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## Social Innovation Approaches to Support Integration of Non-EU Migrants in Rural Central Europe: lessons learned, conclusions drawn

In recent years, many rural regions of Central Europe have witnessed a massive inflow of non-EU nationals, turning them into new migration destinations (NDMs). The majority of these regions were not prepared for this change and international migration became a hot-button topic. However, as the negative consequences of demographic change are getting more prominent in rural Central Europe, these regions should search for new ways to stimulate the integration of newly-arrived migrants. This can be done with the help of “social innovations.” This paper provides a literature overview on the aforementioned topics, as well as an analysis of the results of the Arrival Regions Project (Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE) that tested nine different social innovation approaches to support the integration of non-EU nationals in rural Central Europe. The results of the project confirmed that social innovation approaches are an effective and easy-to-implement way to support integration of non-EU nationals living in rural Central Europe.

**Key words:** rural regions, Central Europe, new migration destination, integration, non-EU migrants, social innovation

Posljednjih godina mnoge ruralne regije Srednje Europe svjedoče velikom priljevu državljana trećih zemalja, čime se pretvaraju u nova migracijska odredišta. Većina tih regija nije bila spremna za ovu promjenu, a međunarodne migracije postale su vruća tema. Međutim, kako su negativne posljedice demografskih promjena sve izraženije u srednjoeuropskim ruralnim područjima, te bi regije trebale tražiti nove načine za poticanje integracije novopridošlih migranata. To se može učiniti uz pomoć „društvenih inovacija”. Ovaj rad pruža pregled literature o spomenutim temama te analizu rezultata projekta *Arrival Regions* (Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE) kojim je testirano devet različitih pristupa socijalnim inovacijama za podršku integraciji državljana trećih zemalja u ruralnim područjima Srednje Europe. Rezultati projekta potvrdili su da su pristupi socijalnim inovacijama učinkoviti i za provedbu jednostavan način potpore integraciji državljana trećih zemalja koji žive u ruralnim područjima Srednje Europe.

**Ključne riječi:** ruralne regije, Srednja Europa, novo migracijsko odredište, integracija, migranti izvan EU-a, socijalne inovacije

## Introduction

In recent years, Europe has witnessed a “sea change” in how (and where) immigrants are settling (Winders, 2014, S164). Former emigrant countries like the Czech Republic (Janská et al., 2014) have become destinations for migrants. What unites these destinations is their lack of history as immigrant settlement destinations (Winders, 2014). According to King and Okólski (2019, 20), “today’s map of European migration comprises a mixture of different elements and patterns, some formed under the influence of recent political and economic events, others reflecting more-established migration traditions and their inertial effects reproduced over time.” This means that international migration to the EU is characterized by both long-standing origin–destination channels (e.g. between Poland or the Czech Republic and Ukraine, see Prát and Bui, 2018) and fundamental changes in the nationalities migrating to the EU (e.g. Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria becoming important origin countries after 2015, see King and Okólski (2019, 24)).

Migration, especially from non-European countries, is a hot-button issue. Frequently, critical narratives prevail, particularly in political and media discourses. However, international migration can also be part of the solution for some of Europe’s problems. Livi Bacci (2018) noted that against the backdrop of demographic change – aging and population decline – Europe needs international migration to sustain its economic power, adding that, in the long run, “economic globalization is closely connected with human globalization” as the “world is shrinking and travel is faster and cheaper” (2018, 702). Many rural areas in the EU, e.g. eastern Germany (also Bulgaria, the Baltic states, or continental Croatia), are already highly affected by aging and depopulation. International migration could be especially beneficial for these regions and help to sustain local economies and breathe new life into declining and aging villages and towns (Livi Bacci, 2018). Many of these rural regions have little experience in receiving migrants and can thus be called “New Migration Destinations” (McAreavey 2017, Winders 2014). Living conditions, integration frameworks, and arrival infrastructures in new migration destinations (hereinafter NMD or NMDs) differ considerably from established arrival spaces (see e.g. El-Kayed et al., 2020 or Steigemann, 2019), so new approaches are needed to “turn migration into a success story.”

In this paper, we pursue the question of whether social innovation approaches (see Neumeier 2012, 2016) can be used to support the integration of non-EU nationals in rural areas of Central Europe. To answer this question, we link the literature on arrival spaces, social innovation, and NMDs with a special focus on rural areas and the specific problems they face. Much of the existing research on migration and integration focuses on urban areas (for exceptions see Glorius et al., 2020; McAreavey, 2017; Rye, 2018; Woods, 2018). This means that some core assumptions, e.g. those regarding the importance of population density, infrastructure, and networks (see El-Kayed et al., 2020), are not easily transferable to rural contexts, and especially for regions that have only recently become destinations for international migration. Rural areas are also rarely featured in literature on social innovation (Noack and Federwisch, 2019; exceptions include Bock, 2016; Neumeier, 2012; 2016). We argue that social innovation could be a promising avenue to tackle some of the problems and challenges described above, and to support the integration of international migrants in rural regions without established arrival infrastructure. In order to support the results of the literature review, we also present the lessons we learned from the EU-funded Arrival Regions Project, which aimed to test various social innovation approaches to support the integration of non-EU nationals in nine rural areas of Central Europe. By combining the results of the literature review with discussion of the results of the project, we show evidence that social innovation is a promising tool to support integration of migrants, especially in NMDs.

Our paper is structured as follows: In section 2, we introduce the theoretical framework of the paper, notably the concepts of NMDs, arrival spaces, and social innovation. We also discuss our understanding of the concept of integration. Section 3 presents the main idea of the Interreg Central Europe Project

“Arrival Regions – Exploring social innovation approaches for the social and economic integration of non-EU nationals” which was carried out in nine rural of Central Europe between 2019 and 2022. In section 4, we reflect on lessons learned in the project, discuss whether social innovations are an effective tool to support the integration of migrants in rural NMDs, and give recommendations for further integration projects in rural Europe.

## Theoretical Framework

### NMDs in Central Europe

Europe has a long-standing history of international immigration. King and Okólski (2019) distinguished four main phases of migration between 1949 and 2015: first, mass labor migration to Western and Northern Europe (1949–1973), followed by a phase of economic restructuring, family reunion, and return migration between 1974 and 1984. This phase is characterized by a migration reversal from a sending to a destination region in Mediterranean Europe and a partial, state-controlled opening of the borders of the socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where migration (even internal migration) was largely banned in the previous period. In phase three (1985–1993/2004), the collapse of communism, growth in asylum-seeking, and ‘irregular’ migration changed the European migration regime once more. King and Okólski (2019, 18) described the current migration processes as “diverse migration dynamics in an enlarged Europe” with largely unlimited intra-EU migration and increasing migration pressure from abroad. Most EU member states are now countries with net immigration (King and Okólski, 2019). In Central and Eastern Europe, this applies in particular to the Czech Republic and Slovenia (see Tab. 1 and Janská et al., 2014). Poland seems to have turned into an NMD after 2014 (Duszczyk and Matuszczyk, 2018). Apparently, official migration statistics underestimate the number of foreigners (see Table 1) because Polish legislation encourages circular migration, especially from Ukraine (Prát and Bui, 2018). Intra-EU migration processes became even more prominent after the enlargements of the EU in 2004 and 2007, as many people from the new member states have decided to use the benefits of the free movement of labor, taking better-paid jobs in more economically developed parts of Europe (see Green et al., 2009; van Riemsdijk, 2010; Nienaber and Frys, 2012; Rye, 2018).

Despite the long-standing trend of migration to small towns and rural areas across Europe that have not experienced significant international migration before (see Fromentin, 2021), migration research has given little to no attention to these rural NMDs (McAreavey, 2012). This is due to the fact that the majority of NMD-focused studies in English are dedicated to the immigration of Latinxs to rural regions of the USA. Moreover, European research on NMDs primarily focuses on the national level, giving little to no attention to regional and local levels (Winders, 2014). Furthermore, the last decade has changed migration streams in Central Europe, bringing non-EU nationals in unprecedented numbers to untypical places, e.g. refugees from the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa coming to rural Germany, Austria, Italy, and Slovenia (see Weidinger, 2018; Glorius et al., 2020); labor migrants from Eastern Europe, namely Ukraine, coming to non-metropolitan regions of Poland or the Czech Republic (see Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2015; Górny and Kaczmarczyk, 2018; Janská et al., 2014). As this migration trend has remained stable over the last few years, there is a need to better understand the nature of migration to rural NMDs in Central Europe and how their specific features shape the arrival of international migrants.

The increasing popularity of NMDs is a result of the changing nature of migration itself. New migration is characterized by a process of complexification, increased fluidity, and acceleration which entails

Tab. 1 Share of international migrants in Central European countries

Non EU citizens: Top 3 countries of origin			non EU Nationals	EU and EFTA citizens	<i>of which:</i>	Foreign citizens	
Bosnia and Hercegovina	Turkey	Serbia	48,4%	51,6%		Austria	16,7%
13,4%	16,4%	17,0%					
	no data		78,7%	21,3%	Croatia	2,2%	
Russia	Vietnam	Ukraine	59,5%	10,5%	Czech Republic	5,5%	
10,3%	17,7%	41,0%	57,4%	42,6%	Germany	12,5%	
Russia	Syria	Turkey	60,0%	40%	Hungary	2,0%	
3,9%	12,7%	22,2%	70,6%	29,4%	Italy	8,4%	
Vietnam	China	Ukraine	90,3%	9,7%	Poland	0,9%	
4,8%	16,4%	25,3%	25,0%	75,0%	Slovakia	1,4%	
China	Morocco	Albania	86,6%	13,4%	Slovenia	7,5%	
8,1%	11,7%	11,9%					
	no data						
Russia	UK	Ukraine					
8,8%	12,0%	20,7%					
Serbia	Kosovo	Bosnia and Hercegovina					
12,0%	14,5%	54,1%					

Source: Authors' calculations, based on Eurostat data

super-diverse, complex, constantly changing, fragmented, and transnationally linked communities (Urry, 2000). Under such circumstances, not all migrants settle permanently. Many maintain close connections to more than one country (Faist, 2000; Vertovec, 2010). Giddens (2006) added other factors that equally influence the process of changing migration, namely, globalization, interconnectedness, transnationalism, rapidly increasing inequalities, and changing demography. Talking about changing migration patterns, McArdavey (2017, 29–30) stated that: “Contemporary migration is complex, not fully understood and, in parts, quite different from urban migration that characterized the post-war period (traditionally) involving large flows to few (urban) places.” This complexity also results from the fact that nowadays it is impossible to define which groups of migrants are specifically attracted to NMDs. Over the last years, rural areas of Central Europe have managed to attract not only people looking for work in agriculture and food production (see Górny and Kaczmarczyk, 2018; Prát and Bui, 2018; Rye and Scott, 2018) but also lifestyle migrants (see Eimermann and Kordel, 2018) tired of urban life and searching for some image of “countryside idyll”. In addition, the second half of the 2010s brought asylum seekers to many rural areas in Central Europe, as several countries used centralized migrant distribution systems (see Königsteiner Schlüssel) specifically aiming to equally allocate refugees among administrative units. Furthermore, national regulations in many Central European countries limit the spatial mobility of refugees, resulting in their forced immobility (Weidinger et al., 2021).

International migrants living in NMDs face a number of challenges in their everyday lives. NMDs are characterized by a high degree of ethnic and religious homogeneity resulting in limited local experience in dealing with diversity both at an institutional and personal level (see Hugo and Morén-Alegret, 2008; Winders, 2014). The increased diversity presents a challenge for NMDs (Phillimore, 2015). Many citizens see international migrants as a threat to their regions and anti-immigration sentiment has become one of the major reasons underpinning increased support for far-right politicians (Stockemer et al., 2020).

### Arrival spaces: the role of institutions, networks and density

The appearance of new countries of origin and new destinations (both at the national and regional levels) on the map of European migration is linked to numerous challenges. This is especially true for migration to rural areas. Research on international migration to rural areas in Europe has produced a “burgeoning literature in rural geography and rural sociology” (Woods, 2018, 164) in recent years. This body of literature has helped us to better understand the motives, practices, problems, and challenges connected to international migrants arriving in the countryside. However, many “practical” aspects of arriving and integrating into rural societies remain important topics of research. For instance, research on “arrival spaces” (Kurtenbach, 2015) has shown that localities provide newly arrived migrants with crucial resources, institutions, and networks they need to enter the labor market or to find suitable and affordable housing (El-Kayed et al., 2020). However, “arrival spaces” are usually characterized as dense urban neighborhoods with a high share of migrant residents and a long tradition of international migration (ibid.). Such neighborhoods are equipped with a variety of formal and informal, public and private support infrastructure and a concentration of “arrival-related opportunity structures” (Hans et al., 2019, 515), e.g. migrant-led initiatives such as businesses, and social and cultural centers. Such support infrastructure is usually non-existent or weakly-developed in NMDs, which begs the question if, and to what extent, state-organized infrastructures or pre-existing support activities offered by civil society can replace the ethnic networks and dense opportunity structures of long-established arrival spaces (El-Kayed et al., 2020). Research from Sweden shows that collaboration of state actors (e.g. municipalities, agencies related to asylum, migration, and integration) and civil society can be difficult in rural NMDs. This lack of collaboration often leads to the “double isolation” of migrants from both local societies and ethnic networks (Arora-Jonsson and Larsson, 2021).

## Re-defining integration

The challenges that arise with increasingly complex and changing trends in migration, as is the case in NMDs, demand a redefinition of our understanding of integration. Traditionally, and often particularly in public debate and among policy-makers, integration is conflated with assimilation—where migrants adapt to the society of reception and achieve full embeddedness and social mobility therein (Joppke, 2010; Berry et al., 1989). Under such structural and functional assumptions, migrants constitute an alien element that needs to adjust to and connect with a local society characterized by well-defined boundaries, and integrated social and coherent cultural systems (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore, 2018, 187). This perception is particularly prevalent across NMDs that are rather homogenous and have little experience in dealing with diversity.

Nevertheless, we argue that it is necessary to challenge such one-sided and rather incomplete definitions of integration for various reasons. The concept does not readily apply to migrant adaptation under conditions of so-called new migration (Faist, 2000; Urry, 2000; Giddens, 2006; Vertovec, 2010). The effects of accelerated demographic change, which consists of a rapidly aging population across Europe, are some of the key factors highlighting the necessity to review our one-sided understanding of integration. As we already mentioned in the introduction, migration represents a solution for sustaining Europe's aging societies in the future (UNPD, 2000; Livi Bacci, 2018; Marois et al., 2020; Peri, 2020). This is particularly relevant for NMDs that are, to a greater extent, affected by this form of demographic change.

With this in mind, we agree with Schinkel that integration is a property of a social whole, not just the individual (Schinkel, 2018, 3). In other words, rather than seeing integration as a potential outcome or an end, integration is viewed as a continual process that emerges from constant contact between individuals or groups of distinct cultures (Berry et al., 1989). As a result, social boundaries become more fluid because people can still identify with many different, local or transnational, mutually-exclusive groups (Klarenbeek, 2019, 5). This approach puts equal responsibility on both newcomers and the established communities of resident countries. It follows a similar logic as the definition of integration used by the European Economic and Social Committee, which states that: “integration is a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents” (EESC, 2004).

Nevertheless, Klarenbeek (2019) and many others have pointed out an important prerequisite for successful integration: namely, the structure and openness of the receiving society, which is equally important to the commitments, efforts, and achievements of immigrants and their offspring (see also Castles et al., 2002; Modood, 2004; Lucassen, 2005, 19; Ager and Strang, 2008, 177; Phillimore, 2012; Korteweg, 2017). To this end, Anderson (2010) highlighted the crucial aspect of viewing integration as a two-way process, namely that it should not only regard disadvantaged communities as the only ones that need changing. Instead, it should aim to transform the habits of dominant groups and become a tool for breaking down stigmatization, stereotypes, and discrimination (Anderson, 2010, 115–116). As a result, the receiving society and the migrants are in a constant process of exchange and, in the words of Klarenbeek, “insiders and outsiders integrate with each other” (Klarenbeek, 2019, 2). As we mentioned in the previous section, adjusting to increased diversity is one of the greatest challenges in NMDs (Phillimore, 2015). As a result, tackling anti-immigration sentiment among the resident population has also become a prerequisite for successful integration.

Objectively measuring integration has proven to be a difficult task, as it is generally limited to socio-economic measures such as education, employment, health, and income (see also Gilmartin and Dagg, 2021). Insiders are thus, by definition, the benchmark that outsiders need to live up to (Carens, 2005, 42). Such an approach is not in line with our definition of integration. In fact, it does not acknowledge the multi-dimensional (Ager and Strang, 2008) and multi-directional (Cheung and Phillimore, 2013; 2016) aspects of new migration. Such measurements rarely encompass the psycho-social need for stability, security, or identity as



highlighted by Ager and Strang (2008) and Grzymala-Kazłowska (2017). Klarenbeek (2019) attempted to resolve this discrepancy by not defining integration in terms of socio-economic equality. Instead, she argued that distributive equality does not necessarily indicate integration as a situation in which the social boundaries between insiders and outsiders are overcome. One can imagine a situation of economic prosperity in which outsiders reach the same level of employment as insiders yet, as long as social boundaries between legitimate and non-legitimate citizens are maintained, an economic or political crisis could change this equal position; in such a case newcomers might be the first to lose their jobs or suffer various forms of social harm. Integration therefore cannot be measured in socio-economic terms alone (Klarenbeek, 2019, 5), rather it has to encompass the psycho-social aspects, security, and identity of both local residents and migrants.

## Social innovation and why it is needed to support integration in rural Central Europe.

The concept of social innovation (SI) is widely used and regularly occurs in various public and scientific debates. Like many buzzwords, it has several approaches in contemporary social sciences. Unlike entrepreneurial or management sciences, which seek to find opportunities for better business practices, we mainly stress sociological approaches of SI aimed at meeting common social goals (Neumeier, 2012) and territorial development (Moulaert et al., 2005; Moulaert, 2009).

The European Commission defines SI as “new ideas (products, services, and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations” (Hubert, 2010, 7). As this definition evidently requires the explanation of further impacts of SI on rural society, we see the need to expand it. Based on the definition of Moulaert, SI satisfies unmet social needs by transforming social relations, which leads to the improvement of governmental systems or even to the establishment of new governance structures and organizations. This increases the socio-political capacity of society and improves access to resources and services (Moulaert et al., 2005; Moulaert, 2009). At the same time, SI can also optimize the use of pre-existing social networks (Patuzzi, 2020). In principle, “SIs both bring something good for society and enhance society’s capacity to act” (The Young Foundation, 2012, 18).

This also means that social engagement and networking have a major impact on the processes of transformations within the concept of SI. For example, Bock (2016) stressed readiness to engage in the collective as one of the key elements of SI. Additionally, Rammert (2010) highlights the potential of SI in establishing new forms of social integration and solidarity. In order to foster new ways of collaborative action, main stakeholders should change attitudes and perceptions (Neumeier, 2016). Apparently, for this reason, SI comes into common use in the field of integration of migrants and inclusion of ethnic groups (Patuzzi, 2020; Urso, 2021; Hillmann, 2009).

In essence, SI can contribute to the general sustainable development goals of rural regions, most of all for common well-being and quality of life (Eichler and Schwarz, 2019). Implementation of SI in the case of NMDs shapes their ability to respond to the structural challenges brought by (rapid) immigration. Additionally, we argue that SI is particularly well-suited in rural contexts for several reasons. First, SI has a regional-bound nature, which is reflected in transformations in local institutions (see Moulaert, 2009). It may be useful while responding to specific local needs (Kirwan et al., 2013). Second, based on neo-endogenous development strategies which attract more and more interest in Europe, SI seems to be a crucial element for the development of rural areas. According to neo-endogenous theory, the main function of the state is the coordination of local actors in regional development processes intended for the mobilization of local societies (see Neumeier, 2012). Here, SI may be helpful for the creation of spaces for mobilized collaboration (Castro-Arce and Vanclay, 2020). Third, SI may help rural regions to unlock the transformative potential of migration. Its aim to redefine social relationships can help to overcome social fractures connected with the lack of a welcoming culture (Urso, 2021).

To sum up, we see SI as a vehicle for the transformation of social relations, services, institutions, attitudes, and behavior in rural areas, which allows them to meet unsatisfied social needs and to strengthen social cohesion and their capacity to act. Taking this in consideration, we can hypothesize that social innovation approaches can be an effective tool to support the integration of international migrants in rural areas of Europe.

## Research Results

### Description of the project and methodological base.

In this section of the paper we present the results of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Project “Arrival Regions – Exploring social innovation approaches for the social and economic integration of non-EU nationals” (hereinafter Arrival Regions). One of the major goals of the project was to test the hypothesis that social innovation approaches can be an effective tool to support integration of migrants living in rural areas. Arrival Regions aimed to run and analyze small pilot projects in nine different rural regions of Central Europe (hereinafter pilot actions), each testing a different approach toward SI supporting the integration of non-EU nationals (see Fig. 1). Hence, each of the pilot actions was a part of a larger quasi-experiment aiming to test our hypothesis.

The project is based on the ideas of collaboration and co-creation: Arrival Regions united local administrations, scientific organizations, NGOs and other stakeholders from Germany, Italy, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Poland and let local stakeholders and representatives of local migrant communities participate in the design and implementation of pilot actions. All of the pilot regions are affected by demographic decline and seek successful social and economic integration of non-EU migrants in order to stabilize local development. Therefore, each pilot action aimed to solve specific local issues hindering integration processes in each pilot area.

All of the pilot actions were carried out between April 2020 and August 2021 and had at least one of the following overarching goals: integration support of non-EU labor migrants; integration support of migrant youth; and mobilization of local societies and welcoming structures (Fig. 1). To achieve these goals, the pilot actions tested innovative approaches towards common ways of integration support such as cultural mediation activities, support of migrants’ arrival, language courses, legal consultation, counseling on self-employment etc. To understand which social innovation approach to adapt in order to solve local specific issues, the project partners conducted extensive desk research of the most innovative ideas to deal with issues of migrants’ integration in Europe. All project partners also participated in at least one study trip in Europe to learn more about the most promising social innovation approaches that could help solve local integration issues. Based on the knowledge gathered during the desk research and the study trips, project partners designed pilot actions tailored to meet their unique challenges. The implementation and the results of each of the pilot action were monitored with the help of regular partnership meetings, as well as bi-annual reports on the progress of each of the pilot actions.<sup>1</sup>

In general, pilot actions focusing on the support of labor migrants included different types of legal consultation and language courses for migrants in order to improve their quality of life by getting better chances for personal and professional development. For instance, the pilot action implemented in the city of Bor (Czech Republic) targeted migrants employed by large local automotive companies. In the preliminary stages of the project, it was discovered that due to a lack of local language knowledge, migrant workers could

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<sup>1</sup> All documents mentioned in this chapter are available on the following website: <https://www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/Arrival-Regions.html>.



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 Approaches to  
 Support Integration  
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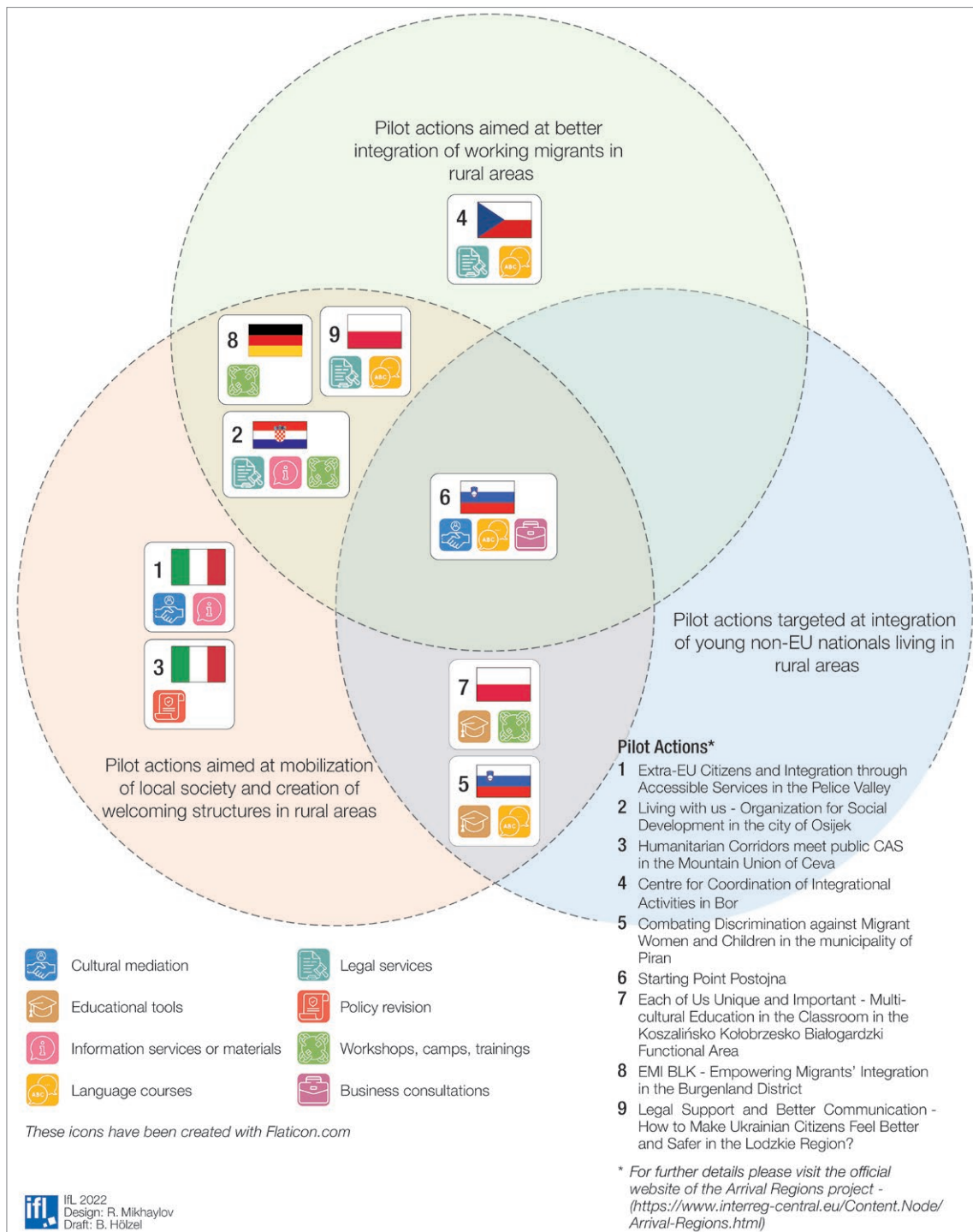


Fig. 1 Arrival Regions: summary of the implemented pilot actions  
 Source: authors' design

not interact with locals and consequently had difficulties building social ties with people outside their ethnic community, as well as with using the full variety of services available to them in the region. Moreover, even if migrants wanted to attend a language course in the regional center, they could not do this due to the time

conflicts with their jobs. Therefore, in the scope of the pilot action, we brought the courses to the premises of the biggest employer and scheduled them in such a way that migrants could attend either right before or right after their shifts. This language course was also designed to cover the specific conversational needs of migrants, both in the workplace and in everyday life. Out of the 15 migrants who regularly participated in the course, 10 migrants filled in the feedback form at the end of the pilot project. All respondents stated that they managed to improve their command of the Czech language and would continue the course if possible (Pěchota, 2021).

The pilot actions directed at the mobilization of local societies and welcoming structures provided various platforms for migrants and locals with the goal to increase mutual awareness of integration issues and help both groups understand each other via information services, materials, and discussions. One of the examples of such a pilot action is the “Each of us is unique and important” project from West Pomerania (Poland). Over the last few years Poland has turned from a typical sending to a receiving country, becoming a popular destination for many labor migrants from Eastern Europe, especially from Ukraine. This rapid inflow of newcomers has resulted in the urge to create a more welcoming society that is open to ethnic diversity. Thus, the goal of this pilot action was to spread ideas of multiculturalism among primary and middle school students in the region. Within this pilot action, 34 teachers from 6 urban and 6 rural municipalities in the region received special training on how to introduce ideas of multiculturalism and openness towards diversity in their lesson plans. This pilot action also hosted 399 children in online workshops on the same topic. Though it is hard to evaluate the immediate effect of a project that aims to create local welcoming cultures, the pilot action received a lot of praise both from local and regional stakeholders who wanted to spread the tested social innovation approach nationwide (Ciesielska et al., 2021a).

The pilot actions dedicated to the integration of young non-EU nationals aimed to reach not only migrant children but also other social groups such as parents, local children, and school staff. This was achieved via various workshops, training courses, and public gatherings. For example, the pilot action from the city of Piran (Slovenia) aimed to support integration of both migrant children and their parents. To do so, the pilot action offered local teachers special training on how to plan lessons in a more inclusive way and how to teach the Slovenian language using unconventional methods (e.g. games, singing, discussions, handicrafts, etc.). In addition to this, the project encouraged migrant parents (especially Muslim mothers, who are often overlooked in the integration process) to take an active part in the organization of various cultural workshops and festivals in local schools. At the end of the pilot action, teachers in local schools stated that, due to the tested social innovation approach, both migrant children and their parents managed to improve their knowledge and usage of the local language and make new friends among the locals (Goja, 2021).

In the next part of the article we would like to reflect on the main challenges and findings while implementing SI approaches within the Arrival Regions project and discuss how social innovation approaches can be used to support the integration of non-EU nationals. This discussion is based on data from the final reports of Arrival Regions’ pilot actions<sup>2</sup>. In order to cover the existing information gaps in the reports, as well as to get a better understanding of each of the pilot regions, the team of authors participated in online reviews of each of the pilot actions in May–June 2021 (Ciesielska et al., 2021b).

It is important to note that the Arrival Regions project was designed as an applied project and thus is more focused on achieving practical results and solving local problems caused by recent demographic developments than on understanding the nature of these processes and the long-term impacts of piloted SI approaches. Nevertheless, we believe that the lessons learned from this project provide initial insight into perspectives of SI approaches as a way to support the integration of international migrants in rural areas of Central Europe.

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<sup>2</sup> All reports are available at: <https://www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/Arrival-Regions.html>

## Challenges and solutions found

Like other NMDs, all pilot regions are characterized by similar challenges, such as the lack of established arrival infrastructure (both formal and informal), the existence of various prejudices about migrants, a lack of welcoming cultures among locals, lack of platforms for migrants and locals to interact, and in some cases a lack of willingness of local stakeholders to support the embeddedness of newly-arrived migrants in their regions. In addition to this, each region has its own specific challenges caused by size, demography, composition of local stakeholders dealing with migration, the size and composition of migrant groups, etc. However, the results of Arrival Regions show that a well-chosen social innovation approach can spur positive changes.

First and foremost, we observed that, before the start of the project, the majority of the partner regions already had a proper set of local stakeholders that could support the arrival of new non-EU migrants. The greatest challenge that we noticed, however, was the lack of awareness, communication, and coordination of activities between the aforementioned stakeholders—sometimes fueled by competition for funding. Lack of communication and insufficient coordination between stakeholders was one of the main reasons why these regions had inadequate responses to new arrivals, as they could not properly prepare for the arrival of migrants and develop the necessary arrival infrastructure. For this reason, we believe that an effective and well-integrated network of local stakeholders is a prerequisite for successful integration projects. The key characteristics of an efficient network of local stakeholders are the following: it should be diverse, proactive, responsive, self-reliant, independent, and innovative. The network should include all stakeholders connected to migrants living in the region, such as local authorities, major employers of migrant residents, educational organizations and institutions, various NGOs, etc. The results of the project indicate that public support on the part of local community leaders (such as local mayors and large local entrepreneurs) is crucial in rural areas, especially if public opinion towards migration is critical. In other words, such individuals should actively promote these networks and keep cooperation going between all partaking stakeholders. The results of pilot actions in Croatia, Czech Republic, and Slovenia showed that successful long-term coordination of a network of stakeholders is a very time- and energy-consuming activity; therefore, there should be a local organization that is charged with coordinating this activity (Mrázová et al., 2021).

Keeping in mind the difficulties NMDs have to face, another key challenge the project had to deal with was the lack of experience in dealing with migrants among rural stakeholders. In order to raise awareness on the topics of diversity and multicultural communication, the relevant stakeholders (e.g. service-desk providers in Pelice Valley, Italy, or primary school teachers from rural parts of West Pomerania, Poland) from each pilot region had the opportunity to participate in professional training. Moreover, one of the pilot actions from Italy showed that both professional cultural mediators, as well as volunteers with migration background, can provide additional support in dealing with conflicts or misunderstandings between locals and migrants. Additionally, due to the very homogenous ethnic structure of migrants in the region, a group of public employees from the Lodzkie Region (Poland) working with labor migrants from Ukraine participated in Ukrainian language courses. The courses helped participants to acquire basic knowledge of the Ukrainian language, making day-to-day interactions with Ukrainian migrant workers easier.

One of the greatest challenges that the project had to deal with was the general understanding of integration among locals, which has been particularly formed and influenced by current media discourses. Local authorities of the rural regions partaking in the project, as well as the representatives of local society, mainly see integration as a goal that can be reached if migrants adjust and manage to fit into the (always subjective) image of a good citizen, e.g. they should speak the local language, be employed, and actively participate in local life. It needs to be noted that the understanding of a good citizen is fully defined by

the receiving society, and is in fact considered to be the benchmark of successful integration. Moreover, the experiences of the project show that there is a common idea that integration only requires effort on the part of migrants. This goes against our understanding of integration as a two-way process that does not have a definite end and requires the equal participation of the resident society (see section 2). The lack of personal experience with foreigners leads to prejudices and further stigmatization of migrants. Thus, several pilot actions tried to create various platforms for communication between migrants and locals, e.g. cultural festivals and public workshops during which locals could get to know migrant citizens and vice versa, talk to them, learn more about their culture and experiences, and thus reduce personal prejudices by ‘humanizing’ migrants. The pilot action in Burgenlandkreis (Germany) went one step further by setting up weekend camps for both local and migrant youth. Throughout the weekend camp, the participants were assigned into smaller multinational teams that competed in various sporting and art contests. This setting helped migrants and locals to get to know each other, improve their communication and negotiation skills, and, as a consequence, create friendships that broke the boundaries between them. Another good example was set by the aforementioned pilot action in the West Pomeranian Region that not only provided children with an alternative narrative on migration to the conservative one, but also indirectly passed these perceptions on to their parents through discussions, games, and other common activities.

Another major challenge is linked to the rural nature of these regions. In comparison to urban areas, the majority of rural regions offer only a limited variety of available jobs, lack ethnic support networks, only have limited options for personal development and consist of social structures which are less open to newcomers. The rural lifestyle does not suit everyone, but regions that are interested in demographic

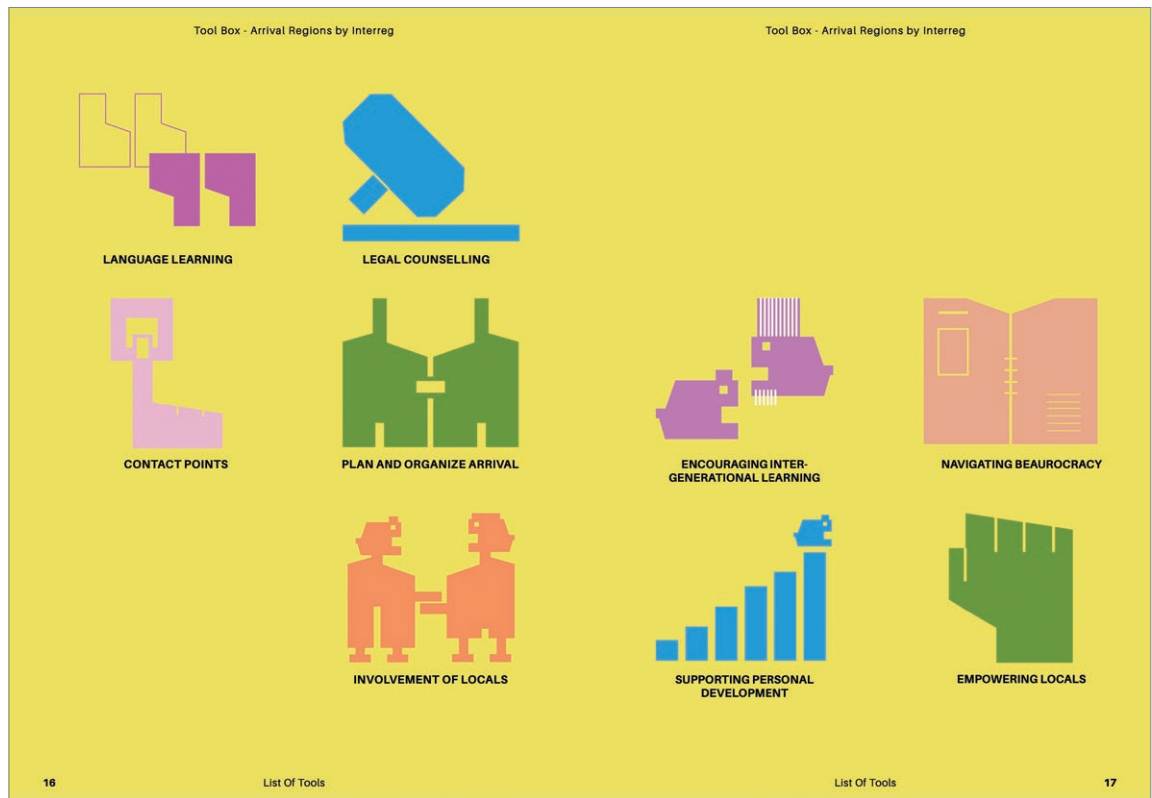


Fig. 2 List of tools  
Source: Leibert et al. (2022)

growth should provide migrants who can and want to stay in rural regions with further opportunities and consistent support. We believe that, while rural regions usually do not have a wide variety of employers, migrants should always be aware of opportunities for self-employment. For instance, the pilot action in Postojna (Slovenia) actively collaborated with a business incubator supporting young migrants in using their skills, knowledge, and creativity to become self-employed in rural areas. With the help of newly-established information centers, legal consultation, and active support of locals, the pilot actions in Osijek (Croatia) and Bor (Czech Republic) provided an alternative to the ethnic support structures present in urban areas, which are still missing in most NMDs. Finally, in terms of seeking overall improvement of quality of life, several pilot actions gave non-EU migrants useful insights into how to live in a rural setting (e.g. the pilot action in Burgenlandkreis).

While analyzing the pilot action results, the project team aimed to “deconstruct” each SI approach used into the form of specific ‘tools’: simple and transferable innovative practices that could support the integration of non-EU nationals living in rural areas of Central Europe. We believe that, despite the fact that each region exhibits unique set of challenges that hinder integration of migrants, they all can be mitigated with simple and common tools. In order to solve the unique challenges, each rural region needs to form its own individual set of tools to support integration based on the local context and resources. All nine identified tools are mentioned in the ‘Tool Box’ of the project (Leibert et al., 2022) (see Fig. 2). In addition to the description of the tools, this document provides local stakeholders with explanations on how each tool can be used to address the challenges that migrants face while integrating in rural regions of Central Europe, as well as detailed guidance on how to adapt each tool to the respective local conditions.

## Discussion and conclusions

Increased immigration of non-EU nationals is a reality that many rural regions of Central Europe have been dealing with for the last few years. There is no single formula for success which can turn the arrival of migrants to rural areas into a success story. However, the experiences of Arrival Regions show that SI approaches can be one part of the answer; while they cannot solve the core of the systemic problems of any given NMD, SI can help rural regions to find new creative ways to solve the issues which are specific to them.

First, the majority of the rural regions already have good preconditions to support the integration of foreign nationals, but they have little to no knowledge and experience on how to use their existing resources in an effective way. SI allow rural regions to re-assess pre-existing assets and find effective and cost-efficient solutions. The process of design, implementation, and management of a given SI approach will lead to the creation of an active network of local stakeholders dealing with the topic of migration. Mutual learning from and networking with other rural regions-both nationally and at the EU level-on how to create better conditions for migrants is also advisable.

Second, one of the reasons why all pilot initiatives implemented within the project proved to be effective and managed to solve the issues they were created to deal with was the fact that these approaches were handcrafted for the specific needs and target groups of the rural regions in which they were implemented. Coming back to the notion of SI, it is important to remember that regions do not need to ‘reinvent the wheel’ if they want to try out SI. By transferring a common approach that has already been successfully implemented in urban or other rural settings and adapting it to specific local needs, a region can easily create a unique product. However, actors who are interested in the transfer of one of the piloted SI approaches to their region should not leave this approach unchanged. In order to get a good understanding of local needs, we encourage actors responsible for the introduction of SI into their region to actively involve all important stakeholders (including major employers and educational institutions) as well as multiple



representatives of migrants and locals. This will not only allow one to get a better understanding of issues the region is facing, but will also help to design a social innovation that does not create an environment where several marginalized target groups are played against each other. In many cases, migrants and marginalized locals have similar interests and face similar challenges, e.g. access to affordable housing. Finally, it is impossible to adequately analyze all potential challenges and obstacles that can arise. Therefore, each new SI approach that is to be introduced in a rural region needs an additional pilot phase that can be used to improve the design of the selected approach. The pilots should be designed flexibly, so they can be easily adapted to changing needs and conditions.

Third, we are convinced that the small scale of rural regions, helps to accelerate societal change. Smaller numbers of inhabitants and more intense social contact make it easier to communicate and present the positive effects of the introduced SI approach. Thus, adding an SI approach to the pre-existing infrastructure supporting the integration of foreign citizens will, in the long run, allow rural regions to change the local understanding of integration and, at the end of the day, ‘humanize’ migration. Due to the specificities of rural regions, active support of local opinion leaders and careful choice of a multi-target SI will facilitate this change of mindset even more.

However, the time-constrained nature of project-based initiatives does not allow us to analyze the long-term effects of piloted social innovations. Because we see integration as a process and not as an end state, we believe that successful integration needs constant and multi-targeted support. This leads us to several important questions that follow up our project.

To begin with, it is still not clear how to address permanent challenges in a permanent way. For instance, SI have proven to be an effective tool to initiate the creation of local welcoming cultures. Nevertheless, the project-based approaches do not sustain the change in and of themselves in the long term. While on the one hand it is easier for local and regional authorities to sustain funding in the long run and initiate the creation of stakeholders’ networks, they often lack sufficient competency and practical experience working with migrants. Moreover, due to existing prejudices and power imbalances, stakeholder authority might even be an obstacle to establishing contact with the target groups. Despite having many ways to approach both migrants and locals, NGOs usually struggle with implementing long-term projects. Thus, it is still unclear who should be the main responsible actor(s) for the introduction and implementation of the selected SI approach.

Finally, the experience of the project highlights the myriad differences between urban and rural settings, emphasizing a need for more research from and about rural areas of Central Europe. SI approaches cannot solve systematic problems of rural areas and thus cannot fully enable the potential of rural regions to maintain newly arrived foreign citizens. Nevertheless, they are an important first step to raise awareness, test possible ways to tackle the challenges and problems connected to migration to rural NMDs and integration into rural societies and create viable networks of stakeholders. The long-term success of SI approaches to improve the integration and living conditions of migrants in rural areas also depends on whether migrants will stay in the region permanently or if it is just a stopover on their way to more-established arrival spaces. As of now, the question of whether rural Central Europe will remain an NMD is still open-only time will tell.

In a nutshell, the answer to our research question is ‘yes’, SI can indeed be a promising, easily implementable approach to improve the integration of migrants, especially in rural areas with little to no experience in receiving them. For SI to work, it is vital to rethink the common understanding of integration. This consists of moving away from a one-sided mindset that rather resembles assimilation, towards a more integrated approach that puts equal responsibility on the migrants and the host society. Integration should be seen as a two-way process with no specific end, entailing constant exchange between migrants and the host society. Nevertheless, advocating for such a two-sided approach for migrant integration is difficult in NMDs that are characterized by rather homogeneous demographic characteristics, and have little experience in dealing

with diversity and almost no existing official support structures or ethnic networks that often work as a safety net for newcomers. This is where SI comes into play and serves as an important tool for supporting the integration of migrants in rural Central Europe. Another vital success factor is changing the public perception of migration. The public and media discourse is more often than not dominated by accounts of how difficult and expensive the integration of foreigners is. Migration is presented as a problem, rather than as a possible solution to looming challenges such as skills shortages, underused infrastructure, or declining population. Showing the positive change that migrants can bring to declining rural regions is important for long-term sustainable actions. However, changing the narrative about migration is extremely difficult.

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