



# Project ISI – Innovation and creative problem-solving in integration work

## About the ISI project

Integrated Smart Inclusion by Volunteers (ISI) is an EU co-financed project on improving volunteer-based support for the integration and inclusion of Ukrainian refugees in Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia.

ISI goes beyond the typical approach of prioritising employment and language acquisition. While these two focuses of integration are of course very important, ISI also addresses the two important prerequisites to sustainably achieve these goals: ISI works on the social aspects of integration and inclusion, especially people-to-people contact and involvement within receiving communities and additional volunteer-based support to improve social inclusion.

The key vector for ISI to achieve this is the development and implementation of a volunteer training curriculum that consists of a central and common part (general target-group specific competences that will be the same for volunteers in all countries) as well as a locally adapted part to build a “knowledge hub” on the community level, with the capacities to assist refugees not only in matters of employment and language courses, but also when it comes to cultural offers and meeting spaces with members of the local community.

This document is one of the early deliverables of the project that takes stock of the need for creative and innovative solutions, including some example approaches from the participating partners.

Up-to-date information on ISI is available at:

<https://isi.samaritan-international.eu/>

## Need for innovative and creative solutions in effective integration services and support offers

Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Mechanism, granting over 4.2 million Ukrainian nationals access to residence, work, and social services. Notably, Germany (1.2 million) and Poland (1 million) host the largest groups, while countries such as Slovakia, Latvia, and Lithuania serve both as transit and destination countries. The scale and diversity of displacement have prompted novel, socially innovative responses aimed at facilitating meaningful integration. This report explores key integration innovations through three lenses: co-production of services, person-centred support, and two-directional integration. It is based on the needs analysis that was carried out by the project partners in the framework of the project’s application process.

### Co-Production of Social Services (Public Services and Civil Society Organisations)

The integration of Ukrainian refugees has accelerated the co-production of social services between public institutions and civil society organisations (CSOs). This hybrid model of service delivery leverages the institutional capacity of local authorities and the grassroots accessibility of CSOs, which is especially vital given the large and diverse refugee population across Europe.



According to Bakoben et al. (2023) in their study “*Lokale Sozialpolitik für Geflüchtete*”, local integration efforts have been most effective when municipalities and CSOs work together, forming new, collaborative service infrastructures. This collaboration allows for greater flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and proximity to refugee communities, particularly in Germany and Poland where the numbers are largest.

Despite the proliferation of public and private support offers since 2022, gaps remain in connecting refugees to existing services and in offering community-based, non-institutional support such as mentoring and informal coaching. Successful integration does not only refer to access to employment, housing, citizenship and rights, but also needs to incorporate the processes of social connection within and between groups within the community; and address structural barriers to such connection related to language, culture and the local environment. (Ager & Strang, 2008). In response, some projects now operate through informal cooperation with public authorities, focusing instead on volunteer-led initiatives to foster trust and direct outreach—an approach supported by experience in post-2015 refugee responses.

### Person-Centred Support (Beyond Labour Market Integration – Social and Cultural Inclusion)

While language acquisition and employment are often prioritised, a more holistic, person-centred model of support is emerging. This approach acknowledges that successful integration involves emotional security, cultural participation, and social connection in addition to economic self-sufficiency.

Across host countries, many Ukrainians report difficulties accessing structured opportunities for cultural exchange and non-institutional community life, particularly outside work and school settings. A growing body of research, including Scholten et al. (2019), has revealed the focus on labour market integration, and the lack of differentiated approaches, also including services that address the psychosocial and cultural needs of displaced persons, especially women, elderly, and families.

Project partners have identified a lack of structured spaces for such interaction, such as community centers, cultural hubs, informal cafés, activity offers, where Ukrainian refugees can both connect with locals and retain elements of their own identity. Initiatives that provide such spaces promote well-being, resilience, and a sense of belonging, key indicators of long-term integration success (Strang, A., & Ager, A. (2010).

### Two-Directional Integration (The Role and Engagement of the Local Population)

A major shortfall in many integration policies is the one-directional expectation that refugees should adapt, without any reciprocal efforts of acceptance by the host society. This view overlooks the critical role of the local population in shaping a welcoming environment, as stressed by Glorius et al. (2021) in “Integration of Refugees in Rural Areas and the Role of the Receiving Society”.

Two-directional integration requires deliberate investment in local awareness, empathy-building, and active participation. Both in rural and urban areas, contact between host communities and refugees remains limited, with few organised settings where interaction is facilitated or occurs organically.

Social innovation here involves facilitating direct people-to-people contact through shared activities: intercultural events, language tandems, one-on-one mentoring, organised community activities, or other projects. Evidence from the SHARE Network shows that such



encounters are key to breaking down stereotypes, reducing social distance, and building trust.

## Examples from the project partners

The following are examples from the project partner organisations that they have identified as innovative, novel, rare or at least uncommon at the time within their countries.

Services vary depending on the local demand – often related to the starting situation found in each country in 2022. Besides offering services guiding towards employment and language learning, many of the following approaches tried different formats of building and managing community between the refugees and local citizens. The extend of local involvement varies, from a long-term line to the organisation to approaches on the level of the individual citizen. One large common denominator, that the organisations share as volunteer-based CSOs, is the integration into one's own organisation as a volunteer. This has proven a highly successful approach to have activities where refugees and local volunteers work together on equal footing, where they can enjoy the social life that volunteering brings and, in the process, become a part of a community of people that form an essential pillar of civil society and active citizenship in the participating countries. Volunteering does have a positive impact on conventional aspects of integration, such as language skills and employment perspectives, but the key benefit is the social integration that it offers.

### LSB, Lithuania – facilitation of community and peer-to-peer support

LSB, as part of their integration work, has facilitated the creation of an association of Ukrainians in Lithuania, “Stefania”. It is technically integrated into LSB, respectively its local branches, as part of the larger associations. In Stefania, Ukrainians from the early waves of refugees support those that came after them. This helps with typical challenges on communication and cultural competence as well as related soft skills that make it easier for Ukrainian volunteers to help their more recently arrived countrymen than it would be for a volunteer crew consisting exclusively of Lithuanians. Stefanie organises social gatherings, e.g. with meals from Ukrainian national cuisine, they enable and refer to groupings by region of origin for a more familiar environment for new arrivals and, later on, groupings by interest or current challenges, as the integration process proceeds.

While bringing Ukrainians together with other Ukrainians is, at first look, not a direct integrative effort into Lithuanian society, the logic of Stefania is that diaspora groups will always form – also by themselves and usually without any relationship with local society. By taking the initiative to create and manage these groups, they remain connected to LSB as a local civil society organisation. LSB also benefits from the existence of the Stefania initiative because they consult them in the role of relevant stakeholders when it comes to establishing more conventional support services for Ukrainian refugees.

**Key point of innovation:** Provide services related to the establishment of refugee-based (diaspora) organisation and support them in exercising their rights in local communities. By taking the initiative to support diaspora in establishing their community organisations, we will keep regular relations and communication and ensure groupings have integrative benefits.



### ASB, Germany – Establishing meeting spaces with citizens & youth work

The Hamburg branch of ASB is trying to create contact between refugees and local citizens as part of their activities. Their temporary accommodation has, for instance, opened the sewing and knitting classes that are available as an activity for the accommodations residents to the general public. This has been well received and led to a meeting space around a joint activity and practical learning experience. Another initiative was the creation of a monthly café event, that is visited by both refugees and locals.

Key point: Creation of different types of meeting spaces to bring local people in contact with refugees.

Another example from ASB is from their youth wing, Arbeiter-Samariter-Jugend (ASJ). They specifically target adolescent refugees as potential new volunteers for their association. Anyone interested will be able to join the youth associations regular program on equal footing to the local youths (first-aid oriented youth activities). As ASJ is often only a first step in becoming a long-term volunteer in the parent organisation ASB, this measure does not only provide immediate community between local youths and refugee youths (which significantly supports social integration as well as language learning), it also opens a path to integrated, active citizenship of the refugees as part of an established volunteer-based CSO.

Key point: Volunteering as active participation in organised civil society of the host country, with a focus on youth.

### LSA, Latvia – Accessibility in refugee aid

Especially in the early days of the refugee movements of 2022, host countries had only limited capacities for refugees with different types of disabilities – despite people with disabilities of course being an especially vulnerable group in a country under attack and thus part of the refugee population. LSA was the first organisation in Latvia to provide aid specifically for refugees with physical disabilities. Their temporary accommodation was accessible, and many persons stayed there for over a year (which is long by temporary accommodation standards), because longer-term accommodation with adequate accessible facilities was not always easy to find.

Key point: Fulfilling the right to accessibility for refugees with disabilities

### SFOP, Poland – Meeting spaces and winning refugees for the organisation's work

In Poland, project partner SFOP is also focusing meeting spaces. They conducted intercultural workshops for women with infant children, offering childcare during this time by daycare volunteers for the duration of the workshop – thus enabling this target group, which can often be pressed for time by their family responsibilities, to take part. The workshops, together with locals, approached cultural exchange on a low-threshold practical level (e.g. cooking Christmas dishes from Ukraine and Poland together). While participants are not systematically tracked, the organisation knows of lasting contacts resulting from these events. Some Ukrainians also joined the organisation in different capacities later on, enabling direct participation in a local civil society organisation as a further benefit for integration.

Key points: Creation of meeting spaces, integration into the local CSO



## ASSR, Slovakia - Collaborating with Local Volunteers to Assist University Student Refugees

According to official statistics, over 12,000 refugees with Temporary Protection (TP) from Ukraine are studying in Slovak universities. Both the refugees and university authorities face significant challenges related to these students' status and the pursuit of equal rights due to various legal and community barriers. University administration is addressing each problem in isolation, utilising various unconventional solutions. Therefore, ASSR aims to provide coordinated support – Youth Mentoring Services. Furthermore, youth mentoring will include assistance with the national professional competence framework and the basics of contractual issues. This social innovation will leverage the internal expertise of the ASSR team in developing comprehensive information services to support the inclusion of migrant communities and labour integration. This also involves attracting foreigners to the Slovak academic sector. The innovation will unfold in the following steps: upgrading ASSR's knowledge about student needs, developing services that address at least ten areas of inquiries with publicly insufficient information for both potential and current students at Slovak universities, creating an information hub related to social, labour, financial, and university matters, and testing the model through online webinars and offline open space activities with refugees that will translate general information into practical applications.

**Key points:** Guidance toward employment sectors with national shortages, at the same time also pointing out and successfully promoting social integration opportunities in voluntary engagement.

### Expected Impact of Innovative Elements

The innovative practices collected through ISI are expected to make a substantial contribution to integration outcomes not only on the local level but through dissemination of the project results across the participating countries. Their impact will be visible not only in immediate service delivery but also in long-term societal transformation:

- **Social inclusion and belonging:**

By providing structured meeting spaces and volunteering opportunities, refugees and locals are brought together in ways that reduce stereotypes, encourage trust, and create a sustainable sense of belonging.

- **Empowerment and agency:**

Refugee-led associations and peer-to-peer mentoring shift the role of refugees from passive recipients of aid to active contributors and stakeholders.

- **Resilience and adaptability:**

Volunteer-based responses provide flexible capacity to complement public services during times of sudden influx or budgetary constraints, reinforcing the long-term resilience of local communities.

- **Skills development:**

Activities such as volunteering, mentoring, and intercultural exchanges support soft skills, language practice, and confidence—laying foundations for successful integration and later labour market integration.



## Elements for Upscaling and Transfer

Several of the innovative elements within ISI show strong potential for replication in other contexts, both within and beyond the participating countries:

- **Volunteer-based integration models:**  
Embedding refugees as volunteers in CSOs provides an accessible and transferable model, which is efficient, cost-effective and can be implemented on the basis of short trainings. With a higher number of engaged volunteers, or more comprehensive trainings, the integration effort is also upscalable. The to-be developed training module aims to achieve both the transfer and the upscaling of the various integration efforts.
- **Community-driven meeting spaces:**  
Informal cafés, intercultural workshops, and activity hubs can be established with minimal infrastructure and adapted to local needs. The threshold in terms of necessary resources is low and thus makes these activities transferable. If sufficient support is provided, the community-driven meeting spaces and/or activities can be upscaled from basic encounters/activities to more frequent or more elaborate activities.
- **Diaspora engagement mechanisms:**  
Supporting refugee-led associations like Stefania ensures sustainable community self-organisation while keeping them linked to local CSOs and can be replicated elsewhere. The volunteer-based organisations offer unique potential for refugee engagement, which can lead to further transfer of agency and result in a refugee-led initiative.

## Relevance of Approaches

The approaches developed under ISI are directly aligned with European integration priorities and broader policy frameworks:

- **Consistency with EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021–2027):**  
ISI reflects its emphasis on whole-of-society participation, empowerment, and inclusivity and is especially relevant in the context of fostering participation and encounters with the host society.
- **Complementarity to public services:**  
Volunteer-led initiatives fill critical gaps, working in hybrid models of co-production with public institutions. This is especially relevant in times of competing political priorities and the resulting budget cuts in the social service sector.
- **Contribution to long-term cohesion:**  
By framing integration as a two-directional process, ISI reinforces not only immediate refugee support but also sustainable community resilience and shared societal transformation.

## Conclusion

The integration of Ukrainian refugees offers a significant opportunity to reframe how Europe approaches displacement—not as a temporary emergency, but as a long-term, shared societal transformation also in the context of its political ambition to attract workers from outside the Union to address labour shortages. Social innovation through co-production, person-centred design, and two-directional engagement provides a powerful framework for inclusion that benefits both newcomers and host communities.

The ISI project will consider these aspects in its work going forward, as the volunteer training curriculum is being developed.



## References

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