,000](#) migrants from Ukraine.

On a per capita basis, this was the highest number in the world. Local governments played a key role in managing the whole situation. In our research published in *Public Money & Management*, we focused on how they managed the situation.

Research results

The arrival of Ukrainian refugees put Czech municipalities in a situation where they did not have a well-developed integration infrastructure. Based on the data collected, we can define several typologies of municipalities according to their approach to dealing with the first phase of the Ukrainian crisis. These are ["municipal activism"](#) and ["municipal passivism."](#)

Active municipalities in [emergency situations](#) activate their own resources and create their own public policies to help manage the situation at the local level. On the other hand, they necessarily take some risk that their policies will be costly and unsustainable in the long run. Passive municipalities do not develop independent activities, do not allocate resources and do not create their own policies. They are afraid to take risks and wait for decisions and support from the central government.

Failure to deal with emergencies can lead to even greater problems such as distrust of the public sector and the strengthening of extremist sentiments in society. But even in the long run, in an environment of [limited statehood](#) (a situation where the public sector lacks sufficient capacity to design and implement public policies), this strategy may seem rational in terms of risk elimination. Local governments save their own resources and capacity in the early stages of a crisis, which they can use in the event of a prolonged crisis.

Limited financial resources, both in terms of staffing and unexpected expenses, were the most important determinants of municipal action. Another problem was the lack of support from the central government. However, the role of the national level was seen as ambivalent, in the sense that while government action was important, municipalities still felt largely alone in the issue.

Housing, psychosocial support for refugees, and access to pre-school care were also identified as problematic in the research. Although municipalities rated the provision of accommodation for refugees as a well-managed urgent task, this did not detract from the urgency of the issue of refugee accommodation at the municipal level.

The arrival of Ukrainian refugees exacerbated the generally problematic availability of housing in the Czech Republic. A similar situation applies to psychosocial care, which is also less accessible in the Czech Republic. The provision of such care for refugees was a challenging (or unmanageable) issue, especially in cases where there were larger numbers (more than ten) of Ukrainian refugees in municipalities. Next, significant challenges appeared in ensuring sufficient capacity in kindergartens, primary and secondary schools.

What are the main lessons learned?

Decentralized systems are able to manage the first phases of migration crises quite effectively. Local political leadership is a crucial factor. The commitment and competence of local politicians make all the difference. In the later stages of the crisis, the administrative and financial capacity of [local governments](#) is crucial, as more investment can be expected to meet the basic needs of migrants. Even if we talk about decentralization, we cannot ignore central government.

The central government must act as a coordinator and a ["bridgebuilder."](#) The coordinator means that that central government must ensure the effective transfer of information and resources between key actors.

Bridgebuilding means that central [government](#) must not only be able to organize partnerships at the horizontal and vertical levels of the public sector, but also must often have the courage to create unexpected partnerships between the private, non-profit, and public sectors.

In order to overcome the crisis in decentralized systems, the ability to achieve synergies is crucial, i.e., the performance of the whole system is greater than the sum of the performance of the 6,254 individual municipalities.

More information: Marie Jelínková et al, Human-made disasters in a decentralized context: How Czech municipalities are dealing with the Ukrainian crisis, *Public Money & Management* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/09540962.2022.2154950](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2022.2154950)

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