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COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE IN LOCAL MIGRANT INTEGRATION: THE CASE OF NITRA AND THE COMIN PLATFORM

ABSTRACT: This article examines local integration policy in the Slovak Republic through a case study of the city of Nitra, with a particular focus on the COMIN platform as a practical model of collaborative governance. In a context characterised by the absence of a coherent national integration framework and the increased arrival of migrants after 2022, the study explores how local actors respond to integration challenges and coordinate services at the municipal level. The research is based on a qualitative case study design combining document analysis and semi-structured interviews with a municipal representative, a representative of a non-governmental organisation, and six migrants. The analysis focuses primarily on the application of collaborative governance principles, complemented by insights from the concepts of the local turn and absorptive capacity, as well as migrants' perspectives on integration processes. The findings show that the city of Nitra has developed an active and coordinated approach to migrant integration, in which the COMIN platform functions as a key mechanism for multi-sectoral cooperation. The platform demonstrates core elements of collaborative governance, particularly in terms of institutional coordination, facilitative leadership, and the practical delivery of integrated services. At the same time, its functioning remains shaped by structural constraints, including project-based funding and limited competences at the local level. Migrants' perspectives highlight both the importance of accessible support and the persistence of broader structural barriers to integration. The study contributes to the literature by providing an empirically grounded analysis of collaborative governance in a Central and Eastern European context and by demonstrating how local initiatives can compensate for gaps in national integration policy.

KEYWORDS: *migrant integration; collaborative governance; local governance; municipal level; absorptive capacity; COMIN*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Migration and migrant integration have become among the most widely debated political and societal issues in the European Union in recent years. The integration of migrants into local communities represents a key challenge within European migration policies. Although migration policy has traditionally been shaped at the national level, cities and regions are increasingly playing a more active role in facilitating the everyday integration of migrants, particularly in the context of the gradual decentralisation of integration services and the growing pressure on local communities.

The city of Nitra represents a distinctive example of a proactive approach to migrant integration. It is the first Slovak city to adopt a comprehensive *Strategy for the Integration of Foreigners in the City of Nitra with a Horizon to 2035*, which defines the objectives and priorities of integration policy at the local level and is oriented towards the long-term inclusion of all population groups, including refugees and migrants with legal residence in the city (Mesto Nitra, 2024).

In the context of recent demographic developments and the increased arrival of migrants after 2022, Nitra has acquired a specific character. Between May and December 2022, more than 10,000 displaced persons from Ukraine arrived in the Nitra region, making it the second most affected region in Slovakia after Bratislava (Nitra.info, 2023). According to the city's migration situational analysis, as of 31 December 2022, 12,822 foreign nationals were living in Nitra, including 6,585 men and 6,237 women. Of these, 2,809 individuals held permanent residence, 4,982 temporary residence, and 5,031 tolerated residence, including persons granted temporary protection status. Among them, 4,202 individuals from Ukraine were granted temporary protection, of whom 68.1% were women (Mesto Nitra, 2024). At the same time, Nitra cannot be understood solely as a destination shaped by humanitarian migration flows. Evidence suggests that even prior to 2022, the city hosted multiple nationalities with different forms of residence, indicating increasing cultural diversity and multi-source migration. This development places additional demands on language, cultural and labour market integration mechanisms within local services.

As of 1 January 2025, the city of Nitra had 75,945 inhabitants (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, n.d.), with demographic developments reflecting not only natural population changes but also migration-related dynamics in the period following 2022. In such a context,

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the integration of migrants requires a systematic and multidimensional approach that not only responds to the immediate needs of displaced persons but also reflects the diverse experiences of migrant groups arriving for employment, family reunification, or other reasons. These challenges form the empirical basis of this study, which focuses on analysing integration processes in the city of Nitra and the role of the COMIN platform in their implementation.

Against this background, the study addresses the following research question: *How does collaborative governance operate in the local integration policy of the city of Nitra, and to what extent does the COMIN platform reflect the key characteristics of this model as conceptualised by Ansell and Gash (2008)?* This research question is further elaborated through specific objectives focusing on the analysis of the city's institutional capacities, the functioning of cooperation among relevant actors, migrants' experiences with integration processes at the local level, and the policy implications of the Nitra case for comparable cities in Slovakia and Central and Eastern Europe.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Local Dimension of Integration Policies: The "Local Turn"

Migrant integration is a complex and multidimensional process encompassing legal, social, cultural, and economic aspects. Contemporary migration literature increasingly adopts a governance perspective, which understands integration as a process of co-production among public institutions, non-governmental organisations, community actors, and migrants themselves (Scholten, 2012; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). This multilevel and multi-stakeholder approach is particularly relevant in contexts where a coordinated national integration framework is weak or fragmented, and where local initiatives play a key role.

The concept of the local turn refers to a shift in migration and integration policies towards the growing role of cities and municipalities (Caponio & Borkert, 2010; Scholten & Penninx, 2016). Cities are no longer seen merely as implementers of national policies, but increasingly act as autonomous actors that design, adapt, and implement integration measures. This development is especially visible in contexts such as the Slovak Republic,

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where national policies often respond to migration challenges in a delayed or limited manner (European Commission, 2025; Najvyšší kontrolný úrad SR, 2025).

Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten (2017) conceptualise the local turn as both an analytical and a political shift: cities become key sites of integration as well as actors capable of shaping policy responses. In this sense, local initiatives do not replace national frameworks but complement or compensate for them. This perspective provides an important lens for understanding the role of cities such as Nitra, analysed in this article through the case of the COMIN platform.

2.2 Collaborative and Multilevel Governance

Within the field of public administration and integration policies, the concept of collaborative governance plays a central role. Ansell and Gash (2008) define collaborative governance as a process in which public institutions engage with non-state actors in order to jointly formulate and implement public policies. This approach is characterised by stakeholder participation, dialogue, shared responsibility, and the gradual development of trust.

In the context of migrant integration, collaborative governance is particularly relevant in environments with limited national coordination, where local actors depend on horizontal cooperation among municipalities, non-governmental organisations, community groups, public institutions, and employers. Such models move beyond traditional top-down approaches and emphasise coordination, cooperation, and the sharing of competences among different actors.

Closely related is the concept of multilevel governance, which highlights that integration policies are shaped across local, regional, national, and supranational levels. In practice, however, the local level plays a decisive role in the everyday implementation of integration measures (Scholten & Penninx, 2016). This makes collaborative governance a useful analytical framework for examining concrete local integration practices, such as the COMIN platform in Nitra.

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2.3 The Integration Model by Ager and Strang

The integration model developed by Ager and Strang (2008) conceptualises integration as a multidimensional process encompassing several interrelated domains, including access to employment, housing, healthcare, and education, as well as social connections, language competences, and a sense of safety and belonging. These domains are mutually interconnected, and disadvantage in one area may negatively affect the overall integration process.

The model is widely used in qualitative research as a framework for analysing migrants' experiences and evaluating integration outcomes. In this study, it serves primarily as a complementary analytical tool for interpreting migrants' perspectives.

2.4 Institutional Capacity and the Absorptive Capacity of Cities

The concept of absorptive capacity refers to the ability of cities to respond to migration-related challenges through adequate organisational, financial, and coordination capacities (OECD, 2018). It encompasses the capacity to provide services, mobilise resources, and adapt to changing needs.

Research suggests that absorptive capacity is closely linked to political will, local leadership, and the existence of cooperative networks between public institutions and non-governmental actors (Alexander, 2007; Collett & Petrovic, 2014; Gebhardt, 2016). In contexts with less developed national integration frameworks, such as Slovakia, this concept is particularly useful for understanding both the potential and the limits of local integration policies.

In this article, absorptive capacity is used as a supporting concept to assess the broader conditions under which collaborative governance operates at the local level.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine how collaborative governance operates in the local integration policy of the city of Nitra, with particular attention to the COMIN platform as

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a mechanism for coordinating public, non-governmental, and community actors. The concept of the local turn and the absorptive capacity of cities are used to interpret the wider institutional context, while the framework developed by Ager and Strang (2008) supports the analysis of migrants' experiences.

To achieve this objective, the study addresses the following specific research objectives:

1. To examine the institutional and policy context in which the city of Nitra has assumed an active role in migrant integration, with reference to the concept of the local turn.

2. To assess the functioning of the COMIN platform in relation to the four core components of the collaborative governance model developed by Ansell and Gash (2008): starting conditions, institutional design, facilitative leadership, and the collaborative process, and to interpret the outcomes and limits of this model.

3. To analyse the organisational, financial, coordination, strategic, and adaptive capacities that support or constrain local integration policy in Nitra, drawing on the concept of absorptive capacity (OECD, 2018).

4. To analyse migrants' experiences of access to services, employment, language learning, social relationships, safety, and belonging with reference to relevant domains of the integration framework developed by Ager and Strang (2008).

5. To identify policy implications for the development and long-term sustainability of local integration arrangements in comparable cities in Slovakia and Central and Eastern Europe.

3.2 Research Design and Methods

The study employs a qualitative case study design focusing on a single research context—the city of Nitra. A case study approach is appropriate as it enables an in-depth examination of complex processes and interactions within a specific local setting (Yin, 2014; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Data collection combined two methods. First, document analysis covered the city's strategic documents, particularly the Strategy for the Integration of Foreigners in the City of Nitra with a Horizon to 2035, as well as COMIN outputs, project materials, and available statistical data. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with one representative of the City of Nitra who was also involved in coordinating integration activities through

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COMIN, one representative of the non-governmental organisation Mareena, and migrants who had used COMIN services. This design enabled the triangulation of municipal, non-governmental, and migrant perspectives. The dual role of the municipal respondent provided insight into both local policy coordination and the operational implementation of integration measures.

The interview sample comprised eight participants: one municipal respondent, one non-governmental respondent, and six migrant participants. The migrant participants predominantly came from Ukraine or had a Ukrainian migration background and represented different migration trajectories, including study migration before 2022 and displacement following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Most were economically active in service, manufacturing, seasonal, or agency-mediated employment, while one participant was a doctoral student with previous part-time employment experience. Because demographic information was not collected systematically for all participants, only characteristics directly supported by the interview records are reported. In the analysis, the municipal respondent is identified as I1, the non-governmental respondent as I2, and the migrant participants as M1–M6.

Participation was voluntary. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and provided verbal consent to the use of their anonymised responses in research outputs. The interviews were conducted in Slovak; quotations included in the article were translated into English for publication and checked against the original responses. All interview data were anonymised prior to analysis.

Purposive sampling was used to obtain analytically relevant perspectives rather than statistical representativeness. Separate semi-structured interview guides were used for institutional and migrant participants. Questions for institutional actors addressed local policy development, cooperation among organisations, institutional capacity, funding, and the sustainability of integration services. Questions for migrant participants focused on access to COMIN services, employment, housing, language learning, social relationships, safety, and perceived barriers to integration.

The data were analysed through thematic coding. Following Ansell and Gash (2008), the primary coding framework comprised four categories: (1) starting conditions, (2) institutional design, (3) facilitative leadership, and (4) the collaborative process, including

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interaction among actors, trust-building, commitment, and coordination. Collaborative outcomes were assessed in the overall interpretation of the platform rather than treated as a separate coding category. The framework was applied to both documentary and interview data to assess how the principles of collaborative governance are reflected in the functioning of COMIN.

The analysis of migrants' perspectives was additionally informed by relevant domains of the integration framework developed by Ager and Strang (2008), particularly employment, housing, language, social connections, safety, and belonging. The conditions supporting and constraining local action were interpreted through the concept of absorptive capacity (OECD, 2018). These frameworks were used as complementary interpretive tools rather than as parallel primary coding schemes.

The results of the analysis are presented in the analytical section of the article, structured according to the individual theoretical frameworks and supported by empirical evidence derived from the perspectives of actors involved in the integration process in the city of Nitra.

4. CASE STUDY CONTEXT: THE CITY OF NITRA AND THE COMIN PLATFORM

4.1 Institutional Arrangements in Migration and Migrant Integration in Nitra

The city of Nitra plays an active and coordinating role in the field of migration and integration, primarily through the establishment and development of the COMIN platform, which functions as the central mechanism for coordinating local integration efforts. Rather than acting as a passive observer, the city operates as a systemic partner that connects domestic and international initiatives, creates space for stakeholder networking, and supports the coordination of services. The impetus for a more systematic approach emerged from the increasing number of foreign nationals in the city, to which Nitra began to respond as early as 2019 through an initiative of the Nitra Community Foundation (NCF) in cooperation with the city. The aim was to connect local government, the non-governmental sector, and employers into a functional integration ecosystem (Mesto Nitra, 2020).

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In this context, the COMIN project (Community Centre for Labour and Knowledge Mobility in Nitra) was established as the first community-oriented project for the social inclusion of foreign nationals in Slovakia. It was created based on a municipal decision and implemented through cross-sectoral cooperation between the city of Nitra, local non-governmental organisations, employers, and selected state authorities. After 2022, when integration processes in the city intensified significantly, the platform of cooperating organisations was further strengthened, comprising the city of Nitra, the Nitra Community Foundation, and the Slovak Humanitarian Council. In 2023, UNICEF and UNHCR officially joined through their inclusion in the Blue Dots network. An important feature of the platform's functioning was the establishment of multi-source funding for the migrant advisory centre. In this sense, COMIN does not represent merely a project-based initiative, but rather a core organisational structure through which local integration policy is implemented in practice (Nitra.info, 2023).

In the period 2022–2023, the first workplan was implemented based on a memorandum between the city of Nitra and UNICEF. It focused primarily on coordinating actors involved in integration activities, strengthening municipal capacities through staff training, expanding kindergarten capacities, supporting integration activities for children, and enhancing professional capacities for working with children, including in the area of mental health. The initiative also included the strengthening of online communication through a dedicated website (Mesto Nitra, 2024).

The city's proactive approach to migrant integration is also reflected at the strategic level. In June 2024, the municipal council approved the document *Strategy for the Integration of Foreigners (including refugees and displaced persons) in the City of Nitra with a Horizon to 2035*. The strategy provides a framework for coordinated integration measures, serves as a basis for local policy planning, and supports the city's ability to secure funding from national and international grant schemes (Mesto Nitra, 2024).

The institutional environment of migrant integration in Nitra consists of a combination of public institutions and non-governmental organisations operating in the areas of migration, social inclusion, humanitarian assistance, and legal protection. Table 1 provides an overview of the key actors involved in migration and migrant integration in Nitra.

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Table 1: Organisations Involved in Migration and Migrant Integration in Nitra

Institution	Year Established	Brief Description
Contact Point for Foreigners (COMIN)	2019	Provides legal and social counselling, language courses, and community activities for foreign nationals in Nitra.
Pokoj a Dobro	2015	Refugee relocation, humanitarian assistance, and support for community integration in Nitra.
Nitra Community Foundation	2002	Funding of community projects and support for the social inclusion of migrants in the region.
Migration Office of the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic	1993	Assessment of asylum applications, management of reception facilities, and provision of international protection.
Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	Before 2000	Provision of support in employment, social benefits, and migrant integration.
Labour Inspectorate	2001	Oversight of working conditions and legality of employment of foreign nationals.
Foreign Police	1993	Administration and control of residence permits, registration of foreign nationals, prevention of irregular stay.
Slovak Humanitarian Council	1990	Coordination of humanitarian and charitable activities, assistance to migrants and refugees in Slovakia.
Mareena	2017	Organisation of language courses, community events, and educational activities supporting migrants.
Human Rights League (HRL)	2005	Legal counselling and advocacy for the rights of foreign nationals and refugees in Slovakia.
People in Need	1999	Humanitarian assistance, distribution of essential goods, and education.
UNHCR	1950	Protection of refugee rights, support for integration processes, and advocacy.
UNICEF	1946	Support for migrant children, education, and psychosocial assistance.

The above indicates that the COMIN platform, as a contact point for foreign nationals, represents a key node in the city's integration infrastructure. It provides initial contact with migrants and delivers essential services, including legal, social, employment-related, and health counselling, community facilitation, support in protecting migrants' rights, assistance with children's integration into schools and pre-school facilities, language courses, and

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community activities. Its functioning is based on networking and cooperation among multiple stakeholders.

The main partner organisations of the platform include the city of Nitra, UNHCR, UNICEF, the Slovak Humanitarian Council, and the Nitra Community Foundation. In addition, COMIN collaborates with a wide range of actors from the public, non-governmental, and community sectors, including expert organisations, educational and social institutions, donors, and local initiatives that contribute to the provision of integration services and support at the local level.

The described institutional framework highlights the central role of the COMIN platform as a coordinating hub of local integration policy in Nitra. Rather than representing only a set of services, COMIN can be understood as a concrete manifestation of a local collaborative governance model in practice. The following chapter therefore applies the selected analytical frameworks to this case and evaluates the extent to which COMIN reflects the principles of collaborative governance and the local turn.

5. ANALYTICAL SECTION: RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 The Concept of the “Local Turn” in the Context of Nitra

The Slovak Republic has long lacked a clearly defined and coordinated national integration policy. In such a context, cities such as Nitra are compelled to assume a more proactive role in addressing integration challenges. The case of Nitra therefore provides an opportunity to examine how the principles of the local turn are translated into concrete policy practices at the municipal level, particularly through the establishment and functioning of the COMIN platform.

The case of Nitra can be interpreted as a practical manifestation of the “local turn” (Caponio & Borkert, 2010), particularly through the establishment of the COMIN platform as a central mechanism for coordinating integration policies at the local level. In addition to adopting its own integration strategy (Mesto Nitra, 2024), the municipality has created an institutional framework that enables horizontal cooperation with civil society and non-governmental actors. In this context, the local turn in Nitra can be analysed through three main dimensions.

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First, political commitment at the municipal level is evident. The city of Nitra was the first in Slovakia to adopt an explicit strategic document defining integration priorities independently of the national level. This strategy reflects the specific characteristics of Nitra, including its demographic context, the presence of Ukrainian migrants after 2022, and the involvement of local institutions and non-governmental organisations.

Second, the institutionalisation of cooperation is most clearly reflected in the establishment and functioning of COMIN as a structured platform for systematic horizontal collaboration among local government, non-governmental organisations, migrant communities, and employers. COMIN operates as the core coordination mechanism through which integration services are organised and delivered in practice. While initiated by the municipality, it is also shaped by participatory planning processes and bottom-up needs emerging from practice.

Third, practical implementation is manifested in the provision of concrete services, including language courses, social and legal counselling, training activities, and community-based initiatives.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the city of Nitra has internalised key elements of the local turn, not only at the level of policy discourse but also through the implementation of relatively stable institutional arrangements. The concept of the local turn thus provides a useful framework for understanding how and why cities such as Nitra emerge as leading actors in the field of integration policies. In contexts characterised by the absence of strong state leadership and coordination in migration governance, such cities play a crucial role in safeguarding migrants' rights and fostering inclusive communities.

In line with existing literature (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017; Scholten & Penninx, 2016), it can be argued that Nitra has moved from the position of a policy implementer to that of an autonomous actor in integration policy, developing measures tailored to local conditions.

5.2 Collaborative Governance and the Model of Cooperation in COMIN

Building on the previous section, the case of Nitra allows for an empirical examination of collaborative governance in practice, with the COMIN platform representing its central organisational expression at the local level. In this context, migrant integration is not

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implemented by a single actor but emerges through coordinated interaction among public institutions, non-governmental organisations, and service users.

For the purposes of this analysis, the collaborative governance model developed by Ansell and Gash (2008) was operationalised into four analytical dimensions: (1) starting conditions, (2) institutional design, (3) facilitative leadership, and (4) collaborative process. These dimensions were applied to the functioning of the COMIN platform.

Starting Conditions

The establishment of COMIN was shaped by a combination of structural and situational factors, most notably the increasing number of migrants and the absence of a comprehensive national integration framework. The city of Nitra faced growing demand for integration services, particularly following the arrival of displaced persons from Ukraine after 2022. Interviews with a representative of the city indicate that the initiative to establish COMIN emerged from locally identified needs, with the municipality assuming the role of an active policy actor rather than a passive implementer of state measures. This corresponds to the conditions identified by Ansell and Gash (2008), under which collaborative governance tends to emerge as a response to the limited capacity of individual actors to address complex policy challenges.

Institutional Design

The COMIN platform represents a formalised and structured mechanism of cooperation among the municipality, non-governmental organisations, and other local actors. It is based on a partnership between the city of Nitra, the Slovak Humanitarian Council, and the Nitra Community Foundation, with cooperation anchored in partnership agreements and implemented through joint projects. This arrangement enables the coordination of integration activities, the sharing of information, and the linking of complementary services. Importantly, COMIN functions as a central entry point for migrants, while specialised organisations provide follow-up services, indicating a clear division of roles within the local integration system. In this sense, the institutional design of COMIN reflects a coordinated rather than fragmented approach to service provision.

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Facilitative Leadership

A key element of the model is the presence of an actor capable of coordinating and facilitating cooperation. In the case of Nitra, this role is performed by the municipality, which acts as both an initiator and a coordinator of integration policies. The city links relevant actors, mediates between local and national levels, and provides strategic direction for integration activities. This corresponds to the concept of facilitative leadership as defined by Ansell and Gash (2008), particularly in terms of enabling communication, supporting partnerships, and mobilising resources across sectors.

Collaborative Process

The collaborative process within COMIN is reflected primarily in the intensity of interaction among actors and in the provision of interconnected services. Empirical data indicate a high level of activity: between March and December 2022, more than 36,000 service interactions were recorded; in 2023, the platform provided services to 9,525 clients and carried out more than 32,000 individual interventions (Mesto Nitra, 2024); and in 2024, it recorded 8,193 clients and 23,365 interventions (Mesto Nitra, 2026).

The range of services provided—including legal counselling, psychosocial support, language education, and assistance in accessing services—demonstrates the integration of multiple sectors within a single coordination framework. From the perspective of migrants, this process is reflected in practical support in navigating administrative procedures and accessing essential services. Respondents consistently emphasised that without such support, interaction with institutions would be significantly more difficult.

At the same time, elements of trust-building between institutions and clients can be observed, as migrants repeatedly evaluate the services as accessible and essential for their integration. However, the collaborative process appears to be primarily oriented towards service delivery, while mechanisms for joint decision-making and co-creation of policies among actors remain less developed.

Assessment of the Collaborative Governance Model

The analysis indicates that the COMIN platform exhibits key characteristics of collaborative governance as defined by Ansell and Gash (2008), particularly in terms of institutional design,

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facilitative leadership, and the practical organisation of cooperation. At the same time, it does not represent a fully institutionalised model in the ideal theoretical sense. Its functioning remains dependent on project-based funding and is constrained by the distribution of competences between local and national levels.

Collaborative governance in this case can therefore be understood as an adaptive and context-driven mechanism, through which local actors compensate for systemic gaps in national integration policy. This highlights both the potential and the structural limits of locally driven integration models in Central and Eastern European contexts.

5.3 The Absorptive Capacity of the City of Nitra

Empirical data indicate sustained pressure on municipal integration services. In 2022, the COMIN platform recorded approximately 36,000 interactions with clients using services such as social and legal counselling, language education, and community support (Mesto Nitra, 2024).

Based on the concept of absorptive capacity (OECD, 2018), and with particular reference to the coordinating role of the COMIN platform, several factors can be identified that point to a relatively high absorptive capacity of the city of Nitra in the field of migrant integration.

First, organisational capacity is demonstrated by the allocation of a dedicated integration coordinator within the municipal administration, responsible for supporting COMIN-related activities, coordinating stakeholders, and overseeing the implementation of integration policies.

Second, institutional cooperation is reflected in the establishment of a formal framework of collaboration through COMIN, linking the municipality, non-governmental organisations, employers, and state institutions. This network is sustained through regular interaction and joint activities.

Third, financial capacity is evidenced by the use of multiple funding sources, including European funding schemes such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), the Norwegian funds, and contributions from the municipal budget.

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Fourth, strategic capacity is reflected in the adoption of a long-term strategic document defining integration objectives and measures up to 2035. The strategy includes indicators for monitoring progress and prioritises vulnerable groups of migrants (Mesto Nitra, 2024).

Fifth, adaptive capacity is demonstrated by the city's response to the war in Ukraine, including the rapid establishment of contact points for migrants, the expansion of language courses, and the strengthening of social services. Increased demand was also evident in the field of education, where schools experienced a significant rise in the number of foreign children, particularly from Ukraine. In response, the city, in cooperation with the COMIN platform and the municipal education department, expanded the capacity of kindergartens and primary schools, established support teams, and strengthened assistance for children with adaptation and language needs.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the city of Nitra possesses the capacity not only to absorb a significant migrant population but also to actively support their integration through coordinated and resource-supported policies. These dimensions are further explored in the analysis of interview data, where they are examined in relation to the perspectives of different actors involved in the integration process.

5.4 Migrants' Perspectives in Nitra (Based on Ager & Strang)

Access to Integration Services and the Role of COMIN

Interviews with migrants indicate that the COMIN platform plays a central role as a first point of contact upon arrival in the city of Nitra. Respondents consistently reported that COMIN provided essential information on residence procedures, administrative obligations, social and healthcare services, as well as opportunities for language learning and employment.

Migrants most often learned about COMIN through informal networks, including other migrants, acquaintances, social media, and community organisations, highlighting the importance of social capital in the integration process. One participant reported learning about COMIN from other migrants, online sources, and information leaflets received in Nitra (M1). For many respondents, the immediate accessibility of services, without requiring prior knowledge of the Slovak administrative system, was a decisive factor.

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The most frequently used services included legal counselling and assistance with documents related to residence, temporary protection, health insurance, and access to social benefits. Respondents emphasised that such support was important because language barriers and limited knowledge of the legal and administrative system made independent communication with institutions difficult. As one participant stated: “The assistance was very useful; without it, I would have had great difficulty dealing with matters at the authorities and in everyday life in Nitra” (M1). Legal and administrative assistance was therefore perceived as an important basis for subsequent integration steps, including employment and housing.

Language barriers emerged as a key obstacle to integration. Language courses were perceived as an important support mechanism because they facilitated communication in everyday life and at work. As one respondent explained: “The courses help me communicate in everyday life and at work” (M5).

Respondents also valued the supportive manner in which services were delivered. One participant described the staff as “helpful, patient, and always willing to advise” (M5), while another referred to moral support alongside assistance with housing and employment (M3). These accounts indicate that the relational dimension of service provision complemented the practical support offered by COMIN.

Despite the overall positive evaluation, respondents also identified persistent barriers to integration that extend beyond the scope of local-level interventions, including access to housing, recognition of qualifications, and unstable employment conditions. These findings highlight the structural limits of local integration efforts.

From the perspective of migrants, COMIN thus functions not only as a service provider, but as a key intermediary facilitating access to integration mechanisms at the local level.

Employment and Economic Integration

Employment was perceived as a fundamental precondition for long-term integration, associated not only with income, but also with independence, dignity, and stability. Several respondents indicated that access to employment influenced their decision to remain in Nitra.

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Entry into the Slovak labour market was described as challenging, particularly due to language barriers, limited knowledge of labour regulations, and administrative complexity. In this context, COMIN supported respondents by providing information, assisting with administrative matters, and, in some cases, facilitating access to employment. As one participant stated: “I work as a kitchen assistant, and I found the job with COMIN’s help” (M2).

Respondents also highlighted a mismatch between previous qualifications and the positions available to them. This was particularly evident in the case of a participant with a Ukrainian teaching diploma who was unable to secure corresponding employment. As she explained: “I currently have only seasonal work. It was not easy to find a job with a Ukrainian teaching diploma” (M3). These experiences point to qualification recognition and occupational downgrading as barriers to economic integration.

Language proficiency emerged as a decisive factor influencing access to employment and communication in the workplace. Respondents therefore regarded Slovak-language learning as an essential component of labour market integration. As one participant observed: “Language is the first step and a key point in adapting to a new country” (M6).

Work experiences varied. Respondents described employment in services, manufacturing, seasonal work, and jobs obtained through agencies or personal contacts. Their accounts indicate that economic integration was closely linked to language skills, the recognition and use of previous qualifications, and access to formal and informal employment networks.

Overall, economic integration in Nitra can be understood as a gradual process shaped by the interaction between migrants’ individual strategies and the availability of local support mechanisms, with COMIN playing an important facilitating role.

Social Relationships, Sense of Belonging, and Safety

Social relationships and a sense of belonging represent an important dimension of integration that extends beyond access to services or economic stability. Interviews indicate that the quality of everyday interactions with the majority population significantly influences migrants’ subjective sense of safety and well-being.

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In the initial phase of residence, social contacts were often concentrated within family, friendship, or migrant networks. Although these networks provided practical and emotional support, language barriers could limit wider interaction with local residents. As one respondent stated: “I feel part of the community, but not fully, because I do not speak Slovak well” (M4).

Over time, respondents reported developing contacts through workplaces, neighbours, university environments, and their children’s schooling. For one participant living with children, assistance with access to school formed an important part of the support received after arrival (M2). These settings created opportunities for gradual interaction with local residents.

COMIN also played a mediating role in this process by providing access to information, services, and community-oriented activities. One participant stated that COMIN had helped her to feel more a part of the local community (M1). Another respondent described Nitra as having become a “second home” through regular contact with people at the university, at work, and in informal settings (M6).

Most respondents evaluated Nitra as a safe city. However, the interviews also captured occasional experiences of prejudice or differential treatment. One respondent noted: “Not directly, but sometimes I feel that people look at me differently when they hear that I am from Ukraine” (M5), while another reported occasional unfair treatment in employment (M3). These experiences affected respondents’ perceptions of inclusion, even though they were not reported across the entire sample.

Findings suggest that a sense of belonging is closely linked to access to stable housing, employment, and language education, highlighting the interdependence of integration dimensions. Overall, social integration in Nitra can be understood as a gradual and uneven process, in which local initiatives such as COMIN play an important role, while structural limitations remain present.

Synthesis: Benefits, Limits, and Experiences of Inclusion

Migrants’ perspectives highlight both the strengths and limits of local integration policies in Nitra. Access to coordinated services, language support, and assistance in entering the labour

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market significantly facilitates the initial stages of integration, with COMIN acting as a key intermediary within the local integration system.

At the same time, structural barriers—such as housing constraints, labour market segmentation, and the recognition of qualifications—remain beyond the reach of local interventions. These factors contribute to continued uncertainty and vulnerability among migrants.

While experiences of discrimination were not dominant across the sample, they affected the sense of inclusion of those respondents who encountered them. At the same time, the positive evaluations of COMIN indicate that accessible information, legal advice, language support, and responsive staff can strengthen migrants' orientation, confidence, and everyday security.

Overall, the findings confirm that local integration policies can play a significant role in facilitating integration and strengthening social cohesion. However, their effectiveness remains dependent on the broader institutional context, pointing to the need for stronger alignment between local, national, and supranational levels of governance.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide insight into how local migrant integration governance develops in a context characterised by limited national coordination and increasing pressure on municipalities to respond to migration-related needs. Rather than representing an isolated local arrangement, the case of Nitra reflects several broader tendencies identified in research on urban migration governance, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, the case demonstrates how these processes operate in a medium-sized city through the interaction of municipal leadership, cross-sectoral cooperation, institutional capacity, and migrants' experiences.

6.1 The Local Turn in the Context of Fragmented National Governance

The findings support previous research on the growing importance of cities in migrant integration. The concept of the local turn emphasises that municipalities increasingly develop their own integration responses, particularly where national frameworks are fragmented or

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insufficiently adapted to local needs (Caponio & Borkert, 2010; Scholten & Penninx, 2016; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). The case of Nitra corresponds to this pattern. The municipality has not acted solely as an implementer of national measures but has gradually developed its own institutional infrastructure, particularly through the COMIN platform and the adoption of a municipal integration strategy.

Recent comparative research on migration governance in Central and Eastern European cities provides a broader context for these findings. Łukasiewicz, Pachocka, and Nowosielski (2026) show that local migration governance across the region is shaped by the interaction of political leadership, institutional capacity, cooperation networks, funding arrangements, and relations between local and national levels. Their comparative analysis also identifies recurring problems of fragmented central–local coordination and considerable reliance on civil-society organisations in the provision of integration services. The case of Nitra reflects several of these characteristics, particularly the proactive role of the municipality, the importance of non-governmental partners, and the need to compensate locally for gaps in national coordination.

At the same time, the Nitra case extends this discussion beyond the larger capital and secondary cities that dominate much of the existing literature on urban migration governance. It demonstrates that locally driven integration arrangements can also develop in a medium-sized city where municipal leadership and established cooperation networks provide the institutional basis for coordinated action. The local turn should therefore not be understood solely as a phenomenon of large metropolitan areas, but as a process whose form depends on local institutional conditions and the ability of municipalities to mobilise relevant actors.

6.2 Collaborative Governance: Coordination and the Limits of Co-decision

The findings partly correspond with the collaborative governance model developed by Ansell and Gash (2008). COMIN demonstrates several important characteristics of this model, particularly facilitative leadership, institutionalised cooperation, regular interaction among public and non-governmental actors, and the coordination of complementary services. The municipality plays a central coordinating role, while specialised organisations contribute legal, social, humanitarian, educational, and community-based support.

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Similar mechanisms have been identified in other Central and Eastern European cities. The case of Lublin is particularly relevant. Podgórska and Jekaterynczuk (2026) show that the city's response to the large-scale arrival of displaced persons from Ukraine after 2022 was facilitated by partnership networks and social capital developed through earlier cooperation between local government and civil-society organisations. These pre-existing relationships allowed municipal and non-governmental actors to coordinate assistance rapidly when the crisis emerged. A comparable feature can be observed in Nitra, where cooperation in the field of migrant integration had already begun to develop before 2022. The subsequent arrival of displaced persons from Ukraine therefore intensified and expanded an existing collaborative structure rather than creating cooperation entirely from the beginning.

However, the Nitra case also reveals an important limitation when assessed against the collaborative governance model of Ansell and Gash (2008). Cooperation is strongly developed in relation to service coordination and implementation, but the empirical evidence provides less indication of systematic joint decision-making or co-creation of integration policy involving all relevant stakeholders, particularly migrants themselves. COMIN therefore reflects collaborative governance most clearly as a mechanism of coordinated implementation and service provision, while the deliberative and co-decisional dimensions of collaboration appear less developed.

This interpretation is reinforced by the convergence between the municipal and non-governmental perspectives identified in the interviews. Both emphasised the importance of cooperation and the central coordinating role of COMIN, while also identifying similar challenges concerning housing, language education, cooperation with employers, and long-term financial sustainability. This convergence supports the interpretation of COMIN as an established coordination mechanism, while also indicating areas in which the collaborative model could be further developed.

6.3 Institutional Capacity and the Problem of Sustainability

The findings concerning the absorptive capacity of Nitra are consistent with the broader understanding of local integration capacity presented by the OECD (2018). The ability of cities to respond to migration depends not only on the availability of resources but also on organisational capacity, institutional coordination, leadership, and the ability to adapt

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services to changing needs. Nitra demonstrates considerable capacity in these areas through dedicated coordination structures, cross-sectoral cooperation, a municipal integration strategy, and the mobilisation of multiple funding sources.

At the same time, the findings show that such capacity should not be understood as a stable or exclusively local characteristic. Comparative evidence from Central and Eastern European cities demonstrates considerable variation in migration governance according to the strength of institutional coordination, political commitment, available funding, participation mechanisms, and cooperation networks (Łukasiewicz et al., 2026). The same research shows that locally developed integration systems may remain constrained by fragmented coordination between levels of government and by dependence on civil-society actors and unstable sources of funding.

The Nitra case corresponds to this broader regional pattern. Although the city has developed significant organisational, strategic, and adaptive capacities, the long-term sustainability of the COMIN model remains influenced by project-based funding and by competences distributed across different levels of government. This suggests that absorptive capacity should be understood as a relational and multilevel phenomenon. Municipalities can develop effective mechanisms for coordination and service provision, but their ability to address structural integration challenges remains dependent on national legislation, financial frameworks, and institutional support.

6.4 Migrants' Perspectives and the Limits of Local Governance

Migrants' experiences provide an important perspective from which to assess the practical effects of local integration governance. The findings broadly correspond with the multidimensional understanding of integration proposed by Ager and Strang (2008), particularly with regard to the interrelated roles of employment, housing, language competence, social connections, safety, and access to institutions.

The interviews show that COMIN can reduce some of the immediate barriers encountered by migrants by providing information, administrative assistance, language support, and access to specialised services. In this respect, the findings demonstrate the importance of a local intermediary institution that facilitates migrants' access to a complex institutional environment. At the same time, the persistence of problems related to housing,

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recognition of qualifications, unstable employment, and language barriers confirms that locally provided services cannot by themselves address all dimensions of integration.

This distinction is important when evaluating the effectiveness of local integration policy. Accessible and coordinated services can improve migrants' ability to navigate administrative procedures and support their initial orientation in the host society, but structural barriers in areas such as housing and labour-market positioning are shaped by wider institutional and economic conditions. The findings therefore support the argument that local integration governance is most effective when municipal measures are embedded within broader national and supranational frameworks.

The migrants' accounts also indicate that formal institutional support interacts with informal social relationships. Respondents frequently learned about COMIN through acquaintances, other migrants, social media, or community networks. Formal support structures and social networks therefore operate in a complementary manner, with COMIN providing an institutional entry point that can connect migrants to services and wider integration opportunities.

6.5 Implications for Comparable Slovak and Central and Eastern European Cities

The case of Nitra also provides a basis for considering the development of similar local integration arrangements in other Slovak and Central and Eastern European cities. In Slovakia, the emergence of municipal integration centres is no longer limited to Nitra. In 2025, seven cities – Bratislava, Nitra, Trnava, Žilina, Košice, Prešov, and Michalovce – were connected through the Bezpečný bod (Point of Safety) network of centres for refugees and foreigners coordinated by the Union of Cities of Slovakia with the professional support of UNHCR (Únia miest Slovenska, 2025). The network includes centres operating under different local models, including centres in the eastern Slovak cities of Košice, Prešov, and Michalovce.

Michalovce provide a particularly relevant eastern Slovak comparison. Since 1 April 2025, the city's Integration Centre has been incorporated into the municipal system of social services, continuing integration support previously provided with UNICEF assistance. Compared with Nitra, where COMIN developed from a cross-sectoral platform established in 2019, the Michalovce model illustrates a more recent institutionalisation of integration support directly within municipal social services (Mesto Michalovce, 2025).

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This development indicates that the establishment of local support and integration structures is becoming a broader feature of municipal migration governance in Slovakia rather than an isolated initiative of one city. The Slovak experience also highlights the importance of inter-municipal cooperation, common service standards, and the exchange of experience between local centres. At the same time, the Union of Cities of Slovakia (2025) identifies sustainable financing as a key condition for their continued operation. This corresponds directly with the findings from Nitra, where dependence on project-based and external funding represents one of the main structural limitations of the local model.

The comparison with other Central and Eastern European cities points to similar conclusions. The CEELMiG comparative analysis demonstrates that more developed local migration governance is associated with a combination of political commitment, institutional capacity, coordination mechanisms, cooperation networks, and more stable financial arrangements, whereas cities with more limited resources or fragmented institutional structures face greater constraints (Łukasiewicz et al., 2026). Nitra reflects several characteristics associated with stronger local governance, particularly municipal leadership, institutional coordination, and the existence of a dedicated integration platform. However, its dependence on external funding and the limited capacity of the local level to address structural issues such as housing or qualification recognition also correspond to limitations identified elsewhere in the region.

The comparison with Lublin further demonstrates the importance of developing cooperation networks before periods of acute migration pressure. In both cases, existing relations between municipal and non-governmental actors facilitated a more coordinated response when the arrival of displaced persons from Ukraine increased after 2022 (Podgórska & Jekaterynczuk, 2026). Although the scale and border context of Lublin differ substantially from Nitra, both cases suggest that institutional preparedness is strengthened when cooperation is established before a crisis rather than created only in response to it.

Several policy implications can therefore be identified for comparable cities. First, the establishment of a clearly identifiable local coordination point can reduce fragmentation in access to integration services. Second, sustainable integration arrangements require institutionalised cooperation between municipalities, public institutions, non-governmental organisations, and other relevant actors rather than reliance on temporary crisis-based

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partnerships. Third, stable and predictable financing is essential if local centres are to develop from temporary projects into durable components of municipal governance. Finally, stronger coordination between local and national levels is necessary because municipalities can facilitate access to services and support everyday integration, but cannot independently resolve structural challenges that depend on national policy and legislation.

7. CONCLUSION

This study analysed local integration policy in the city of Nitra through the case of the COMIN platform, with the aim of understanding how collaborative governance operates in a context characterised by limited national coordination. The findings show that Nitra has evolved from a policy implementer into an active local actor that shapes integration responses through institutional coordination and cross-sectoral cooperation.

The COMIN platform emerges as the core organisational mechanism through which this approach is implemented in practice. It enables the coordination of services, links diverse actors, and facilitates migrants' access to integration support. In this sense, the case of Nitra demonstrates that collaborative governance can function as an effective model for organising local integration policy, particularly in contexts where national frameworks are weak or fragmented.

At the same time, the study highlights important structural limits. The functioning of COMIN remains dependent on project-based funding and is constrained by the limited competences of local government. Migrants' experiences further show that while local services can effectively address immediate integration needs, they cannot fully compensate for structural barriers related to housing, labour market conditions, or the recognition of qualifications.

The comparison with other Slovak and Central and Eastern European cities indicates that the Nitra case forms part of a broader development towards stronger municipal involvement in migrant integration. The expansion of local integration centres in Slovakia and comparable experiences in Central and Eastern European cities suggest that institutional coordination, established cooperation networks, municipal leadership, and sustainable

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financing are important conditions for the long-term functioning of locally driven integration models.

The main contribution of this study lies in providing an empirically grounded analysis of collaborative governance in a medium-sized Central and Eastern European city. The findings show that local integration arrangements can be effective when supported by institutional cooperation, political leadership, and a coordinating platform such as COMIN, but they also remain vulnerable when they are not embedded in stable national frameworks. From a practical perspective, the study highlights the importance of coordination across sectors, accessible support services, institutional continuity, stable financing, and stronger alignment between local and national levels of governance.

This study also has several limitations. First, it is based on a qualitative case study of a single city, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Second, the purposive selection of respondents means that not all relevant stakeholder groups could be fully represented. Third, the findings are shaped by the specific post-2022 context of increased arrivals from Ukraine, which may not fully reflect a more stabilised long-term policy setting. Finally, the assessment of collaborative governance is based on qualitative interpretation rather than quantitative measurement.

Despite these limitations, the study provides relevant empirical insight into the functioning of local integration policy and into mechanisms of cooperation in the Central and Eastern European context. Future research should build on these findings through systematic comparison of local integration centres in Slovakia and comparable cities in the region, including their governance structures, financing arrangements, migrant participation, long-term sustainability, and outcomes.

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