

The following case from the Czech Republic belongs to a series of case studies prepared in the context of Community Alphabet, an international peer learning program led by Via Foundation in Prague. The program focuses on inclusive participatory community building and seeks to deepen participants' awareness, knowledge and skills of asset-based community development (ABCD) and participatory mapping, and offers opportunities for peer and expert support to advance their community-building efforts.

Between 2020 and 2022, 26 community practitioners, leaders and foundation staff from the Czech Republic, Hungary and Serbia took part in the program's pilot.

A new round of the program focusing on community practitioners and leaders from a broader spectrum of European countries is planned for 2023-2024.



**Asset-based Community Development (ABCD):** A way of approaching community building/development that enables residents to recognize and use assets that exist in their own community and to connect around shared interests, all with the aim of deepening interaction, enhancing neighborhood life and empowering local residents to take the initiative to make change. See [here](#) for more information on the Core Principles of ABCD.

**Participatory mapping:** A wide variety of approaches that directly and meaningfully involve community members in the process of understanding what already exists in the community (in terms of skills, knowledge, facilities, existing support and the like) as well as views on how the community might evolve (participatory budgeting, Citizens Assemblies, etc).

The case studies in this series offer insights into the ways program participants have tested ABCD-based community building ideas and practices to identify and mobilize local skills, knowledge and other resources or participatory mapping, and what this has brought them in terms of results to date, reflections on their own role and ideas for building community in the future.

The cases seek to recognize the changes occurring in the community and among at least a few people directly involved in the process. Over time, additional reflections and voices will be included to capture changes in the community and in the active group, as well as differences in perspectives and opinions on the process, its value and its main achievements.

# ÚSTÍ ADVENTURERS: WHAT 1 YEAR, LOTS OF ENERGY & SOME NEW INSPIRATION CAN DO



*I am glad I started it. It's important for the community. I asked people about what is unique about Ústí? Many people said that it is a place with great potential for change.*



*-Míša, May '22*

## I. Introductions: The Place and the People

### Ústí nad Labem

is one of those medium-sized cities that conjures up images of heavy industry due to the chemical, metallurgical, textile, food and machine tool industries that emerged in the 19th century, many of which are still present in the area to this day. Located in a mountainous region at the meeting point of two rivers, it has long been a place of transit of goods and people. In 1930, nearly two thirds of its population was German.



In the years immediately following WWII, most of its majority German population was expelled and was replaced over time by migrants from other parts of Czechoslovakia, Europe and, more recently, from even further afield.

Ústí's current population of approximately 92,000 includes many who live close to or below the poverty line, including a large Roma population. The average age of residents is slowly rising and it has the lowest number of residents with higher education and the highest number of residents with the minimal education in the country.

It suffers additionally from an unattractive job market, high unemployment, low wages, a large number of confiscations of property due to default and very limited cultural activities. It has long grappled with significant social problems linked to poverty and exclusion. Racist views and actions, directed particularly against Roma residents of the city, are common.

In combination these factors have undermined much sense of 'pride of place' and have engendered a pessimism towards their city among residents, and often among city officials, that is transmitted from generation to generation.

Although no full mapping of civic initiatives exists, there are at least 50 active citizens' groups in the city, of which approximately one-third are informal groups. Collaboration between these groups and local government has been limited and focused on addressing specific problems or cases of violence.

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### Míša

is a serial Ústí activist with a desire to have her city become a community of diverse and active citizens. She was raised in Trmice, a small town characterized by a large Roma population and, at the time, foreigners (Moroccans, etc.) who had escaped economic challenges or persecution in other countries. It is a few minutes' drive from Ústí and was part of the city until 1994.



For Míša this was a small kingdom that offered constant exposure to diverse cultures and perspectives and the reactions to difference on the part of the majority. A remarkable school of life!

She attended school in Ústí from the age of 11, and after obtaining a first degree in Social Work from the University in Ústí, completing further studies in Public Policy, two years of doctoral studies in Sociology and traveling extensively, she settled in Ústí in 2010.

Over the past 10 years Míša has been working as a freelance project manager, PR adviser, project evaluator, coach and administrator of social media profiles. She prefers this sort of varied employment to a job addressing one set of issues. Míša has also long been active in organizing musical events in Ústí. She became involved in civic activities in 2015.

In 2017 she and two other women founded Promyky, an informal group striving to make community life in the Klíše district of Ústí nad Labem more vibrant through public space revitalization, neighborhood events with music, theater and food, and fundraisers. But she has also initiated other local projects to build a sense of connection to the city, such as the Unknown Heroes of Ústí nad Labem which resulted in a number of large format murals reflecting the life stories of interesting inhabitants.

In the fall of 2021 Míša joined the Community Alphabet program as a participant and was introduced to principles of ABCD, participatory mapping and other approaches to community building. As she later said: *ABCD gave me a totally new view of society, of people. I saw how beneficial ABCD can be to individuals as well as society. It helps me greatly now both in organizing community activities but also in other areas of my life – in my work, e.g., the idea of treating each person as an individual who brings something valuable to our work, this partner thinking. This enables me, for example, to advise Open Society Fund how to put on an event. I learned that anyone can do community work!*

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She also praised the program's emphasis on inclusion, and its effort to increase participants' understanding of tension and conflict in the life of communities and in the lives of active citizens seeking to engage with people with whom they would not normally interact. As she said, *I like to share this view of being open to otherness with my community and that we can perhaps shift the thinking of the people we consider to be other. And we need also these "others" to do community work.*

By December 2021 Míša had decided to pursue a new project drawing on the inputs and inspiration generated by ABCD and participatory mapping: to establish a bank of contacts of the local NGOs and informal groups active in Ústí nad Labem, one that includes those that might not be highly visible. She saw this as a first step to improve communication between active residents of the city, recognize the assets already present in Ústí and encourage the exchange of these assets among groups interested in the life of the city or its neighborhoods.

Within a few months, Míša was working with a variety of local groups to plan and coordinate initiatives for Ukrainian children who had arrived as refugees, was engaging local experts to support active groups, and was on the way to establishing a vibrant, new and very open network of active groups and people in Ústí nad Labem.

Tereza, whose views are also captured in this document, studied business administration and finance and worked in HR for 15 years. She began volunteering through the Ústí Volunteer Center following her maternity leave and gained experience in seeking funding for local groups. In 2015 she joined Bateau, a non-profit center offering specialized assistance to children in crisis and their families, initially as a volunteer. She is now the organization's Deputy Director for Development and has chosen to work less than full time because, as she says: I want to have time for other areas of my life, my community. Her community for the last 13 years has been the city district of Skorotice.



Skorotice is a well-to-do neighborhood with a mix of historical buildings and considerable new housing. She is active in the community, organizing small neighborhood events, most recently to celebrate Halloween and traditional caroling at Christmas. Events in 2022 have raised funds for renovation of a local church.

Because most properties in the area have been sold to private investors, she and other residents would like to create a community gathering place: *We tried last year to get a site from the Skorotice District Council for community gathering, a place for all generations. Ninety families supported this idea, while three people strongly opposed it. We did surveys, a petition, but finally the District Council rejected it because of two people's sharp objections, one of whom was a company owner. We haven't given up, we are still meeting. We have big plans and are founding an association.*

By mid-year, Tereza was an active member of a new network and soon after was co-leading a fundraising workshop for active people across the city.

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## II. Inspiring New Connections in Usti in 2022

Something new started in Ústí in 2022 due to the efforts of Míša and a group of people she helped convene.

To begin mapping and connecting groups, formal and informal, active in the social and civic life of Ústí, in early January Míša reached out to active people she knew and asked for their help in expanding the contact list. She then began telling people – via Facebook, email, Messenger, at face-to-face meetings – of her idea to connect active NGOs and informal groups, establish an open network of groups and individuals open to sharing information about their activities and look for forms of mutual support. She felt a tangible way to start could be to identify local resources, such as party tents, drinking glasses, etc., that could be shared to facilitate organization of local civic-oriented activities and events. She asked everyone to pass the message to others and then invited everyone on her list to a meeting on the 19th of January.

*When I began, I wrote a message to everyone and asked them if they wanted to join. I wrote to everyone, even those whom I don't like 😊. It is also about improving relationships; we don't have to be best friends, but we can shake hands, recognize that we are each doing something useful even if we don't like each other.*

Based on her Promyky experiences she knew it would take awhile...

*First, I invited a diversity of people, including those whom I know and got recommendations from people I know. Being open to that diversity, to everyone, whether community gardens, Roma, anyone.*

*To join the Facebook group, you have to answer 2 questions 1) what group do I belong to/what do I do for the community? Not everyone answers and I began letting people in who didn't answer too. I understand that some people have just entered to check it out, which is okay. - Míša, late Nov. '22*

At the first meeting Míša presented the ideas of ABCD she had learned about in the Community Alphabet program.

She also indicated that she did not want to lead this group but rather wanted leadership to be shared. Fifteen people attended, including many she had not met before.



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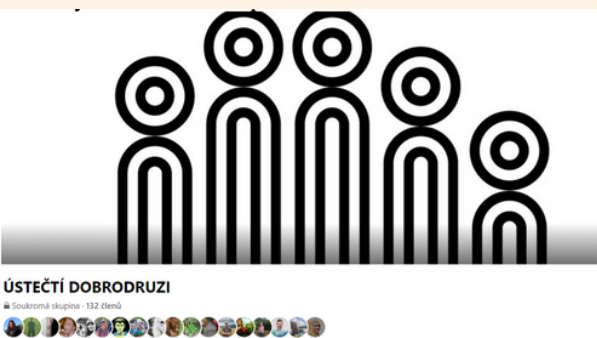


She also shared examples (Krompach and Library of Things<sup>[1]</sup>) from other communities and her own idea of creating a system to share available resources to facilitate civic activities in the city. She convened a similar meeting online (inviting 28 additional people) shortly thereafter to connect with those unable to attend the first meeting because of Covid concerns or illness.

While the online meeting proved more challenging than the in-person meeting (due to doubts about the value of the initiative and that it could succeed in a city like Ústí), Míša feels that those interested in being connectors in their community should be prepared for exposure to pessimistic views and actively seek ways to build trust and demonstrate the benefits of the effort to all local groups. Initial participants in the group are identified in the Annex.



Attendees of these meetings agreed to help identify other active groups and share available assets in the community: experiences, knowledge, skills as well as practical items. They decided to avoid instituting costs or a system of insurance for the shared items and instead rely on trust and the borrower's sense of responsibility. For the purpose of getting to know one another better, the group decided to hold in-person meetings once every quarter.



Míša established a closed Facebook page called Ústečtí dobrodruzi ("Ústí Adventurers", or UA) for ongoing exchange by the group, access to a database of things to share, and to keep informing one another of activities in the city. Any active person or group could ask to join. A design was later prepared for establishment of the Ústí Adventurers website.

According to an early member, Tereza, who later co-led the fundraising workshop: *My motivation (for joining UA) was to meet other people like me, people who are trying to get citizens engaged in community life. I was motivated by the idea of sharing, networking, mutual inspiration.*

*I find it meaningful because each of us represents a different part of the city or different interest area, but we all want to change Ústí, and we are often viewed as crazy people. I am in the UA group for the Skorotice district.*

<sup>[1]</sup> Krompach umi ("Krompach knows how") is a project in a small village to help residents identify skills, knowledge and other resources they have and would like to share with their neighbors. Library of Things is a loaning system, where a non-profit organization collects useful items such as repair or sports equipment that people in the community can borrow.

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Shortly after the first gathering Míša developed a questionnaire to gather information on what active people and groups appreciate about Ústí's civic life, what they feel they do well, where they struggle, as well as topics related to cooperation and activating residents. The idea was to draw on this to create an online database to further facilitate the sharing of equipment, knowledge and other resources among active citizens in Ústí. Among other things, the questionnaire revealed that groups of all types were concerned with the lack of volunteers and that active people were often experiencing burnout as a result of trying to do too much as a small group.

Gradually more and more organizations and informal groups were made aware of UA and invited to join the emerging network.



*We set the goals quite simply so they could be fulfilled - to meet, inform each other regularly, create the database, work together more intensely together. -Míša, May '22*



In early March 2022 a second meeting was called, open to all, in cooperation with the Department for Strategic Development of the municipality (and with the presence of participation experts from other cities and representatives of governing and opposition parties), to discuss revisions to the city's bi-annual approach to participatory budgeting so as to increase citizen involvement in the budgeting process and its outcomes.

This resulted in concrete ideas, including simplifying the text requesting public involvement in the process, how to strengthen dissemination, changes to the voting system and online voting site.



At this same meeting Míša suggested organizing a variety of activities for Ukrainian children that would put them in contact with Czech children, facilitate their inclusion into the life of the city and help improve their difficult situation. People took up the call and in late March UA members had compiled a list of 13 activities for these children. Míša took this list to the Director of the city's Support Center for Integration in order to obtain its help with translation, space and partial financial support, resulting in collaboration on 2 events. A fundraising drive using a national giving platform (Darujme.cz) was also initiated, which raised CZK 34,950 (ca. € 1,400) in one-off donations from individuals. These funds were matched by a small grant of CZK 20,000 (ca. € 800) from Via Foundation.

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As Míša commented in May: *We realized that when we connect, we can do something for the newcomers. We decided to do events for children. I was surprised how many got involved – one-third of all of the people said yes. We have UA as the main group and a sub-group formed to do these events for families; I was surprised that so many people were willing to do something extra. Especially because the questionnaire survey showed people lack time - but they made time for this (20-25 people, 12 events). There were 700 new children from Ukraine in Ústí. Events will start soon, now in May, (we were waiting for the fundraising drive to finish) and we are working with a migrant NGO locally, which is also supporting us. I asked those who don't do events for children to at least share the link.*



*Accessing diverse groups seems to have come naturally. Each member addresses a different issue and those different interests bring diversity. Scientist, humanitarian, artist...no one blocks or mocks anyone else.*

*There was one situation where I said no to a community activity proposed by a local resident. An elderly man working with a community garden offered to do an activity showing Czech and Ukrainian children how to shoot with a BB gun and use plastic grenades. There was a difficult conversation with the man. -Míša, May '22*

*He has not attended UA meetings since, but the door remains open to him!*  
-Míša, Dec. '22



One month later, at the 3rd UA gathering, the group undertook an exercise involving 10-minute brainstorming sessions to expose the issues with which local groups are grappling. The process was led by another Czech Community Alphabet participant.



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Míša commented: *The hallo positive moment was when someone realized that we have the sources within our own community - e.g. the girl who can train fundraising, who knows the target groups in the community, even better than some pro from outside who doesn't know you and you don't know.*

At this same UA meeting in late April attendees discussed organizational details around the activities for Ukrainian and Czech children and did a detailed review of what groups could offer one another in terms of resources and other help.

Things were moving quickly...

As Míša said in May: *Someone in the group always knows someone else. For example, the Sokol civic association is now part of the group. Members of the group are adding people on their own now. The snowball process is working.*



### Reflections - Challenges along the way:

*My perfectionism! I would like more people to come. 30 people at first, 30 people at second event, only 9 at the third event (where Michal was). But it was actually good because we did ProAction group and more would have been too much. -Míša, May '22*



Tereza indicated in December: *I have brought 3-4 people into the group. They ask how it works. Then they look at the Facebook site.*

One of the interests identified by the group of active citizens involved with UA was to learn about fundraising. Míša asked Tereza, a UA member and fundraiser of a local organization, if she would train the group. A workshop was planned for September.



Míša later noted:

*The fundraising seminar was led by one of the network members. And when we didn't get a space to hold it from the city, the UA member who was leading the training said we could meet at her office. The member who led it got together with Petr Veselý of the Ústí Community Foundation and prepared it – without me.*

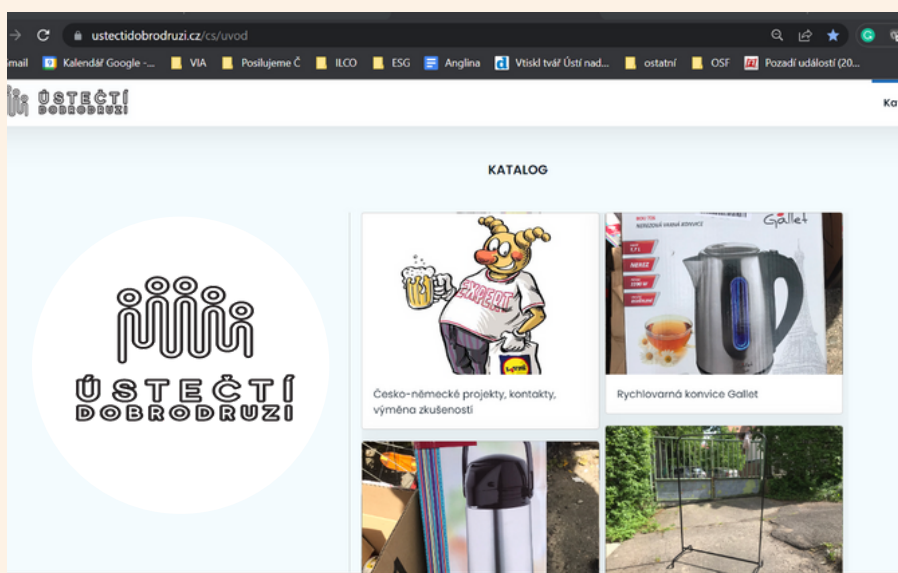
According to Míša, responding to this request of members was important because: *They are advanced beginners. They are already doing community activities, but it is quite intuitive, they are not involved in continuing education. Perhaps more importantly for Míša, this step demonstrated the use of local resources. And it showed me that it is possible to work using local resources, without outside funding.*

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Meanwhile, preparations for the children's events gradually took shape, with 14 local groups offering to help organize activities. Ultimately, 12 activities for Ukrainian and Czech children, involving 291 people, were funded from the financial and other resources that had been collected. According to Míša: *It showed that we can come together around a shared goal, and each group does something on their own. Each group acted responsibly.* Significant for Míša was also the fact that she did not need to attend 80% of the events. She noted: *Others took the lead and all I did was send money.*

The UA website - [ustectidobrodruzi.cz](http://ustectidobrodruzi.cz) - was presented to members in the fall. It includes a database of resources and various types of contributions (experiences, skills, musical instruments, technical equipment, etc.) that can be shared and an invitation to add new ones.



In the same period Míša requested and received a grant from the Ústí Community Foundation to cover some of UA's meeting costs. A professional graphic designer and friend offered to create options for a UA logo at no cost. The logo selected by the group reflects the connectedness between people.

Throughout this period between 10 and 15 UA members were actively posting information about grants, training opportunities and events on the UA Facebook site. By early November, UA had 120 members (with another approximately 380 indirectly involved if one includes the full membership of the groups) and was, according to Míša, working very smoothly.

## Reflections:

*It would be nice if someone else volunteered to lead the next UA event. I am planning to try this for the next meeting - I will ask for a volunteer to lead the next meeting. I introduced this intention at the very first meeting, that it won't be all on Míša's shoulders. It will give them some of the power too. - Míša, May '22*

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*It is so motivational being part of UA that I am becoming an optimist instead of a realistic pessimist.*

*-Tereza, Dec.'22*



### Reflections:

*I think it will take some time before it grows to what I think it should already be – that members communicate more. Should I see the glass half full when 15 members out of 120 members come to a meeting? I am thinking about the live interest, to come to a meeting and discuss. It's the same 10-15 people who communicate on FB. But I am grateful for the 15 active ones, they are each from a different environment, different city district and different type of group. -Míša, late Nov.'22*

A 4th UA meeting was held in late November. Míša was out of town, and happily handed over the role of running the meeting to two other network members, something she sees as an important step in empowering other members and freeing herself from the role of 'captain of the ship'. At the meeting participants reviewed what different groups and individuals had done in 2022.

They also looked at what UA had accomplished and what had worked well. Míša had designed the agenda consciously to continue to encourage sharing, confidence-building and transparency and explore how members could help one another in the new year.

During the discussion about community activities many acknowledged experiencing negative responses to their activities from people living in the vicinity of the activities, causing some disappointment or frustration on the part of the organizers. However, members also came to agree that this reaction was a natural one, that not all people will respond positively.

At the same time, groups felt that there was growing public interest in their activities, necessitating improvements in their planning and organization skills and use of volunteers. They agreed that these would be useful topics for a 2023 meeting. Míša also plans to raise the idea of a training in managing conflict for the UA group to assist them in their work with the public and public officials as well as for their discussions within UA.



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Those at the meeting agreed that the emergence of UA has brought great benefits and hoped to continue it and deepen their cooperation. They also discussed how to support other active people and groups, for example by creating a list of contact people responsible for different themes at the Municipality, district offices and institutions. The feeling was that such a list could help citizens who wish to become active in the civic life of the city but do not know how to link to these offices.

The group also agreed on the value of creating a sort of community manual that identifies the administrative and legal roles of these offices and the necessary administrative and legal steps and liabilities involved when residents wish to organize something themselves. It was agreed that this idea would be discussed with the city's Department of Strategic Planning that is initiating a new project called Neighborhoods.

*I heard from Míša that a municipal staff member wants to meet with UA. He is in charge of participation, there is a new municipal project called "Neighborhoods". It would be great to have support top-down in addition to the bottom up. The political situation is not too great here. But we have a new senator who looks promising. It is encouraging to see the city is interested in supporting people who bring life in the city, who engage people, and try to make up for the lack of vibrancy. -Tereza, Dec.'22*

During the meeting with the Department of Strategic Planning, attended by 5 UA members, the Department invited UA members to work with the Municipality on a project to implement a series of public events about environmental topics in different parts of the city. The UA members asked the municipal employees to prepare a written description of the project and then attend a UA gathering to discuss the details and constraints that were identified (i.e. limited budget, administrative requirements of the proposed events). UA took this opportunity to raise the idea of establishing a virtual currency for volunteer activities in the city (such as painting public benches, etc.) and permitting it to be used for vouchers for the public pool or theater.

*Very interesting people are emerging, who know how to do something or know someone who has something I need. They have contacts, ideas, it is a mix "eintopf". It is great to run into these people, we are like magnets in these different environments that recharge each other. Very nice, these are people I didn't know before. They are constantly giving feedback that (it) is a good thing that we started it. -Míša, Nov.'22*

Prior to the last meeting in 2022, Míša asked for some members to join her in raising funds for the basic operational costs of UA and to take on the organizing of future meetings. Two members have offered to organize meetings in 2023.

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As the year came to a close, Míša presented a cultural events calendar including all cultural activities in the city in order to reduce overlap and identify where sharing, assistance or support was possible. She discovered that another UA member from a cultural group has long had a similar idea so they will pursue the idea together in the new year. She also plans to poll the full Facebook group to obtain information on their needs and a list of volunteer, not-for-profit activities realized in 2022 in order to advocate with the mayor for a more cooperative relationship. Additionally, Míša raised the idea of holding a Fair of Active People, similar to one already held for social services in the city in which individuals and all types of groups can present themselves to others in front of City Hall. With all these steps, Míša's aim is to show citizens how many dedicated people there are in Ústí.

Tereza, in turn, sees how this contributes and how her neighborhood might become involved. As she noted in December: *Míša had a great idea to hold a Day of Ústí UA to tell more people about us and get them to come out from their own neighborhoods. I am a bit of a dinosaur with social media – so the idea of finding a way to communicate with older people who aren't on social media is appealing – I see that there are many people who learn about these things only through printed flyers, so to give them a chance to see how they could use their free time, perhaps as volunteers, in various interest areas. Inclusive volunteering is a big trend now. Ideally, I would also connect with 2 firms that are located here in Skorotice.*

### III. So what was achieved in 1 year in addition to the....

- seven meetings of Ústí Adventurers for networking and relationship building, training in fundraising, discussions concerning the Municipality's approach to participatory budgeting, etc.
- questionnaire circulated to active groups, formal and informal;
- fundraising call that raised CZK 54,251 (€ 2,250) and generated 12 activities for Ukrainian children and their Czech counterparts;
- web building and web-based information activities;
- new approach to participatory budgeting presented to the Municipality;
- creation of a logo to identify UA and link its members;
- Facebook page with 132 members;
- donations of space and technical equipment;
- two small grants to support UA gatherings and activities;
- 30-40 people regularly attending meetings and activities, approximately 125 people who are active online;
- and 380 contacts in the Ústí community with whom to share ideas and things, ask for help in realizing activities, and who are informing one another and the public about what happens in the city and its neighborhoods.

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Looking back at the end of the year, Míša feels that UA members have realized that they have skills to offer one another and have started to think and work together more collaboratively to animate and engage with residents at neighborhood level and city-wide. This seems to have brought a feeling of moral support. She sees signs too that the confidence and recognition of active groups have improved.

Equally important, she feels that: *Active citizens are much more interconnected. I know so many more people! Relationships have improved between some people. We are more informed about opportunities - funding, who is doing what. And this leads to improving events. Municipal offices are aware of us. That there are a lot of us. A better position when we communicate. It has also generated offers – someone gives us something.*

Tereza's views supports this, but also emphasizes the value of the feeling of moral support UA has generated. *I feel that people in the UA group give each other courage and we support each other morally, which counters the put-downs we sometimes get from people in the broader community or in our own communities. There is a core group of people who come to every UA meeting, and also other people who come occasionally. I have met a broader pool of people than I knew before.*

*The first exchanges (i.e. borrowing of equipment) have already taken place. A database has been developed where we will be able to borrow various types of equipment from each other. And we can also offer intangible things there (expertise, etc.). I have looked at that and I used it for the Halloween event – borrowed a party tent. During the Christmas vacation I will add what I can offer to the database.*

New groups seem to be emerging, with cooperation as a key element of their approach. Míša noted: *Two new groups formed here that decided to do an activity for the Czech nationwide event Zažít město jinak ('Live Differently in the City'). These two groups decided to connect their events on this day – they got an old communist-era bus to transport citizens from one event from the other. And they shared resources. They are 3 small groups, two of which hadn't done much community activities before.*

Míša feels that UA plays another important role, that of showing citizens how many activities there are in Ústí and encouraging new ones, thereby generating a greater variety of activities for the city. In addition, Míša saw benefits for Promyky's work and encouragement for others in her district to take active part in community life.



*I think [I see] more people, too, I know of 15 people who started doing something, being active, signed up on FB saying "I want to do something too". I think people have a hunger to do good. –Míša, late Nov. 22*



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*At our last [Promyky] community event in August there was more help from neighbors that I hadn't directly asked for. Maybe because we inform people about the benefits of co-creating (I always try to embed a bit of ABCD in my Facebook posts) and show that things don't happen without citizen-led activity. More people offered to lead a workshop, donate money, be a partner (Junak offered to have a booth and help organize musical or arts activities in which parents interact with their children, a group of women offered to do the charity bazaar).*



*I try to write that each of us have a gift wherever I can! Contacts, hands to help, time, money. It is quite easy now to organize events and the events are super. This shows that others can do it – not just the 3 of us – and we can advise others and transfer positive energy. It is like a snowball.*

Members like Tereza also sees how UA contributes to Ústí and to her own work in the Skorotice neighborhood: *I think there could be big changes. Definitely. I don't want to seem too idealistic but I think people's thinking could change quite dramatically. I think people at their core are good and they want to get involved. I think Ústí can be changed individual to individual – new projects could emerge, more people could be inspired to get involved in community life. For example, I see big gaps in environmental protection, tree planting.*

Tereza continued: *We want to restore an allée to the cemetery here in Skorotice. Through that effort I have met a new guy who has tons of ideas. And many neighbors, people who have no idea what a community plan or public space is, are getting involved and they see that it is bringing something positive to their lives and they are glad something is going on. We are becoming closer as neighbors, people are helping one another in our "micro region" of a few square kilometers here in Skorotice. We are kinder and more open to one another, new friendships are emerging, and I would like to transfer that to the whole city.*

Míša has also seen tangible changes in sources of funding for Promyky, the NGO she co-leads: *More neighbors and local businesses are offering funding for our community events. They recognize that community events are a place to meet and reconnect with others. I would like to strengthen this aspect and gain the community's trust so that eventually we can bypass grants entirely. It is liberating to not have to ask institutions for funding and know that you have people in the community who want to give.*



### IV. Further Reflections and Thoughts

The process of bringing about these changes in Ústí has been accompanied by learning, challenges and numerous reflections on these developments and how they have changed people. Some of these are presented below.

Míša said: *My vocabulary has changed. I no longer speak of volunteers but rather my co-creators.*

Míša nevertheless feels that: *The mindset is new to people. It starts with that. Not being dependent on someone else. The connecting to other people, that is hard for many people, to pick up the phone and ask another community leader to give you advice about how to put on an event, for example. The first thing is to teach people to think a community way and seek local resources in their closest surroundings. People do it naturally in their personal lives, it is about showing them how in community activities. You have to take it slowly. Not everyone is open to changing themselves. People view my positivity as crazy.*

*I learned how enriching diversity in the community is. It is not good to have a group comprised just of well-educated, well-off people. Everyone can bring his or her view and experience to the activity. To not be afraid to open up the bubble to more people.*

Tereza too feels she gained a lot from taking part in UA. *I went to see events in other city districts, I helped the community groups there, I learned about them, also I borrowed the tent and got to know the tent-owner in person. I learned that we can help each other. Also the information shared in the workshop (with Michal).*

*I have greater self-confidence that I can ask someone for something, the worst is that they will say no. I am now willing to go beyond my comfort zone. For example, the planned Skorotice dance, I know that we or I can do it, I just have to ask for help, I know that people will help me.*

*Meeting Míša in person and letting her optimism affect me. Twice I read her posts and immediately sent them on to our group, and I got great reactions. It is like a snowball of new energy, the feeling that it all makes sense, and it is good that we are doing it. People who want to take part will, and others who don't want to don't have to, that's okay.*

*I am so grateful, that I realize I am almost devoid of criticism. I feel like I have new blood in my veins. Energy. Without the chance to see that projects succeed elsewhere or that other people have similar problems, you would fall into skepticism. It is great that we support each other this way.*

## ÚSTÍ ADVENTURERS: WHAT 1 YEAR, LOTS OF ENERGY & SOME NEW INSPIRATION CAN DO



Lastly but perhaps most essential, Míša's reflections on what helped to encourage participation, relationship-building and trust within the UA group included:

*Any issues are dealt with publicly on the FB group. When we have offline meetings, I see that people feel that they can say anything, they don't feel like they have to watch what they say. Even money – a table was accessible publicly. Budget and how much for what activity. Everything is open, accessible. And no positions. Everyone is on the same level. That's why being a captain was troubling.*

*The database - a catalogue of things to which you add material or non-material things that people lend with the trust that the borrower will return it in good shape and if not they will compensate - was a huge tool for building trust!*

*Regular posts to the FB page of UA, with training events, workshops, or examples of creative projects. Shows them that you care about them.*

*Using comprehensible language. I know that I have to speak in regular language, not 'project speak'.*

*Demands that I place on myself, not to place them on others. To welcome every energy, every willingness to do something, no matter what 'level', e.g. to welcome event technical support or writing a project proposal. Not to have high expectations on those around me. Not to nag. For example, only 2 activities have been added to the database recently, but I am trying not to nag. Don't want to lose them because of this. I will mention it in more natural settings, when we meet by chance.*

### V. Looking forward

In addition to deciding to create resources, such as the community manual and list of contacts in local institutions, to facilitate the entry of more citizens into civic life, the group identified a series of topics to explore in 2023. These include: the legal and tax framework underlying the functioning of the city and soft skills such as working in teams, managing stress and burnout and planning and organization skills. One member volunteered to look for funding from a sponsor he knows in order to offer a training for UA members on the legal and tax framework of the city, and the group shared ideas of how to identify a trainer.

Míša herself feels she has gained new energy and new perspectives on the city and that her perspective on the work has radically changed. As she indicated in late November: *UA members are a great recharge for me. Now I see the whole city, not just my district. A bird's eye view. I see the complexity of groups across the city and see that many activities are happening. That gives me a lot of energy. And when I meet people in important positions, I have things to tell them, about what is happening, and how people are meeting, and how that is impacting citizens positively.*

## ÚSTÍ ADVENTURERS: WHAT 1 YEAR, LOTS OF ENERGY & SOME NEW INSPIRATION CAN DO



*I have a more positive mindset and lowered my expectations on those in my environment (i.e. I cannot expect others to bring what I do to community – my education, experience – and it is useful to try to estimate what each can bring – e.g. a woman on maternity leave may not come to every meeting or lead, but will come once in a while and also bake something for an event. It is useful to be specific – here is what I need: 5 people to help build a gazebo; I need CZK 5,000 for a festival – and put these specific needs out there.*

She nevertheless recognizes ongoing challenges like building co-leadership within UA, developing an equal partner relationship with the municipality and balancing members' views on how the group should develop. *Gradually transferring leadership is still a challenge. I like to be active, I like change, I like to create new projects after one project ends. That's why it is important to have people around me to delegate to and transfer leadership to. It's hard because people don't want to take over someone else's old horse (project).* –Míša, Sept. '22

Tereza's view on Míša's role reveal the leadership challenge: *She is a leader, communicator, facilitator - a multi-functional woman. She wasn't at the last meeting, and I was concerned about how we would manage it, but she said we have to manage it.*



POSLEDNÍ  
SETKÁNÍ  
V 2022

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TLACHÁNÍ S  
ÚSTECKÝMI  
DOBRODRUHY

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22.11.2022 od 18:00  
v Hraničáři



*Two women took over the meeting leadership in her absence. It was a success and we were able to do it without her. Although I did sense a bit of a facilitation gap because the two women aren't as experienced as Míša in that area.* –Tereza, Dec.'22

*She is a visionary, an initiator. She says she wants to pass the baton on. I can't quite imagine that yet. But we agreed we would meet on 19 December to discuss work things, and I am willing to participate and help organize meetings. But because I am not the founder, the visionary, I can't imagine that we would do it by ourselves. I think Míša has to be there for now at least, and we will see what happens in the future.* –Tereza, Dec.'22

According to Míša: *When I spoke with the participants of the last meeting in 2022, I understood that they would like the UA initiative to become an association, to act on behalf of the active citizens who are members. She believes this is to solidify the position of UA and for the purposes of fundraising.*

But she doesn't agree. *On the contrary, I think it should be informal, neighborly, not have a legal status with statutes, but a living organism that should be able to handle things on its own. I think I will have to explain the goal once again.*

## ÚSTÍ ADVENTURERS: WHAT 1 YEAR, LOTS OF ENERGY & SOME NEW INSPIRATION CAN DO



Another challenge Míša identifies is how to share or transfer this thinking to the public administration and local institutions. *On one hand, public administration is a crucial partner for NGOs (approvals, funding) but on the other hand it is one major reason why the NGO sector exists – because the public sector has shortcomings. For example, the municipality could create a storage warehouse for equipment that NGOs need. And the NGOs could borrow it as needed. This could be an ABCD approach, the municipality thinking of all the associations, and says ‘we are here for you, borrow what you need’. To find someone at the municipality who stands behind you and helps create the conditions for NGO community work. It is a huge benefit for the municipality when there are (crazy☺) people who are active citizens.*

Julia Szanton, Michaela Valášková, 2023

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST!**

  
**NADACE VIA**  
COMMUNITY  
ALPHABET



## Annex

The initial UA participants were:

- Skřivánci na síti ("Starlings on the Net"), a registered group in the Skřivánek neighborhood that organizes neighborhood events and activities.
- Ústím na kole ("Through Ústí By Bike"), a registered group concerned with road safety, city bicycle paths and organizing related advocacy and events such as joint cycle rides on the Day Without Cars and cycle trips.
- Sokol (Česká obec sokolská, or "Czech Falcon Community"), a registered group with a long history of encouraging exercise and health.
- Lucie Taifl, an active individual interested in revitalizing the spaces in a housing estate in the Všebořice neighborhood, reconstruction of a children's playground.
- Společně ("Collectively"), a registered group interested in drawing attention to Usti's public spaces, such as undesired construction on green areas and re-use of 'brownfields', the environment and related advocacy.
- Corvus Milites, a registered group of people doing historical reenactments involving fencing, knights and the like.
- Žížala na Terasě ("Worm on the Terrace"), a registered group creating a multi-purpose community garden on a housing estate in the neighborhood of Severní Terasa.
- Krásné sousedění ("Beautiful Neighborhood"), a registered group pursuing a similar community garden project on the housing estate in the neighborhood of Krásné Březno.
- Veřejný sál Hraničář ("Hraničář Public Hall"), a registered group running a cultural center (cinema, gallery, musical events) in the center of the city.
- Lenka Šarše, an active woman focusing on revitalization of the neighborhood of Střekov, including reconstruction of a children's playground.
- Tereza Nováková, an active woman then representing Skorotice sobě, a registered group organizing neighborhood events, such as on Halloween and Christmas caroling in the Skorotice neighborhood.
- Stop tunelům ("Stop Tunnels"), a registered, apolitical group concerned with environmental protection and advocating for greater attention to environmental protection in the city of Usti.
- Limity jsme my ("We Are the Limits"), an association opposed to coal mining and burning, operating city-wide.