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# Plan Einstein Academy

URBACT Innovation Transfer Network

## Network Journal #2

Jun - Aug 2025

# Plan Einstein Academy Network Journal #2, Sep 2025

URBACT



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# A. Network recap

## ‘Plan Einstein’ and ‘Plan Einstein Academy’

**Plan Einstein Academy** is a two-year URBACT ‘Innovation Transfer Network’ working to transfer Utrecht’s ‘Plan Einstein’ concept to five other European cities.

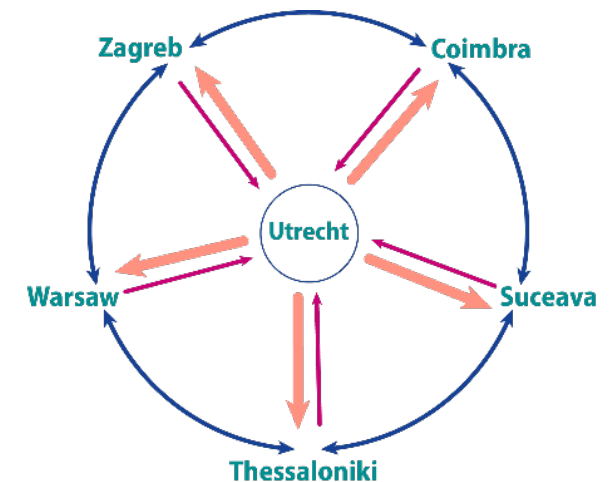
**Plan Einstein** is an innovative approach to local neighbourhood-level social cohesion bringing diverse local residents together as equals through open welcoming spaces and a diverse range of activities for socio-cultural engagement and personal development.

One of the strengths of Plan Einstein for its transfer is that local implementation can be very flexible. Spaces and activities can be very different from one location to another – so long as the principles of openness and inclusivity are respected.

Plan Einstein may – but does not have to – include a co-housing component bringing together newcomers and neighbourhood members. Implementation is best applied through an ecosystem approach – not isolated activities.



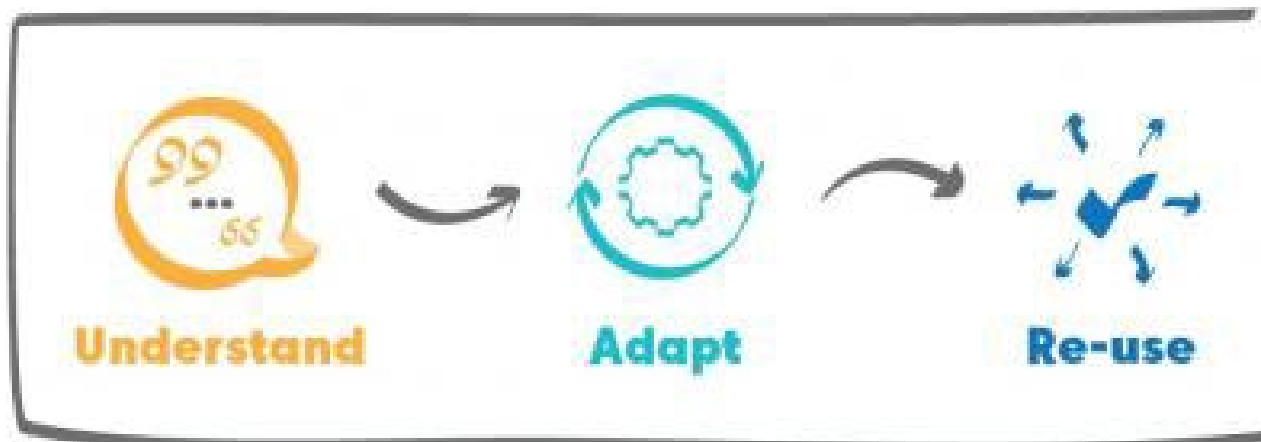
*The network partnership*



## Network journey so far...

The first six months of the network (September 2024 to February 2025) were the **'Understand Phase'** – focused on building a solid understanding of Utrecht's original innovation - see [Network Journal #1](#).

Since March 2025, the Network has been in its **'Adapt Phase'** – where the focus is on exploring how the original innovation can be adapted for implementation in the five partner cities.



## Key milestones in the period Mar-Aug 2025 (Adapt Phase Q1-Q2):

1. In-person network meeting in Warsaw (TEX4), 26-28 Mar 2025
2. URBACT ITNs' 'Adapt Phase' kick-off meeting, Paris, 28-30 Apr 2025
3. Finalisation of the Plan Einstein Academy 'Transferability Study'
4. Partner 'Health Check' calls with Lead Partner
5. Online network meeting (TEX 5.1 on Investment Plans), 26 June 2025
6. Online network meeting (TEX 5.2 on ULG developments), 1 July 2025
7. Publication of first network article, 9 July 2025



*Network partners met in person in Warsaw for the 4<sup>th</sup> network transnational exchange meeting, 26-28 March, hosted by the Family Support Centre.*

## **B. Exploring potential transfer to each partner city**

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# 1. Coimbra

## Partner profile

The project partner is the Intermunicipal Community of Coimbra Region – made up of 19 municipalities with around 460,000 inhabitants. Located in the Central Region of Portugal, around half-way between Lisbon and Porto, it comprises diverse coastal, rural and urban areas.



There is a diverse migrant population across the Coimbra region, including refugees and beneficiaries of international and temporary protection. However, most migrants come through voluntary migration in search of work and/or better living conditions.

In the context of local labour shortages and the significant increase in the number and diversity of migrants arriving in the region, it is considered essential to work locally to promote improved reception and integration of migrants – as well as meeting the needs of longstanding residents and ensuring cohesion between all members of the local community.

Six municipalities in the region – Arganil, Mealhada, Góis, Cantanhede, Coimbra and Tábua – have set up local support centres for the integration of migrants (CLAIMs) – part of an increasingly broad national network started in 2005.

# Coimbra's initial reflections and approach

Coimbra is **thinking about how to introduce Plan Einstein across the region** – and whether it is best to work with one or more municipality on a pilot basis or attempt a regional Investment Plan.

As it continues to develop its thinking, the **URBACT Local Group (ULG) has been created at regional level**, involving representatives of regional institutions on education, employment and vocational training and health – as well as representatives of different levels of governance, including two municipalities, the intermunicipal community and the Regional Coordination and Development Commission.

An important area of opportunity is seen to be the successful project application the team made under a national call of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). This project should allow them to **integrate Plan Einstein approaches into new local plans for the Integration of Migrants** – one at intermunicipal level and 19 municipal plans.

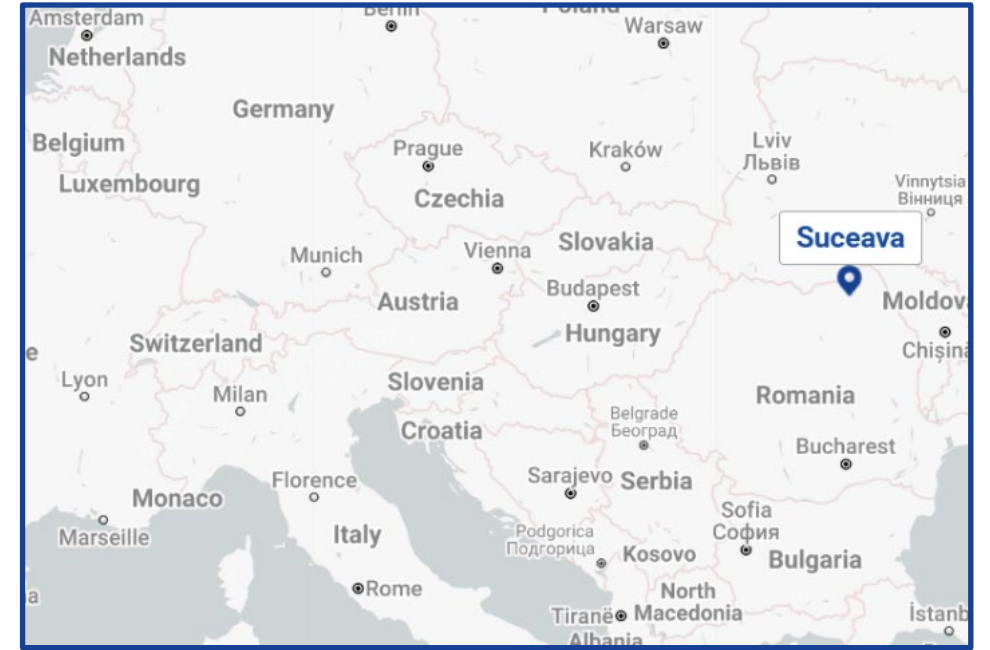
Another early idea has been to **integrate Plan Einstein into the work of the CLAIMs** - the local support centres for the integration of migrants across the region.

An important early reflection of the project has been that there are already relevant initiatives fostering meaningful encounters with newcomers taking place in diverse locations across the region. A key priority for the team is therefore to **map the Plan Einstein-type initiatives already taking place** in Coimbra, in order to build on what already exists.

## 2. Suceava

### Partner profile

Suceava is a city of 84,322 people, located in the northeast of Romania, just 43 km from the nearest border crossing with Ukraine and 450 km from the capital Bucharest. Known for its historic fortress, the city has been keen to boost its potential for tourism and as a base for new industries.



Suceava has long had a small minority Ukrainian population and became one of the most important entry points for Ukrainians fleeing the war after 2022. This required an emergency local response for which the municipality was initially under-prepared, including the need to create a temporary reception facility for refugees at a local secondary school providing more than 200 beds.

Although the urgency of the initial wave of refugees has passed, the experience has highlighted the need for a more developed approach to receiving migrants and also contributed to reflections on the need to create a more welcoming culture to receive foreign workers that are needed for key sectors of the local economy – including construction.

# Suceava's initial reflections and approach

The team in Suceava was particularly motivated by the idea of creating **one or more new space for meaningful encounters in the city** – this being identified as something that is currently lacking.

There are different potential options being considered. One of the main ones is the idea to turn the relatively new **'Arta' multifunctional centre** that opened in summer 2023 into a Plan Einstein location. Located in the Itcani neighbourhood of the city – outside of the city centre – the building has impressive facilities, but is still rather under-utilised by the local community.

Another option is to take advantage of **empty premises in the town centre** under the control of the local authority to create one or more open, welcoming spaces for Plan Einstein-type activities.

The local team also has ambitions to develop an **online welcoming guide for newcomers** in Ukrainian, English and hopefully more languages – focused on public services and institutions available to new arrivals in Suceava.

There are also ideas to start providing **information in multiple languages on the local public transport system**, which currently only provides information in Romanian – meaning info in English and maybe also Ukrainian.

## 3. Thessaloniki

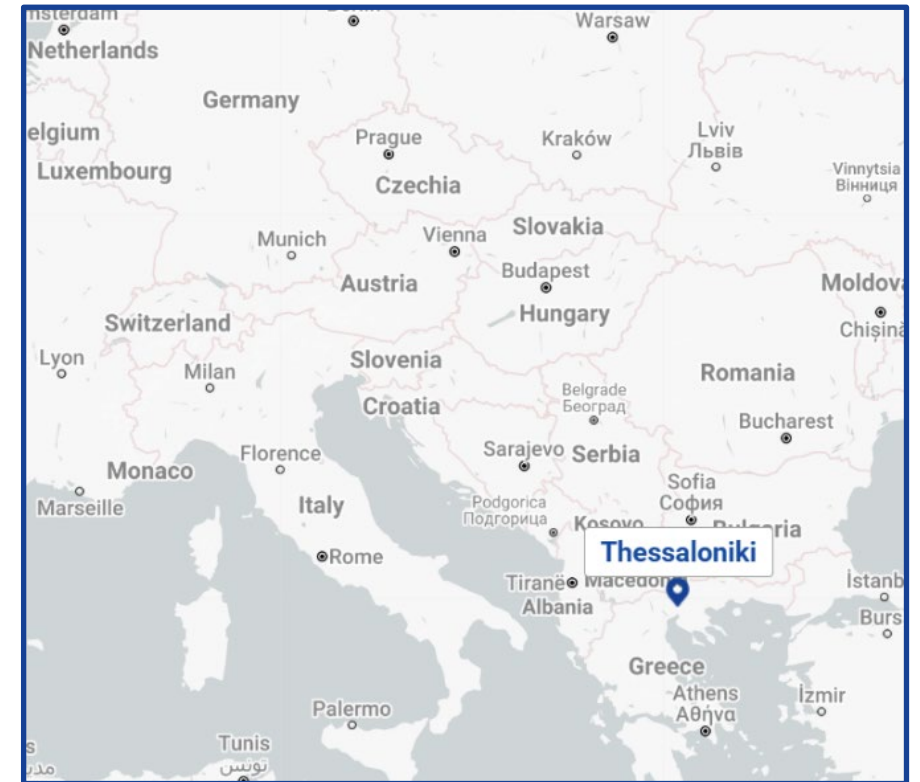
### Partner profile

Thessaloniki is the second-largest city in Greece, located at the northwest corner of the Aegean Sea. The municipality has a population of 319,045, while more than one million people live in the wider metropolitan area.

Located near Greece's northern border with North Macedonia and a major transportation hub – accessible by train, road and water – Thessaloniki is a common entry point for migrants looking to take the Balkan route to northern Europe.

While many asylum seekers have seen it as a transit city, there are several thousand migrants living in Thessaloniki at any given time, including a substantial proportion who are waiting for their asylum applications to be processed.

At the same time, there are increasing numbers of long-term 'economic' migrants from countries such as Albania and Bulgaria as well as from African, South Asian and Middle Eastern countries. Overall, the city faces substantial challenges in providing adequate support, housing and opportunities for effective integration and social cohesion.



# Thessaloniki's initial reflections and approach

Initial discussions in Thessaloniki were highly influenced by the reality of **funding cuts in the migrant reception sector**. Several local programmes – supported by emergency finance in the wake of the intensified refugee arrivals from 2015 – were being closed, including measures providing access to rented apartments, a shelter and key support services. Many NGOs were being forced to pull out of Thessaloniki or significantly scale back their activities.

In this context, several members of the URBACT Local Group have felt strongly that the **most urgent priority is access to housing** for refugees and asylum seekers, providing the foundation on which other efforts can be built. Others, have sought to prioritise long-term funding solutions for frontline migrant reception activities.

Despite these challenges, ideas also started to emerge for more local community-focused activities in disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Thessaloniki. This included an idea to test a **Community Garden initiative** aiming to bring neighbourhood members and newcomers together to build community, foster integration and promote sustainability through shared gardening activities.

The possibility to **integrate Plan Einstein-type activities and spaces into existing services for migrants** will also be explored, such as at the Blue Refugee Hub run by the NGO 'SolidarityNow'.

## 4. Warsaw

### Partner profile

Warsaw is the capital and largest city of Poland situated in the east-central part of the country along the Vistula River with a population of around 1.9 million. The city is represented in the project by the Warsaw Family Support Centre – a body funded by the municipality to run key family-focused services.



Warsaw has emerged as a significant centre for migration and refugees in recent years. A first important wave came from Belarus after its disputed presidential election of August 2020 and the subsequent persecution of protestors. Poland provided special instruments to facilitate their arrival, such as humanitarian visas, expedited access to the labour market and special business programmes.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, approximately 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees have sought asylum in Poland, with Warsaw hosting a substantial proportion due to its status. According to 2024 estimates, 112,722 Ukrainians benefitting from the EU's Temporary Protection Directive were resident in Warsaw (accounting for around 85% of Warsaw's foreign residents).

# Warsaw's initial reflections and approach

The Warsaw Family Support Centre already ran twice-yearly networking sessions between organisations active in the sector of migrant support and human rights, and these actors provided the core of the URBACT Local Group after its creation. Many of these were **NGOs looking for immediate financial support in the face of funding cuts** and wanting to prioritise frontline responses to meeting the urgent needs of people displaced by the war in Ukraine.

However, other areas of potential progress were also identified. This included provisions under the 'Warsaw 2030' local development strategy for the creation of **Neighbourhood Activity Places (known as 'MALs')**. As part of their job description, MALs are designed to “foster the establishment of interpersonal contacts, neighbour integration and cooperation, and the inclusion of newcomers to the local community.” This provides clear links already with the Plan Einstein philosophy and a basis on which to build further activities.

Other potential avenues to be explored include building approaches and activities with the **Warsaw Multicultural Centre**, which is an existing place for activities and dialogue between migrants and the local community – currently managed by the Polish Migration Forum under a three-year contract with the city.

Another possibility could be to bring Plan Einstein into the **public spaces provided under the banner 'Good to See You in Warsaw'** by the Intercultural Centre for Social Development – a space which is managed by the project partner.

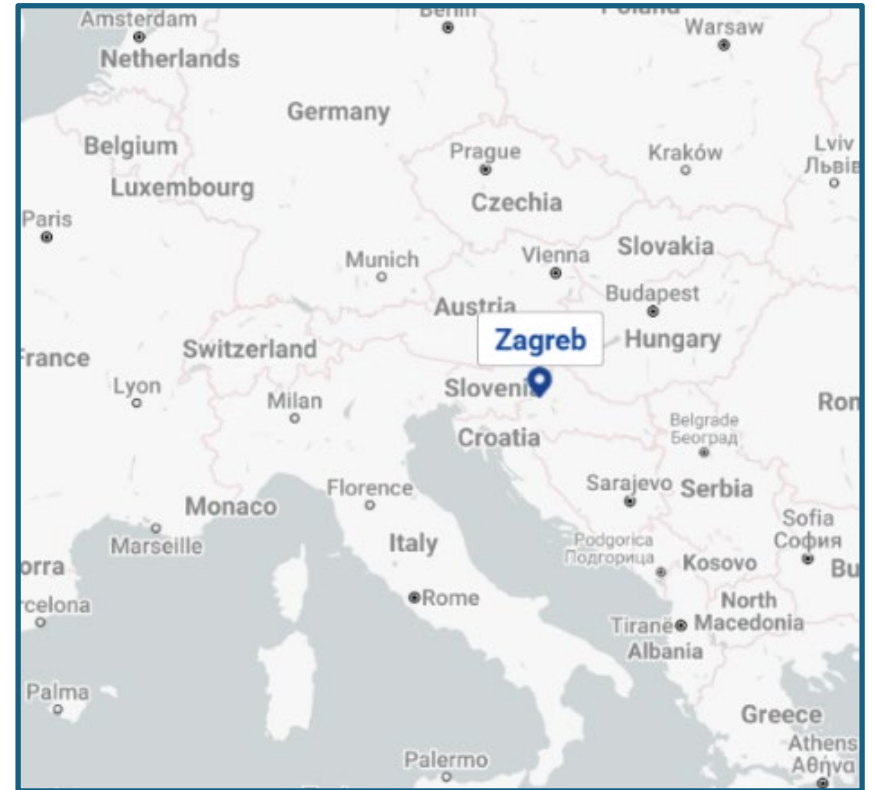
## 5. Zagreb

### Partner profile

Zagreb is the largest and capital city of Croatia, situated close to the northern border with Slovenia. It has a population of around 770,000 and is known as the cultural, scientific, economic, political and administrative centre of the country.

Croatia is often a transit country and the city has been a stopover for many migrants en route to Western Europe from conflict in the Middle East. In this context, Zagreb hosts the Porin Reception Centre – one of the largest asylum seeker facilities in the country, managed by national authorities.

At the same time, the city is seeing the increasing arrival of economic migrants – often working in low-wage sectors such as delivery riders or construction – from countries as diverse as Ukraine, Nepal, Serbia and India. This has created new challenges for the city, including issues of potential exploitation and lack access to rights, as well as issues for integration and local social cohesion.



# Zagreb's initial reflections and approach

The team in Zagreb started off thinking about the **city-wide transfer of Plan Einstein** and was looking at the idea of using the existing multi-stakeholder 'Coordination Group for Integration' as the basis for the URBACT Local Group. This is a group created under the city's first Action Plan for the Integration of Asylum Seekers and Refugees, consisting of four representatives from city administrative bodies and five of migration populations, selected under an open call.

Another early idea was to try to **turn the city's Welcome Centre into a Plan Einstein hub**, with the aim of creating a space for meaningful encounters between local residents and newcomers in the heart of the city.

Other possibilities **included building an ecosystem involving diverse actors already working in the migrant integration sphere**, including the Jesuit Refugee Service, Croatian Red Cross, and the Center for Cultural Dialogue. The idea of turning spaces managed by these organisations into a set of Plan Einstein hubs was also suggested.

The idea of creating **activities focused on or around the Porin Reception Facility was considered unlikely** in a context in which the local authority had no presence in the facility – which is managed exclusively by national authorities – and with tightly controlled access by just two approved NGOs.



## Adapting ‘Plan Einstein’: Initial Overview of Potential Transfer

At the TEX4 meeting in Warsaw in March 2025, the table below was agreed as a first mapping of the potential transfer of Plan Einstein to each of the partner cities. This provides a quick visual summary of the different approaches being explored initially by the diverse transfer partners of the Plan Einstein Academy network.

This visualisation highlights several important aspects. It is clear that spaces and activities for meaningful encounters – as well as an ecosystem approach – are all seen as essential/core components of transfer. At the same time, different cities have slightly different prioritisations between these aspects.

The potential transfer of some of the more optional aspects differs more significantly between the partners. For example, some partners are seriously considering co-housing solutions and policy changes – whilst others have already ruled such ideas out at this stage.

Key: Priority Important Potential Not feasible

	Core Components			Optional Components			
	Spaces for Meaningful Encounters	Activities for Meaningful Encounters	Ecosystem Approach	Policy/strategy	Co-housing	Shelter-focused	Voluntary Migrants
Coimbra							
Suceava							
Thessaloniki							
Warsaw							
Zagreb							

# C. Next steps



## Key activities and topics for the ongoing work of the network

The up-coming key next steps for the Plan Einstein Academy network, Sep-Nov 2025, include:

- ✓ In-person TEX6 Meeting in Zagreb in early October, exploring neighbourhood approaches to implementing Plan Einstein and how to communicate Plan Einstein.
- ✓ Launch of the Network Mid-Term Review from Oct 2025.
- ✓ Development of draft Investment Plans by each partner with their URBACT Local Group
- ✓ Bilateral health checks with each partner, Oct-Nov 2025.
- ✓ Ongoing external communication, including the next network journal and social media.

*Look out for future editions of our network journal as we continue to follow the progress of our partners in developing their approaches to applying Plan Einstein to their own local context and testing local actions...*