

# COMMUNITY ALPHABET CASE STUDY: CREATING A NETWORK OF ACTIVE CITIZENS IN THE CITY OF ÚSTÍ NAD LABEM

“ 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 Valášková likes to say she is an ordinary girl. And while she may have been raised in ordinary circumstances - in a housing estate in north Bohemia, in the post-industrial city of Ústí and Labem - she is, in fact, a civil society powerhouse. Míša is revolutionizing how residents shape and experience the social and physical dimensions of public space in her hometown, and influencing many potential change makers across the Czech Republic.

Ústí and Labem is not an easy place in which to spark change. Unemployment, poverty and exclusion rates are high, while wages and education rates are low. Racist slurs against the city's large Roma population are common. Much of the city's current population arrived after WWII and the expulsion of the native German population.

It is difficult to foster a sense of 'pride of place' in such circumstances. There is a tendency among residents, and some officials, to feel pessimistic about their city, a feeling that is transmitted from generation to generation.

There are at least 50 active citizens' groups in the city, including local associations like gardeners' clubs and informal groups around particular issues, but collaboration among them, or between these groups and local government, has been limited and focused on addressing specific problems or cases of violence.

Míša has long been a part of the fabric of civil society in Ústí. Since 2017, she and two other women have been bringing the Klise district of Ústí alive through neighborhood events with music, theater and food, public space revitalization, and fundraisers. She initiated the Unknown Heroes of Ústí nad Labem, a series of murals reflecting the life stories of interesting inhabitants, to build resident's sense of connection to the city.



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“ 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. ”

In Community Alphabet, Míša was introduced to inclusive approaches such as asset-based community development (ABCD) and participatory mapping. The program's emphasis on engaging with people beyond our normal circles and understanding tension and conflict in those interactions resonated. She met other change makers from across Europe and saw and heard first-hand what other communities were doing.

In the Netherlands, she learned how drawing out residents' strengths and resources can lead to robust networks that multiply the effects of citizen action. Inspired, she set about weaving a network in her own hometown.

## Act I

To begin mapping and connecting groups, formal and informal, active in the social and civic life of Ústí, Míša asked people she knew to help expand her 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 in an open network of groups and individuals open to sharing information about their activities and 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 for 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.

*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.*

*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.*

This was her first step in opening the lines of communication between active residents, highlighting the assets already present in Ústí and encouraging groups to exchange resources for community events.

The first meeting came soon after. 15 people attended, including many she had not met before. Míša presented the ideas of ABCD she had learned about in CA and let people know she wanted network leadership to be shared.



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*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.*  
-Tereza, member of the network



The group 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. To get to know one another better, the group decided to hold in-person meetings once every quarter. Míša noted: 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 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.

Her initiative took off just before Russia invaded Ukraine and refugees flowed to nearby countries. Within a few months, Míša was working with a variety of local groups to plan and coordinate initiatives for incoming Ukrainian children and was on the way to establishing a vibrant, new and very open network of active groups and people in Ústí nad Labem.

## Act II

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. It would serve as input for an online database to further facilitate the sharing of equipment, knowledge and other resources among active citizens in Ústí.

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



*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.* - Míša



Some months later, 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 ways to revise the city's participatory budgeting program to increase citizen involvement in the budgeting process and its outcomes.

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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 with Czech children to facilitate their inclusion into the life of the city and help improve their difficult situation. People took up the call and soon UA members had compiled a list of 13 activities. Míša took this list to the Director of the city's Support Center for Integration to get its help with translation, space and partial financial support, resulting in collaboration on 2 events. A fundraising drive using Via's national giving platform (Darujme.cz) was also initiated, which raised additional funds.



As Míša noted: *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...and we are working with a migrant NGO locally, which is also supporting us.*

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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One of the interests identified by the UA group was to learn about fundraising.



Míša commented: *The aha 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.*



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. It showed me that it is possible to work using local resources, without outside funding.*

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 collected resources.

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.*



Summing up the change, she said:



*The mindset is new to people. It starts with that. Not being dependent on someone else. 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.*



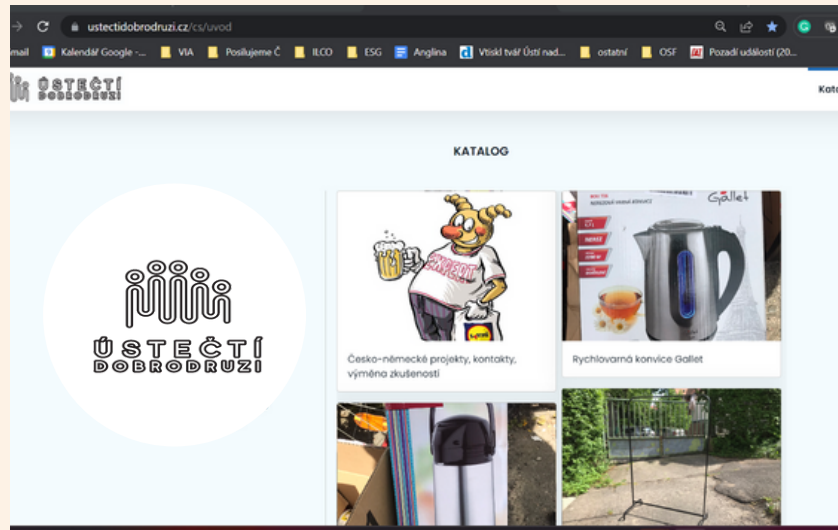
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*It is so motivational being part of UA that I am becoming an optimist instead of a realistic pessimist. -Tereza*



Some months later, the UA website - [ustetidobrodruzi.cz](http://ustetidobrodruzi.cz) - was presented to members. It includes a database of resources (experiences, skills, musical instruments, technical equipment, etc.) that can be shared and an invitation to add new ones. Míša also got a grant from the Ústí Community Foundation to cover some of UA's meeting costs. A professional graphic designer offered to create options for a UA logo at no cost.



## Act III

At the end of the first year, UA members came together to assess what they had achieved together. In just 12 months, they had generated:

- a core group of 30-40 people regularly attending in-person meetings
- a broader group of 132 people who are active online
- 380 contacts in the Ústí community sharing ideas and things, asking for help in realizing activities, and informing one another and the public about what happens in the city and its neighborhoods
- 7 UA meetings 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 provision
- 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.



WED, SEP 18 AT 5 PM

**Komunitní zahrady a jejich význam v době změny klimatu**

Kinozahrada

Shared to ÚSTEČTÍ DOBRODRUŽI

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



Reflecting, UA members recognized the value of the network, both to their own community efforts and to the position of civil society in the city as a whole. Looking forward, they agreed to collaborate even more intensively and offered new ideas to advance the network, e.g.:

- creating a list of contact people at the municipality, district offices and institutions to help citizens who wish to become active but don't know how to link to these offices
- developing a community manual identifying these offices' administrative and legal roles, and the administrative, legal and liability issues of self-organizing events.

They agreed to discuss these ideas with the city's Department of Strategic Planning, which was initiating a new project called Neighborhoods. This department expressed interest and invited UA members to work with the municipality to hold public events about environmental topics in different districts of the city.



*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*



UA used the opportunity to suggest an innovation: 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.

In parallel, Míša presented additional ideas to strengthen the network's value:

- a cultural events calendar to reduce overlap and identify where sharing, assistance or support was possible
- a survey of the full Facebook group about their needs and a list of their volunteer, not-for-profit activities in order to advocate with the mayor for a more cooperative relationship
- holding a Fair of Active People, similar to a social services fair where groups present themselves to others in front of City Hall, to show citizens how many dedicated people there are in Ústí.



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The changes that UA was generating in the city's social fabric corresponded to internal shifts within UA members. For her own part, Míša increasingly appreciated how embracing differences can yield benefits:

*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.*

Míša also perceived changes in how UA members see their role in the community. Realizing they have skills to offer one another, they have started to think and work more collaboratively to animate and engage with residents at neighborhood and city levels. This has increased moral support, confidence and recognition of active groups.

Equally importantly, in her view: **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.*



Míša feels that UA plays another important role: showing citizens how many activities there are in Ústí and encouraging new ones, effectively generating a greater variety of activities, while also encouraging individuals to take active part in community life.

Míša and fellow UA members accelerated this thread the following year by organizing a UA Festival showcasing the varied activities that citizens, groups and institutions lead in the city. The Festival featured 13 NGOs and informal initiatives and 4 city departments and showed *"that there are many people in this city who strive voluntarily and selflessly to improve the quality of life through their activities. People who are willing to cooperate, communicate and are open to new members."*

Significantly, the Festival marked the first time that UA members jointly organized a public event. As they strengthen collaboration within the network, UA is also weaving a cohesive fabric across Ústí that is changing how citizens see and experience their city. There is power in that work, and the future is wide open!

*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.*