



Reconnections for mobile EU citizens: the Barka experience in Belgium

Interview with Renata Bogacka (*Barka Team Antwerpen*), Piotr Smigielski (*Barka Team Brussels*), Helena Dezor (*Barka Team Brussels*)

Why and when did you decide to set-up the service in Antwerp and then in Brussels? Who took the initiative?

In Antwerp it was set up 4 years ago while in Brussels last year. It is always the public authorities, the municipalities or the cities, that asked for the service to be put in place. The first time we provided a reconnection programme was in London in 2007, after the big inflow of migrants from Eastern Europe and the municipalities realised that many did not succeed in finding a better life so people were literally on the streets of London. At that moment, Barka in Poland was a network of care-houses and communities already well established in the Polish context. Then the idea of a street work team, composed by social workers and a leader, came up to reach out to people rough sleeping and try and find the best solution for everyone, either in the place where they are currently living or through reconnection to Poland.

If it is possible, we help the person where she or he currently lives, for instance if she or he has been living there for many years and has the possibility to access social rights. Therefore, in several places, like for instance Utrecht, we also have Integration Centers.

Where are you currently based in Europe, besides Belgium?

Iceland, Ireland, Netherlands and in Germany.

Do you think that homeless mobile EU citizens need different services than national homeless people?

It does not really matter whether you are a mobile EU citizen or a homeless national. The needs are the same, but the solutions are different according to nationalities and to which extent the individual has access to social rights in the place where she or he is living.

We should also bear in mind the existence of linguistic barriers for which services need to adapt. Many of the beneficiaries can only communicate in their native language so that means that you need professionals who are able to speak in Polish, Romanian and so on.

How is the service funded? Is it only public authorities' funds or you have other sources of income?

Funds are provided by municipalities, sometimes Ministries like for example in Brussels (Fedasil).

How did the idea of having a Barka service in Brussels come up? Was it Fedasil that proposed it?

The City of Antwerp noticed that, during the winter programme, the second most represented nationality in their night shelters was Polish so they did a study visit in Utrecht to see how they were working over there. Based on the experience of Utrecht, they invited us to see, for a few months, if our service was going to work in Antwerp. The City of Antwerp is also working with Fedasil, which learnt about our work Antwerp and proposed a similar project in Brussels.

Fedasil normally works with asylum seekers. How come did they want to develop something for mobile EU citizens?

Fedasil was unable to reach out to nationals from Central and Eastern European countries, they could not help them since they only work with third-country nationals. We had a lot of exchanges with them to see how we could work together, and they decided to finance our work in Brussels.

Are there any conditions attached to the funding? Do you have to work only with a certain kind of target group or are there any other criteria you must stick to?

We do not have any strict criteria to follow. Our goal is to get people out of homelessness and, of course, the easiest target group for us is people from Eastern European countries. Most of the time we have contacts with Polish people. If we have contacts with other nationalities or third-country nationals, we refer them to Fedasil or IOM (International Organisation for Migration). An important criterion to mention is that we try to help in the long-term. We do not for instance provide cash. We assess the needs of individuals concerned and develop a plan. Of course, if we think that a few nights in a shelter are urgently needed we might want to pay for it – but this is very exceptional. Most of the people we work with are in dire need and unfortunately do not have any concrete perspective of staying in Belgium in the long-term.

How does the service work in practice?

Our work is based on street outreach work. We meet the person in the streets, we have a few meetings, assess which kind of needs she or he has and then see if she or he is willing to get help. We develop a link of trust with the person. We try and get to know the person and hope that this contact is meaningful to them and can change something, trigger something in their way of thinking and make them want to quit living in the streets



And which solutions can you offer? Do you mainly propose to be reconnected to their country of nationality?

Yes, especially if the person does not have access to social rights here, which is generally the case.

Can you tell me more about the profile of homeless people you work with in terms of gender and age?

Most of the people we meet and work with are males. The age ranges from 20 to 70 years old. There might be less people between 60 and 70 but there is still a significant number of people this age.

I met one of your beneficiaries, a 68 years old man who has lived in Brussels for 38 years. He moved from Poland when he was 30. For people in this situation, after so many years of residence in Belgium, should not there be a way to access the services they need in the country where they reside instead of the country of which they are nationals?

This is indeed the tragedy of people in this situation. The fact is that they have never worked with a contract and consequently cannot access their social rights – or, at least, not the same social rights than the nationals. Therefore, no, they cannot have a place in a shelter, they cannot get social benefits since they have never been registered at the municipality.

Do you try to help them with the regularisation of their residence so that they can enjoy their social rights in Belgium?

Yes, many times. I had for instance two cases of elderly men who worked in Belgium for 15 years without a contract. While they were working everything was going well: they were working in the Polish community, with colleagues from Poland and not interested in learning Dutch and integrating in Belgian society. At a certain moment, they had a health issue and lost their job. They asked for regularisation for medical reasons but could not get it. The lawyer immediately said that it was not possible because they could get the same treatment in Poland. That's the paradox of the European Union: you are allowed to stay wherever you want, but if you do not build your social rights in the country where you are staying, you will not get long-term support. People are often angry or surprised, they wonder how is that possible that, after they lived here for so many years, they have no right. It is sometimes difficult to explain and difficult to understand.

Do you only work with people who do not have an administrative status?

Sometimes we also work with people who have other kind of troubles, debts, for instance, and we refer them to the adequate services. But this people, even though they are vulnerable, they are registered and if we think they just need a bit of help, we help them here. However, most of the time we work with people without registration who have been living for a very long time in Belgium or people who were homeless in another Member State. We regularly meet, both in Brussels and in Antwerp, people who were homeless in the Netherlands, or in France, Italy, and so on.

Among the people you have been reaching out to, do you think there are people who could potentially find a job?

Of course. Sometimes we just advise about where they have to go to look for a job, which services they have to access. Sometimes we work with them if we see that they have the profile we mostly work with it: people who have alcohol or drugs abuse problems. 90% of people we work with have alcohol or drugs abuse problems: for elderly people it is mostly alcohol abuse while for younger people it is mostly addictions to different substances and mental health problems.

When a person accepts the reconnection – or voluntary return – option, how do you proceed?

We see if the person has a place where she or he can get back to, such as her or his family. Then the question is: does she or he want to get back there? Sometimes people, for different reasons - because of shame not to have succeeded, for instance - do not want to get back to their families. We therefore look at what we can propose, a place in a community. What is important in this case is their willingness to solve their alcohol or drugs abuse problems

The communities you are referring to, are Barka communities or also other service providers?

We are in contact not only with Barka communities but also with other Polish service providers. It depends on the situation of the person.

And when it comes to other countries than Poland, with which services are you in contact?

In Bulgaria and Romania, it is not working as well as in Poland, but we are slowly developing our network. We have a few contacts in Romania and we are starting to build something also in Bulgaria. When we do not have any personal contact in the country of reconnection, we get in contact with specialised services and ask what the possibilities are.

Can you tell me more about the role in the team of people with experience of homelessness in the way the service works?

In each team there is always an "assistant". The assistant is a person who lives in a certain country, speaks the languages, knows the social sector there and has the technical knowledge. And there is a "leader", a person who knows the problem from the inside out, who experienced homelessness and knows what people are going through. The leader of the Brussels team, for instance, was homeless in the Netherlands, suffered from addictions and is still fighting against addictions.

Was this method introduced by Barka? Was there a reason to introduce it?

In the beginning, when Barka was set-up in London in 2007, the idea was to only send "leaders", people who used to be homeless, but the problem was that they could not speak English. So, they decided to hire a social assistant who could speak both English and Polish and created a team. In all cities we now have teams of two people: the leader and the assistant.

"in 2007, after the big inflow of migrants from Eastern Europe... the municipalities realised that many did not succeed in finding a better life, so people were literally on the streets"



Does the assistant need to have a social assistance background?

It is surely easier if the assistant has a social work education but not all assistants have it. Soft skills are much more important. The communication skills and the languages are the basics.

Which kind of involvement do public authorities have? And which kind of partnership did you develop with other homelessness, health, employment services?

With the City of Antwerp and with Fedasil in Brussels, we basically have meetings to share opinions and discuss. Most of the time they ask us what we need to improve our service, which challenges we have been facing. Both in Brussels and in Antwerp we noticed that from the beginning we are well seen in the day centres, maybe also because we speak the language of the beneficiaries and we can facilitate the exchange. In every city we try and build a network of institutions and organisations we can work with. We of course work with the Consulate, with the hospitals, with medical centers, with days centres, night shelters, street outreach teams. We do not have a structural partnership, but we are constantly, almost daily, in contact, with day centres, because we know that homeless from Poland will be there.

Are you able to monitor the results, and how the living conditions of the people you reconnect develop?

It depends. If the people return to communities, or specialised services, we are able to keep track. But if they are going back to their families, it is up to them to inform us, if they want to. We sometimes receive information through calls or emails. Sometimes we have their Whatsapp contacts.

Do you go along with the person when the voluntary return – or reconnection – takes place?

Not always. If we consider that the person needs assistance or if the person asks for assistance, we provide assisted reconnection but normally the person goes back on her or his own. We book the minibus for them, we accompany them to the bus, and sometimes it is the driver who inform us that the person arrived safely home. The minibus is the easiest option because it brings them to a specific address, to the very door. The bus is a bit more difficult because then they have to move from the big cities - where the buses normally arrive – to small villages.

How many people can you reconnect by year?

In Brussels we provided voluntary return to approximately 30 people over the last year. In Antwerp, 30-35 per year. In the Netherlands, we do approximately 450 reconnections every year but it depends on the city, sometimes the need is bigger because you have more young mobile EU citizens who are homeless for a short time after having lost a job and they really do not want to stay in those circumstances, so they are returning to their families and we consequently reconnect more people. In cities like Brussels or Antwerp the majority is people who are long-term homeless thus you need to spend more time with them to get in contact and prepare the reconnection.

How can the service be improved?

Our service needs time to properly develop and reply to beneficiaries' needs. We also need people speaking Romanian and Bulgarian and to develop a network with Romanian and Bulgarian services. This way, we could offer solutions in other countries of origin than Poland. With regard to people with disabilities, we always have to wait for a long time before we find a place in a specialised service in Poland. It would be very useful to find a way to speed-up the time.