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**European Observatory on Homelessness: Thematic Report
2006 - Latvia**

Public space, homelessness and use of public space in Latvia

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December 2006

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Introduction

Homeless person in translation to Latvian means: "*bezpajumtnieks*" – direct meaning is "person without a roof above his head". It means that a term "roofless" is a more adequate term to be used. The Dictionary of the Latvian language gives several meanings to this term - "an unsheltered person", "person without permanent place of living" or "vagabond". In the Latvian language there are two genders, but the term "roofless" is used mainly in masculine. It has another meaning, which is not in the direct translation, but which is used in the Dictionary of the Latvian language. There is another term "*bomzis*", which is used more often than a literary term "*roofless*". This term has come to the Latvian language from the Russian term "*bomzh*", which comes from ex-Soviet Union and means "person without a fixed living place". This term has appeared to the Latvian language in mid 1980-ies and usually this term included such categories or population as ex-prisoners, "travelers" who did not want to "live a life or a good Soviet citizen – fulfill their duty of a "citizen" - work for the victory of communism", chronic alcoholics and categories of deviant persons.

The meaning of the term *bomzh* has changed during the 1990s. In the beginning of 1990-ies it has meant mainly deviant persons who were living in summer houses, in the basements or attics of living houses, boondocks who abuse alcohol. The Dictionary of the literary Latvian language does not give the meanings to the term "*bomzis*".

The Dictionary of the Latvian literary language gives the following explanation for the term "*publiski*" (public, *adv.*). The adverb has two meanings – (1)"Public – something that happens for public, what society can see and hear; (2)"accessible to everyone, open, exposed to everyone".

Public space does not have one concrete single meaning, it is a rather broad entity. In Latvia urban "public space" is mainly used in three main meanings:

1. open air public space - public squares and parks, non-covered railway stations, bus stations, markets, sport stadiums;

2. public space covered with roof - public buildings - municipal and government administration buildings, railway stations, bus stations, polyclinics, hospitals, cinemas, theatres, museums, etc.
3. public transportation.

Each type of urban public space should be available for public.

Study “Use of public space by roofless persons” is based on several interviews, which are divided into two groups – expert interviews and interviews with roofless persons.

Expert interviews include interviews with

1. municipal policeman, head of Unit, small town
2. head of night shelter in a big city
3. head of night shelter of religious organization in the capital
4. employee, Dept. of Welfare, Riga City Council.

In order to find out opinions concerning the use of public space by the roofless persons, several interviews have been performed with the following types of homeless:

- pensioners who live in the night shelter of a small town of Latvia;
- roofless person who has chosen to live illegal life individually, not staying in the shelter;
- roofless persons who use to stay at the night shelter.

The first category of roofless persons include mainly elderly retired single persons who have lost their housing (living space) due to high rent at denationalized housing, low pensions and inability to cover the housing costs and heating costs in winter time.

The second category includes two subcategories of population – ex-prisoners and deviant persons who have no housing, persons who have regular alcohol problems.

Third group – includes the same groups – ex-prisoners, deviant persons, alcoholics, mainly unemployed persons. Recently a new category of persons has appeared in the night shelters – evicted persons from their housing. They usually are employed and use shelter as dormitory. One expert says: “when the person leaves the shelter in the morning or returns in the evening, you can never imagine that he or she is homeless”.

Characteristics of homeless respondents

| Name | Gender | Age | Time of being roofless |
|----------|--------|-----|------------------------|
| Eduards | Male | 52 | 7 |
| Yurij | Male | 47 | 15 |
| Laimonis | Male | 53 | 4 |
| Svetlana | Female | 50 | 6 |
| Vita | Female | 57 | 3 |

In order to find out how the groups of roofless persons use the public space, several interviews have been done. Expert interviews and interviews with roofless persons took place in the following cities - Ventspils, Liepaja, Tukums and Riga.

On one hand, expert interviews in various urban settlements – small town, large city (regional centre) and capital city provides with richer information about the possibilities to use public space. On the other hand, probably concentration of expert interviews in capital city might give more precise information about the use of public space in the capital city.

Expert interviews were based on questions about the characteristics of roofless population, general behavioural patterns of roofless people, access to public space and existence of any legal limitations of public space for some categories of socially excluded population.

Interviews with roofless persons mainly concentrated on the main problems that roofless persons have faced and how these problems could be solved, and whether they have faced limitations in the public space.

A fragment from an interview with a Master student of MBA is used. The student had to make a social experiment – to change her appearance as roofless person and to behave as a roofless person when using public space.

Results from the expert interviews

On the bases of the expert interviews it is possible to make a classification of the roofless population. Some 5-6 years ago the roofless population has been more

homogenous, when the majority of roofless have been people for whom being roofless has been a lifestyle, and those people can be characterized by long term unemployment and alcohol abuse. Some of roofless are ex-prisoners who are not able to find a job and living space (further in the text as category No.1). Recently a new category of roofless persons have appeared. These are people who have been evicted from their apartments as a result of debts for rent and communal payments, or who have become victims of fraud of dishonest brokers, or who have been evicted from the denationalized buildings and who are not able to buy or rent a new apartment because of poverty (category No 2). This category of people is very different from the “typical” roofless population. The director of night shelter emphasizes: “when these people leave the night shelter and go to work, one could never imagine that they stay in the shelter. We have men who wear a tie when leaving the shelter and going to work. Also women – you could never imagine that they stay in shelter. Well, but they are minority”.

In a shelter of a small town the majority of roofless are poor pensioners (category 3):

“This is more like a social house than a shelter. The people who stay here are poor pensioners”.

When asked about the access to public space, the directors of night shelter say that they do not see any limitations for roofless people to use free public space or covered public space. They emphasize that there are no limitations for roofless persons as such. The problem might be the behaviour of the first category of roofless. In general there are two groups who might break the laws – those who drink alcohol in public space, and those who are begging on the streets.

Alcohol use in public space is prohibited, and according to regulations, a person who uses alcohol on streets should be taken to police.

Begging is prohibited, and persons who are begging, also have to be taken to the police. These are the main cases when the use of non-covered public space is limited for the roofless.

Behaviour that is publicly unacceptable might be the main reason why roofless may not use the public space like parks, squares, etc. Head of the Police Unit emphasizes that police do not limit the use of public space to the roofless:

“There are a few exceptions only – when the “bomzis” are drunk, make noise or behave improperly. Otherwise, they may sit in the park or bus station without any limitation. When they are drunk and sleep on the street, we try to take them away. But the idea behind it is not limitation of public space of the “bomzis”. It really looks ugly when a drunk person sleeps somewhere on the street”. He continues: “We know where they concentrate. If they sit in a bus station or railway station, we do not disturb them. Well, but when they start to drink in the bus station or in the square in front of the kindergarten, we have to move them away...To conclude – public space “per se” is not limited for them. It is limited for activities that are not publicly accepted”.

Employee from the Welfare department stressed that places for public use like museum or cinema is not forbidden for roofless persons.

“However, people have to pay the entrance fees there. If it is for free roofless persons may enter museum or cinema. If the person “seems to look strange”, it is not reason why he or she is not let in. The museum custodian “will follow the strange person with suspicion”, but will not ask to leave the museum”.

She emphasizes that during the cold weather (minus 20 degrees or colder) the administration buildings of municipality are opened for roofless where they may stay overnight.

The representative of the Riga City Council S.R. says that roofless persons have sufficient information about the possibilities to stay overnight in warm public spaces . Information is provided by policemen, social workers, in the soup kitchens and other places. There is a question – whether and how the roofless persons can get to the night shelters because of alcohol abuse, sick or weak.

Riga City had elaborated a programme how to support roofless persons during the cold weather. Policemen had a duty to keep eye on people on the streets and in case of necessity to take them to a warm place or to the night shelter.

“During the cold weather conditions the night shelters accept people also during the day time. If the cold is minus 20 degrees or colder, other public places use to be opened during the night time, for example bus station, administrative buildings of municipalities, Riga City Council”.

However, the Riga City Council was opened for roofless people only for one night. Afterwards, it was closed for the homeless. The churches are incited to open the donors to the roofless people.

The homeless persons have access to four night shelters in Riga. However, it is quite often that roofless persons choose to stay outside the night shelters even during the winter season, including the very cold time when the temperatures have reached even minus 27 degrees. The main reason for staying outside the shelter is alcohol abuse and there are several restrictions. The interview with the head of the night shelter of religious organization „The Blue Cross” Mr. K.D. shows that there are some roofless people who refuse to stay in the night shelter:

„There are some people who do not want to stay in shelter and that’s it. There were a couple of people who lived 200 meters from the night shelter, they made fire every day. We invited them to shelter, in the warmth, but they refused”.

However, the politicians emphasize the individual responsibility about himself/herself and their relatives. Politicians do not see the responsibility of state institutions for those who have frozen to death.

Use of “public space covered with roof” like libraries, museums, polyclinics differs depending on appearance and behaviour of the roofless people. If the appearance of the persons is poor, but not dirty or “smelling badly” there are no limitations to enter any public space where the entrance is for free. There are two main obstacles to enter and use the public space – dirty appearance and bad smell, and improper behaviour. Night shelters usually offer medical services. However, according to the expert interviews, the idea behind inviting doctor to the night shelter is not related with limitations of public space to homeless persons.

“We invite the doctor to the shelter because “Bomzis” will probably let the doctor see him. He will not go to polyclinics himself for various reasons – laziness, fear to go to polyclinics, not willing to wait in line, and of course, because of payment for the visit. On the other hand, of course, if some doctor has “bomzis” as patients, the other patients might change the doctor because of the fear to get some “bad disease””.

The interview shows that in reality the use of some public space is limited to homeless because of strong stereotypes and some kind of fear from homeless because of their lifestyle diseases. At the same time it is important to emphasize that it concerns only to the first category of roofless persons.

Use of public transportation

Use of public transportation is available to anybody who can pay for the ride. If person is paying for the ticket there should not be any limitations to use the transportation. However, if the person is drunk, behave improperly; he/she might not use public transportation. According to expert interviews, in cases, when a person is dressed in very dirty cloth or smells badly, other passengers try to avoid to stand close or to sit next to “stranger”, but loudly nothing is usually said. The student who has participated in the social experiment and has entered a tram when dressed in a dirty cloth and was dirty herself told that she has felt very ashamed and has felt strong condemnation from the side of other passengers. However, she says:

“Nobody has said any single word to me. Everybody looked at me, shrinked seeing me and tried to move away from me. I felt really very badly – being as “homeless bomzis””.

Results from the interviews with roofless persons

The interviews with the homeless people took place during the spring and summer season when majority of homeless did not stay in the night shelters during the night. Some of them lived with friends or lived in attics or basements or self made carbon “buildings”. During the interviews the respondents told about their homelessness history, the reasons of becoming homeless, about their lives while being homeless, about their efforts to survive, their knowledge of existing system of social support and their experience contacting social workers, State Agency of Employment.

Respondents were asked questions about their use of public space and whether they have experienced limited access or no access to public space.

As mentioned earlier, 5 interviews with homeless persons were performed: 3 male and 2 female. Two respondents were Latvian, and three respondents had Russian background, and the interviews homeless people were within the age group 45-57. There are no interviews with younger respondents. Probably, their responses might show a different perspective of homelessness problem.

Interview with Eduards (Ventspils) shows that he has had mainly good people surrounding him. He has been homeless about 10 years, since he returned from prison after having accident as a driver of a truck. His wife had left him and did not let him into the apartment after imprisonment. He describes his situation:

“I had no money to change my old Soviet passport to the new Latvian passport and had no money to change my old driver’s license to the new one. Therefore I had no legal access to social services or to my occupation as driver”.

He has settled in the attics of the five storeys Soviet style building. When people have realized that he is not a thief, but just unhappy person, they started to help him – somebody has given a blanket, somebody even an old bed and a cabinet and a small mirror. Sometimes somebody leaves some food for him.

“I arrive to my place in the evening and go to bed. In the morning I wake up when people on the fifth floor start their morning activities. Then I shave and go to the market place where I beg for some hours. Somebody gives me money; somebody gives some vegetables or some bread. Nobody kicks me or chases me away. Then I go to the market toilet and wash myself”.

After having breakfast somewhere in the square he starts the next part of his day: *“then I go to “my district” to collect the empty bottles. I know my district and collect bottles there. Sometimes I can find good things there. Once I got a jacket and good trousers... Usually I find a newspaper, which I can read in the square ...*

Other people are not allowed to collect bottles in my district, only me. If I find any “bomzis” in my district, I rush him away. I have also a square in my district. I may collect bottles there or sit and check the garbage. Nobody says anything. Sometimes the children look on me, but I don’t care. I know that I may not leave garbage everywhere afterwards. I wash afterwards in the toilet at the market. I have good relations with policemen. Market and square are my public places... and my attic. Sometimes I have a talk with my “neighbours” from my house. Once I even helped to fix the toilet in the flat. I do not use public transport, so I do not know what people would say to me... Well, I have not faced any really bad attitude from people in the market or on the streets...”

Eduards was asked about people’s attitude towards him at such public places like polyclinics, cinema or library.

He has not been to any of them. He has no time for such “luxus”. He remembered that once he has been to cemetery. He has noticed that the elderly ladies looked at him with suspicion “but I don’t care”.

Yuriy had not been to polyclinics or library during the years of homelessness. During the cold time he stays in the night shelter when he is not drunk. He does not like shelter. He calls the shelter as his public space:

“If you want, you may think that shelter is what you call a public space. I don’t like that they have those stupid rules there: you need to wash there and behave in their manner... You may not arrive there “under volume” there. Sometimes they say that I should go to doctor because of my cough... No, I do not need to go to polyclinics to disturb the “normal people” there. They have a special doctor for us – who comes to the shelter.”

During spring, summer and autumn he stays in the dumpsite or with friends at the empty summer cottages. He agrees that sometimes there are problems with the neighbors and local people, and sometimes with police. However, he says that he and his friends have been too noisy or too drunk and that has been the reason for conflicts with people. When he does not make noise, nobody says anything to him, even police. He does not pay much attention when people gaze at him.

His position in general is “I do not care about those people who do not like me”.

Laimonis case is different. His wife was killed in 1989 and he became ill afterwards. He has diabetes and depression. He is not able to work because of his illness. He lived in a denationalized house on was evicted because of the rent debts. He is sitting on the streets and has idea about suicide. He is not able to work and he blames society for problems he has.

He says “society needs you when you are healthy and wealthy. Nobody thinks about you when you are sick and poor.”

During the interview his mother joined her son. He “sits on the shoulders” of his 82 years old mother. At present she has got a room in the flat of her cousin. They have to leave the room in the autumn and have to move to some place. Both his mother and himself they say that

“Homeless people like us are gazed everywhere – on the streets, in the hospital where I have to undergo the treatment regularly”. They feel badly in the soup kitchen where she goes for food, when she calls to emergency and when she goes to the municipality to ask for assistance for herself and her son who is disabled.

“Nobody likes us. The social workers are so unpolite and rude. They think you try to cheat them... In the hospital they are so unpolite and they do not care about you if you are not able to bribe them”.

Even in the church they try to keep away from you when you try to talk to them. The people have become so merciless”.

Interviews with Svetlana and Vita show that women have lost their apartments several years ago. Svetlana had a house during the Soviet time, but in 1990 she had sold the house in the suburbs of a city and has bought an apartment. Then she lost job and had a rent debt. Somebody has promised to pay her debt and buy a smaller apartment for her. Unfortunately, she has become a “fall – guy”. The person has showed the new apartment to her and she has signed the papers about selling the flat. When she moved to the new apartment, after a month she had realized that she has no documents for the apartment, and the house where she moved, has an owner who kicked her out because she had no “legal papers”. The broker has disappeared, and she was on the street. During winter Svetlana stays at night shelter, and during summer she stays with her friend in her summer house. Svetlana has got a job in grey economy:

“I work for a master. We pack some powder. We are five people working for the master, and he himself. I am happy that I have this job and that I can earn money. However, I do not hope to get an apartment of my own. It is too expensive nowadays... And I am not so young to marry a rich man...(laughs)”

She tries to dress neatly, so that

“I regularly wash my cloth, so on the streets nobody could see that I am homeless. I keep my cloths at my friends place. Sometimes I get some new cloth at the church. I think that I look all the other poor people. When I go to the river bank or to the lake, I feel like all the other people. I go there with my friend and feel like other people... I sit there and talk with my friend... When I go to shopping to the market there are many poor people, like me. Well, the merchants sometimes say me that the market is not a charity place. Then I feel ashamed... I sometimes ask if they could sell me some potatoes or tomatoes at the end of the market for cheaper price or give for free ... Sometimes the merchants are helpful, sometimes they are rude...”

She does not go to polyclinics to visit the doctor. Once she felt very badly and decided that she has to go to doctor:

“I cannot afford to go to doctor. I have some back pains and joint pains. However, I cannot afford that... Once I felt so badly that I decided to go to the polyclinics... I went to registration and asked when I can visit the doctor. The nurse at the registration looked at me and asked whether I have a family doctor. I did not have a family doctor. She told me that a person has to sign for a family doctor. But I cannot sign to family doctor without a fixed address. She told me – if you have no address, then the visit to the doctor costs six lats. It is a very big money ... She was rude to me. But the other people – no, not the people. There are many poor people in our city and we understand each other.. .”

She does not go to library or cinema. She would like to go to cinema, but it costs money. She would like to read a book, but she cannot sign for a library without a fixed address, and she has no glasses for reading.

She likes to go to the public events if she reads about the events and if it is for free and the weather is nice.

Last week I found a newspaper and read about “the milk and bread festival” in our city. On Sunday I put my best dress and went to the festival. I could try different kinds of dark and gray and white bread. I had also a glass of milk and a glass of yoghurt, and it was for free... There was a line to get the yoghurt, but different people were there – both poor and not poor, and nobody looked on me as on poor. I met some friends there from the old times, and I did not feel any difference from them. Of course, I did not tell them that I do not have a flat. I told that now I live in suburbs in a summer house... And there was a concert – music and folk dances...”

She did not feel ashamed. However, it is important to be similar to other people and Svetlana understands that. She emphasizes that for her:

“It is important not to be socially excluded from the society and that she does everything “to look “like other people look like” and then you can go everywhere”.

When she had no job, she regularly visited the soup kitchen and had a feeling of shame because of comments from people walking the street.

“There were lines on the street before the soup kitchen opened at nine in the morning. There were different people standing there – disabled, alcoholics, old poor pensioners. Each time when I waited there, there was at least one person who was walking along and saying something to us who were waiting... something like – you alcoholics and idiots, you should work and not eat on our expense, you “on hangers”. When standing there, yes, then I really felt ashamed.”

Vita’s history is different. Vita abuses alcohol and she does not deny it. She had a house in the town, and she has sold it three years ago. She told that she had got only a part of money for the house and she would buy a flat when she gets the rest of it. So far, she works for a landlord (landlady) and lives at her house and works in the farm “for tummy” (without money payment). When she wants to go to the city she asks landlady to give her money for a bus. She says that she feels good everywhere, and has no problems to sleep in the square if she “has taken too much”. She understands her alcoholism and she is not able to fight it. She does not visit the doctor, and has asked her son to remove her tooth with nippers when she had the toothache. She says

that her “outlook does not fit to regularity norms and therefore I better do not go to doctors”.

Conclusions

The interviews with the homeless people show various aspects of the use of public space and report on different aspects of the public space.

The attitude towards the other people depends on their general attitude towards the society – some people blame the society and government for the problems they face, the others – feel guilty for their problems.

The view on the possibilities to use to public space also is different. In general, the homeless people have no limitations to access to public space which is not covered – *squares, parks, market place*. For some of them *forest* is a place where they pick berries and mushrooms for sale and they feel that forest is their favourite place of stay. Nobody sends them out of the forest. When they sell berries and mushrooms in the market they use to sell the products sitting close to each other. Then they feel better. Sometimes they sell mushrooms somewhere on the *corner of the street*. They have free access to that, and usually municipal police do not trouble them. However, they prefer to do that in small groups, “to feel safely”.

Sometimes, when sitting on the street and begging they hear comments from other people, but not very often. One respondent told that his friend (also homeless) has been beaten by a group of teenagers when he was begging on the street.

One homeless women enjoys to participate in *open air public festivals* and feels there “*like a normal*” human being.

The interviewed homeless people *do not attend libraries and museums*. Those who have attended *polyclinics* feel discriminated and ashamed by administration and personnel because of poverty and lack of address. One respondent and experts reported about *doctors having special working hours in the night shelters*. The expert explained that shelter has a contract between the shelter and municipality concerning the costs and that homeless people do not attend doctor when they are sent to polyclinics. It was reported also that polyclinics do not want homeless to enter the building because of the possible “lowering status” if homeless visit the institution. There are no comments concerning access to public transportation. The only rule – one has to pay. The participant who had a task of social experiment – to dress and

behave like a homeless person has expressed her feelings as being *gazed, treated with contempt and turned away from her* (social experiment was a part of other project).

The respondents and experts were chosen from various types of settlement – capital city, big city, small town. The hypothesis was that there might be reasonable differences concerning access to public space between the various types of settlement. However, although all the respondents (homeless) belonged to middle age, the sample was too small to confirm the hypothesis.

Also the experts were chosen in different types of towns and cities. Probably, the case study only in one city or town could provide with different type of knowledge and feedback for analyses.