

HOMELESSNESS IN BULGARIA

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Prepared for FEANTSA – September 2003

In 2001 Bulgaria (with a population a little bit less than 8 millions people) disposes with around 3,7 millions dwelling places. According to this data, there are somewhat more than 460 dwelling places per 1000 people of the population. (that is, higher than the European average). Data from the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works shows that the structure of the dwelling places according to their size is as follows: 57,2% are with size from 30 to 59 square meters; 25,3% are with size below 30 square meters, 14,5% are with size among 60 and 89 square meters and only around 3% are more than 90 square meters big.

The living space per person is a little bit more than 15 square meters in towns and around 22 square meters in villages.

The main part (96,6%) of the dwelling places is individual private property and ownership is largely dispersed between a big number of owners.

Many different factors have contributed to this situation. Probably most of them were specific of the “socialist period”, for instance - construction of houses was main field of economic activity, were a combination of private investments, private ownership, individual initiative and in some extent - entrepreneurship, was tolerated.

1. The actual state of access to housing

Having in mind the above-mentioned data, the phenomenon “homelessness” does not seem particularly severe and “visible” in Bulgaria. At least, this is its usual evaluation by policy makers, civil society structures and even researchers. The reason most probably is in the specifics of the first phase of the phenomenon’s dynamics during the transition – that is the current emergence of the problem. It could be said that this specifics concerns beforehand the reasons for homelessness. More concretely, the restricted economic opportunities (incomes) of the population are still not transformed into a leading reason for the restricted access to housing, despite the sharp impoverishment of a big part of the

population. The main part of the population still lives with the “inheritance” from the past, when a significant housing has been accumulated.

Consequently the inherited housing serves as a buffer between the low incomes (poverty, impoverishment) and the access to housing and prevents the transformation of low incomes into a basic factor for reduced access to housing. Thus, during the current period the restriction of the access to housing is rather demonstrated in the inability to maintain the available housing and its rapid amortization, instead into a homelessness. The relatively high degree of social exclusion is not still expressed directly in the exclusion from housing. The low level of house taxation and the practical lack of housing insurances artificially maintain this situation.

That is why studies reveal that lack of own house is provoked by reasons that seem to be specific for the transitional period: frauds, combined with low level of property rights protection; unsuccessful attempts to start individual business through bank credits and as a consequence - ruining; disintegration of families and households; violence in the family. In some cases young people become homeless, because after a certain age they have to live the special social institutions were they have been accepted in their childhood.

Nevertheless, cases of homelessness, provoked by restricted access to housing are still relatively rare, although basic factors of housing exclusion are enforced. Studies of poverty demonstrate that poor people usually possess their own houses. And even deprivation of own houses is not immediately transformed into real (visible) homelessness, because of the large amount of houses and dispersed ownership of houses.

On the other hand, the turbulent social changes engender other social problems that press the homelessness in the background.

Due to this the homelessness is not among the priorities of the social policy of the country. There is no homelessness service sector in Bulgaria. Homeless people seldom appear in the list of the most vulnerable groups. In basic governmental documents (for example Strategy for poverty reduction) homelessness is even not formulated, if we do not count the rather formally presented ideas for building of social houses. But even these ideas are based mainly on other considerations – for example, to provide better houses for Roma people (who usually live in bad conditions) or to provide employment for the

unemployed through the new building schemes, instead on the identification of the social problem “homelessness”. The housing policy is the most underdeveloped component of the social policy.

Similar is the state of the Third sector, where only a few non-governmental organizations (from totally more than 8000 NGOs) are engaged incidentally with the problem. To a big degree this lack of interest is due as well to the donors’ policies (the problem of homelessness is lacking in their programs) as NGOs often adapt their activities to the donors’ programs.

2. Homeless people are “invisible”

Homelessness in Bulgaria is extremely difficult personal situation. Its usual effects are multiplied by the lack of any normative framework, concerning this phenomenon and as a consequence – the lack of administrative capacity to cope with this situation. For instance, the social services servants cannot identify people that need assistance, without permanent home address. Administrative procedures and official documents, which are necessary for the provision of some kind of assistance to the poor people also require home address. And obviously in the situation of homelessness there is no possibility to provide a permanent address. It is impossible to be hired without documents for personal identification (personal card, passport) but homeless people often do not have such documents. Something more, acquisition of such documents is impossible without permanent home address. In this way sometimes arises a specific vicious circle and homeless people cannot break this circle.

The lack of permanent address provokes also exclusion from the list of voters etc. Since the permanent address (that is home) plays very important role in the administrative system, homeless people literally disappear without home address; they don’t exist for different state agencies, especially services for social assistance, labor offices, health cares, education etc. and in this way namely people which are experiencing extreme need, cannot receive help. Homeless people have little chances to survive under these conditions.

3. The expected scenario: increasing of housing exclusion

It could be said, that in the described situation the Bulgarian society overlooks the stage of the emergence of the phenomenon. What is more, the current social dynamics preconditions exclusively big scales of this phenomenon in the near future.

On one side, the opportunities of the inherited housing to serve as a buffer between the low incomes and the access to housing are more and more restricted. It could be expected that the access to the housing will be drastically reduced with the restriction of these opportunities, especially having in mind that the economic perspectives of the country are not good.

The social changes have created a strange and inconsistent combination between: (almost) missing middle class, underdeveloped market economy and widespread private ownership of houses – the most important investment of the middle class in developed market economies. This combination is not stable and a process of changes already starts. First aspects of these changes are: abandonment of houses; physical erosion (degradation) of the existing fund of private houses; transformation of houses for other needs; concentration of the ownership of houses. These changes, combined with a low level of construction of new houses will reduce the existing fund of houses and the access to houses.

There are enough indices for these changes. For instance - the large number of houses/apartments that are uninhabited being either located in unattractive regions or unsuitable for living. According to some data around 14-15% from the dwelling places in the country are not inhabited (being 4-5% average in the developed market economies). Almost one forth of the dwelling places is uninhabited in some regions of the country. Another reason (except emigration) for the large number of uninhabited dwelling places is the housing unfitness. A significant part of the dwelling places are evaluated as primitive and with very bad conditions (around 10 300 in 2003) Together with this there are around 170 000 housings that are estimated as overpopulated. This means that there is a demand of around 180 000 social houses/apartments despite the big numbers of housings.

According to some evaluations at least 10% from the so called “panel” housing have become dangerous and are in need of urgent repair.

Despite this there is a clearly observed tendency in the dynamics of the classic indicators of access to housing, which are much worse than the analogous indicators in the countries with developed market economies. For example, the distance between the price of housing and the annual income rapidly increases: in 1989, 2.8 average annual incomes were necessary to buy an “average housing”, while in 2002, 7 annual incomes were necessary for an average household to buy a house/apartment of 72 square meters. This indicator is 2 times higher in Sofia. What is more, it is important to keep in mind that because of the high income differentiation in the country and the practical lack of middle class, the concept “average household” at the moment does not have a real social structural correlate. In the current period only 10% of the identified aspirations to buy a house/apartment do correspond to the solvency. The remaining 90% from these housing aspirations could not be satisfied through solvent demand. Approximately the same is the share of the solvent people to all that would like to rent a house.

The expenses for house maintenance in the last 10 years have not exceeded to more than 16.4% from the average household income, whereas the food costs have ranged between 38% and 54%. Experts consider that due to the deep impoverishment and the deformed structure of the consumer costs, the disposable means for acquiring or maintaining the houses have fallen below the critical minimum. The significance of credit instruments for facilitating the access to housing is restricted as well. In such conditions the share of the “pseudo-owners” – persons who could not maintain their property in the current conditions, rapidly increases as well.

On the other hand, the same economic factors and particularly – the underdeveloped housing market prevent the uninhabited housing to meet the needs of housing.

The lack of adequate institutional framework for housing will also contribute to the increasing of homelessness.

Future increasing of homeless people could be provoked by some institutional changes. Most important of these changes is the intended reform of the existing social institutions for some vulnerable and deprived groups – especially children that (due to

different reasons) are deprived of parental and familial support and cares. A large number of homeless people could appear if the implementation of this reform is not completely successful.

4. State of the research

This state of affairs influences the scientific researches as well. Within the described context the main problems connected with housing are interpreted as problems of: bad housing, overpopulated dwelling place, urban architecture and development or as problems of a particular ethnic group (the problems of the Roma houses in the cities' ghettos), but not as problems of homelessness. That is why on one hand, the information on homelessness could be found out more in non- specialized studies – such as those devoted to: poverty and social policy; living conditions; Roma social integration; studies on the family crises, family violence, Youth and Women studies; regional development etc.

In the above-mentioned studies homelessness is more or less peripheral problem. Specialized studies on homelessness are comparatively few and generally are in their initial stage of development. Comparing Bulgarian studies with the transition of the research of FEANTSA's Observatory from descriptive research to policy oriented and pro-active research, we can conclude that Bulgarian studies are in the beginning of “descriptive stage” of development. But as it has already mentioned, existing studies did not accumulate enough descriptive information about homelessness. In the Institute of Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, only 1-2 researches have been devoted to Homelessness. As far as I know such researches are not conducted in the universities as well. The homeless are not identified and clearly described as a significant group that needs special attention. As a whole studies on homelessness till now do not succeed to attract the attention of politicians and public audience.

As a result we simply do not know enough for the phenomenon “homelessness” – numbers, share, structure of homeless etc. We do not know enough for the reasons of its emergence and clear visions for purposeful influence upon this target group are not available.

5. The need of studies

Within the framework of the described tendencies a comparatively rapid increasing of homelessness could be expected. On one side it will most probably develop towards the usual model in market economies. But on the other hand it will have dimensions that will surpass the scale of homelessness in the developed countries.

However, currently Bulgaria disposes neither with policies nor with normative – institutional framework through which to meet the challenges of such a scenario. That is why a transition to more intensive policy oriented research is necessary. From this point of view the current status of studies on homelessness is hardly adequate to the above mentioned expectations. A systematic accumulation of knowledge about this social phenomenon is highly necessary – both for the aims of elaborating political measures and because the specific conditions of the Bulgarian transformation could reveal a variety of interesting aspects of the phenomenon.

A particular risk is hidden in the fact that this problem is still not identified, the society is not well informed about it and visions for eventual interventions of different social actors are missing. However, the internal Bulgarian sources for social studies financing still do not show particular interest in such type of researches. And this is not strange in the context of an obvious collapse of the financing of researches in social sciences.

That is why the transfer of know-how and information from EU, the development of joint researches and the inclusion of Bulgaria in the European Observatory on Homelessness are very important component of the efforts for the integration of the country in EU.

6. Research potential

Bulgaria disposes with enough research potential that allows the country to resolve successfully two important tasks: first, to provide acceptable description of homelessness through systematization of data that are dispersed in different researches and conducting some small researches in order to complement missing data; second, to develop policy oriented and pro-active studies of homelessness.

