

Exchange visit to Bilbao, Basque Country, Spain

Dates: 30 September – 1 October 2025

Project: Support to Frontline Workers (SFW)

REPORT

Context

Under the *Support to Frontline Workers (SFW)* project – implemented within the *Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF)* and funded by the *European Commission (DG HOME)* – a two-day exchange visit was organised in Bilbao, Basque Country, Spain. The project builds on the success of previous initiatives and responds to the expressed needs of governmental partners and civil society organisations for peer-to-peer exchanges among practitioners working directly with migrants in irregular situations.

The relevance of this visit was underscored by the *New Pact on Migration and Asylum*, which calls for more coherent, humane, and sustainable return and reintegration practices across the EU. As Member States prepare their *National Implementation Plans*, the role of local authorities and frontline workers proves increasingly central in reaching undocumented or invisible populations and identifying sustainable case outcomes, including voluntary return.

The SFW project explores how **multi-level collaboration**, as well as local strategies and practices, can inform national and EU frameworks and reflect on the conditions that enable effective, rights-based return counselling.

The exchange visit was designed to:

- Examine how irregularity is approached in the Basque and Spanish context through rights-based, inclusive, and collaborative mechanisms.
- Observe how multi-level governance functions in practice, linking municipal, provincial, regional, and national levels.
- Identify models, tools, and practices relevant to frontline engagement, case management, and outreach to people in irregular situations.
- Promote reflection among participants on how these approaches can inform their own institutional and operational settings.
- Encounter every level working on the topic of irregularity and case management: From the view of the central government of Spain to policy-focused Basque region government, Bizkaia Provincial Council, the Bilbao municipality, to NGOs and diaspora organisations.

Participants were invited to analyse: data collection and use; the functioning of multi-level coordination; the roles of NGOs and migrant associations; and the link between inclusion, access to rights, and sustainable case outcomes.

Background

Spain, as a decentralised country, has different models. In this case, the Basque Region—and Bilbao specifically—were selected due to their advanced model of social protection and inclusion across their range of multi-level governance, grounded in the principle of “ciudadanía de residencia” (citizenship of residence). This model ensures access to basic services—such as health, education, and social assistance—regardless of legal status. In addition to ensuring access to basic services within the national legal framework, the Basque model also deepens and operationalises rights that are not always clearly defined at the state level, particularly regarding people in an irregular administrative situation.

The Basque approach recognises migration as a structural and enriching phenomenon, rooted in diversity as a source of social cohesion and sustainable development. Its long-standing Social Pact on Migration, a consistent perspective on human rights and citizenship, and a political narrative of “being protected and welcome” have provided the foundations for durable, multi-level collaboration between government, local authorities, and civil society actors.

Participants were encouraged to analyse how the Basque and Spanish model, and the implementation of it in the Bilbao municipal and NGO space, enables connectivity, inclusion, and agency for migrants while providing reliable feedback channels for evidence-based policymaking.

Data management

A starting point to the visit was provided by IKUSPEGI – the Basque Immigration Observatory, which presented how data underpins policy decisions in the region. IKUSPEGI’s data analysis helps shape the Basque Government’s strategic narrative on diversity and supports multi-level policy coordination.

Quantitative as well as qualitative data are gathered from multiple sources – municipal registration (*Padrón*), administrative records, and NGO inputs – and are fully anonymised.

- A strong legal framework ensures a **firewall mechanism** between social service data and immigration enforcement, allowing migrants in irregular situations to register and access services without fear of exposure.
 - The *Padrón municipal* not only functions an administrative register. It is also a legal right and duty for all residents, regardless of their administrative status. In practice, registration provides access to essential public services and is a key gateway to social rights for people in an irregular situation, including support services for social inclusion, enabling access to healthcare, education, and housing support.
- Grassroots organisations, including diaspora associations, also feed into this evidence system, ensuring that qualitative, bottom-up insights inform decisions.

The profile most prevalent as irregular migrant are from Latin-America. Maghreb migrants follow by long distance as primary non-Latin American migrants. It is noted by participants that this potentially affected policy decisions and tolerance levels of the local population (very high).

Multi-level collaboration

Multi-level collaboration in the Basque country operates through fixed coordination tables and thematic taskforces linking municipalities (as first contact points for migrants), the Basque Government (frameworks, funding, guidance), the State Sub-delegation (national alignment), and civil society (bottom-up intelligence) and academia. The coordination practices vary in formality and frequency; some mechanisms are well-established and institutionalized, while others rely on more flexible or ad hoc collaboration among actors.

The Basque model exemplifies a *mature* multi-level collaboration system between local, provincial, regional, and national authorities, complemented by NGOs and community-based actors.

In practice:

- The **Harreragune** (see below), as a **physical space** of crossroads, maintains a “governance roadmap” that formalises roles, monthly coordination and shared tools, turning cooperation into daily practice.
- Multi-level collaboration operates through a dense architecture of **regular and thematic network meetings**. Coordination practices and dialogue spaces vary across governance levels, some being more institutionalized and regular, others more emerging or informal.

The system is sustained by a **shared narrative** - as a tool for multi-level collaboration - and mutual accountability mechanisms rather than hierarchical control: **municipalities** such as Bilbao act as the immediate contact point for residents, the **Basque Government** provides funding, legal frameworks and technical guidance. The **State Delegation** ensures that national policies remain aligned, though without much direct localised interaction (which for some centralised programmes, such as AVRR, can be considered a challenge in terms of efficacy and reach). There are **continuous feedback loops** where **NGOs and grassroots associations** inform policy adjustments **from the ground up**.

The shared strategic narrative offers a discourse bridge for a layered, “**network-of-networks**” **approach**, enabling consistent support structures to govern locally flexible activities.

Good Practice 1: Harreragune – Integrated Reception and Referral Service

Born from a request by the 24/7 **Municipal Social Emergency Services (SMUS)**, **Harreragune** as a physical space continues the pathway from emergency stabilisation to medium-term integration steps. SMUS and Harreragune have complementary but different scopes: the former focuses on emergency and homelessness care and urgencies, while Harreragune is a new reception hub, a one-stop-desk, created as a pilot by the Basque Government and the city of Bilbao, with the intention of extending this model to other cities in the Basque Country.

Harreragune provides a centralised place in the city connects people to registration, vocational training/employment services, language and social activities, and diaspora/community networks, using intercultural mediators and a citywide service-mapping tool for warm referrals.

- The Harreragune centre represents a cornerstone of Bilbao’s reception and integration system.
- It offers one-stop support to connect beneficiaries with municipal services, NGOs, and community actors.
- Uses intercultural mediators to facilitate access and trust-building.
- Focuses on core functions: registration, linkage to employment or vocational training, connection to community and social activities, and introduction to diaspora and neighbourhood networks.
- Cooperates closely with SMUS and Lanbide (employment services) to ensure seamless progression from emergency assistance to longer-term integration.
- Harreragune embodies the **“city as connector” concept**, facilitating both service access and social belonging. The physical space itself plays an important symbolic role in inclusion, language learning, and social participation. Inclusion and integration go hand in hand.
- The service makes sure that they are not only connected to NGO actors providing guidance, but all relevant services in the city – such as banks (they invite them to provide training sessions as a means to link them).

Good practice 2: **Systematic networks managed by the Basque region**

The Basque Government manages a **cluster of interlinked networks**, covering diverse themes and target groups.

These networks:

- Operate on both **regular** and **on-demand** bases, allowing for systematic dialogue and targeted activation.
- Aim to maintain an overview of ongoing developments, detect needs, and channel input from the local level into strategic decision-making.
- Bring together administrative entities, NGOs, and social partners in a shared governance model.

The Basque Inter-Institutional Commission on Migration, provincial councils, and municipal coordination tables (which also manage neighbourhood and diaspora groups) meet at fixed intervals, while issue-specific taskforces—such as those on housing, youth inclusion, or irregularity—are activated when new challenges arise. Local administrations feed information from the field through these channels, supported by academic partners like IKUSPEGI and civil-society observatories.

This system ensures that multi-level collaboration is a **structured mechanism** for coordination, reflection, and joint problem-solving, with flexibility that easily allows ad-hoc arrangements to take place.

Additional elements encountered

Inclusion

A consistent feature across all programmes is the focus on **interaction as integration function as a precondition for inclusion**. Physical meeting spaces, language learning, and cultural activities are embedded in most interventions. Without these, isolation and vulnerability persist.

The *Lanbide Programme W* illustrates this integration of labour and social inclusion: economic participation is linked to social and educational support, reinforcing beneficiaries' sense of belonging and self-worth.

Strategic narratives can depolarise

Data collection through the *Padrón*, and observatories such as IKUSPEGI provides proof that the local communities overall accept legalisation procedures. This links up with the strategic narrative of the Basque Country that focuses on protection and inclusion to society and communities, framing migration as part life rather to be allowed based on merit/exceptional circumstances. This narrative coherence, clearly shared throughout all levels of the local collaboration mechanics, contributes to depoliticising migration management and fosters continuity across political cycles. This leads to more trust and coherent support mechanisms, beneficial to long term case resolution – whatever the migration pathway may lead to.

As part of the visit, a discussion moment between NGOs and our group of national representatives was facilitated. Because there is such a diversity of European perspectives on irregularity and AVRR activities, all parties appreciated the rare moment to exchange and understand each other's views on these topics.

Diaspora organisations managed through local councils

Diaspora organisations play a key bridging role in Bilbao. Coordinated through the Local Immigration Council, they:

- Welcome newly arrived migrants and help them navigate local systems.
- Identify and communicate community needs to the authorities.
- Counter misinformation and build mutual understanding in neighbourhoods.
- Represent an institutionalised channel for dialogue between communities and government.

Approaches to irregularity and voluntary return

Irregularity is treated as a temporary, solvable administrative situation; *arraigo* (reforms of 2024–2025 that have expanded regularisation opportunities, reflecting Spain's pragmatic approach to long-term integration) and related routes allow transition to legality through residence, work/training or family/community ties.

On AVRR, actors do not exclude the option; information is provided upon request and framed within a broader discussion on stability, rights and future plans. Some NGOs consider the term “voluntary” potentially misleading, yet remain open to discussing it when beneficiaries express interest - consistent with a self-agency, rights-based counselling ethos.

Tailor-made pathways for self-agency and durable case management

Across initiatives such as *Gohabe*, *Trapezistak*, and *Peñascal Cooperative* – recipients of support by multiple government entities – a clear pattern emerged: individualised, comprehensive pathways combining skill-building, psychosocial support, and community participation. Programmes recognise that resilience and long-term integration stem from self-

agency, reinforced by inclusive environments, language training to promote interaction, and sustained mentorship.

Homelessness

Several exchanges - particularly with the *Municipal Emergency Social Services (SMUS)* and the NGO discussion group at *Arrupe Etxea* - highlighted how homelessness and irregularity often intersect. The Basque model addresses this by combining 24/7 emergency assistance by the social and other essential services, with structured referral pathways that relates to the cities integration efforts. So once immediate shelter and health needs are stabilised, beneficiaries are referred to *Harreragune* for registration, counselling, and integration steps.

However, to be able to enter into this case resolution pathway, homelessness remains the biggest hurdle without a clearcut solution when there are administrative issues. SMUS has been operating beyond its capacity, leaving some individuals in street situations. *Harreragune* remains accessible to them, focusing on legal counselling, language learning, and community participation, while direct social assistance is handled by other services.

Main takeaways from participants

Participating Representatives from RRF Member State Authorities and NGOs

- **Belgium:** Representative from *Fedasil*
- **Denmark:** Representatives from the *Danish Return Agency* and the *Danish Refugee Council*
- **Finland:** Representative from the *Finnish Immigration Service*
- **Ireland:** Representatives from *Immigration Service Delivery*
- **Switzerland:** Representatives from the *State Secretariat for Migration (SEM)* and the *Canton of Zurich*
- **Italy:** Representative from the *Ministry of Interior*
- **Germany:** Representatives from *Raphaelswerk* and *LAF*
- **Malta:** Representative from the *Ministry for Home Affairs, Security and Employment*

This chapter summarises the outcomes of the group’s closing exercise on what are the most remarkable learnings throughout the visit, taking into account their own context.

Perspectives on irregularity: primarily all actors have a welcoming attitude (reflected as well in laws); focus on inclusion rather than return; irregularity seen as temporary; *Padrón* as database/gateway is of strong interest for national representatives; high community acceptance linked to labour-market needs; explicit focus on including younger migrants.

Multi-level collaboration: shared needs assessments; aligned interests across levels; human-rights/intercultural principles; recognition of equal standards across the territory; operational “one-stop” roadmaps.

One-stop desks: strong service mapping (e.g., *Harreragune*); word-of-mouth via trusted actors; cultural sensitivity and mediation; involvement of foreign-community leaders; open to everyone and “without fear” (firewall); social media presence; single space enabling durable case-management.

Conclusions

- **Inclusion as prevention:** Ensuring access to rights and services from the start reduces vulnerability, homelessness, and long-term irregularity. This in its turn is beneficial for long-term decision making, including voluntary return.
- **Multi-level coherence:** Clear division of roles between municipal, provincial, regional, and state levels creates trust, collaboration and consistency. It offers a reach deep into different lived realities of (newly arrived) migrants in the city.
- **The role of strategic & shared narratives:** Hand in hand with multi-level coherence, constructing strategic and shared narratives helps bridge differing perspectives and fosters a sense of common purpose in addressing the challenges related to irregular migration and case management. As a narrative framework, by establishing a shared space in discourse and respecting different points of view within, dialogue can be established, and as such offers itself as an essential cog within the collaborative system.
- **Frontline empowerment:** Well-resourced, trained, and networked frontline workers are essential in linking individuals to services, building trust, and relaying evidence from the ground to policymakers. To empower them, they are not only to be trained as in psycho-socio-cultural skills, but also enforced by being actively and collaboratively connected to a large network of societal actors.
- **Evidence-based policy:** Continuous data collection and protection through strong firewall mechanisms create the opportunity to enable both humane practice and informed governance.
- **Balanced options:** Pathways such as *arraigo* and voluntary return are meaningful only when offered within a broader framework of stability, self-agency, and informed choice.
- **Transferability:** While deeply rooted in the Basque institutional culture, elements of this model - firewall safeguards, one-stop services, structured inter-institutional networks - are adaptable and can inform EU-wide return and reintegration efforts.

Institutions and organisations met

City of Bilbao; Basque Government; Local 2030 Coalition - UN; IKUSPEGI; SMUS; Lanbide; Harreragune; Arrupe Etxea & several NGOs; Local Immigration Council; Spanish Government - Subdelegation in Bizkaia; Diputación de Bizkaia; Peñascal Cooperative; Trapezistak; Diversitours.