
Services for Homeless Immigrants: The Social Welfare Capital of Polish Rough Sleepers in Brussels and Oslo

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› **Abstract** *The dynamics of migration indicate that the concept of citizenship, and eligibility for particular benefits, is in the process of redefinition in Europe. Migrants may be among the most vulnerable actors on the housing market, and due to their economic position, and their social and language skills, they may be at greater risk of homelessness. In the case of migrants facing physical homelessness there may be problems accessing even basic help. This paper explores access to service providers for homeless Polish migrants sleeping rough in Brussels and Oslo. Two aspects of 'social welfare capital' – eligibility and individual resources – are considered. In particular, the paper addresses the use of low-threshold services like soup runs, day centres, showers, medical help and emergency shelters. Brussels and Oslo are compared in terms of general patterns of Polish migration to those cities, survival strategies of homeless migrants, and practices of inclusion and exclusion by service providers. Individual resources, especially communication skills, interplay with legal eligibility and may lead to the exclusion of migrants from services on a number of levels.*

› **Key Words** *homelessness, rough sleeping, migration, Poland, Belgium, Norway*

Introduction

For various reasons migrants may be more vulnerable to homelessness. In Europe, migrants from developing countries are often characterized by lower incomes and a lower socio-economic status than the general population. In the case of undocumented migrants arriving in Western countries, the lack of documentation can create difficulties in securing accommodation, while migrants with regularized status also face many obstacles in the housing market (Engbersen and Burgers, 1999). For temporary labour migrants, the rights to various benefits and allowances, including social housing, are not automatically gained with residence or work permits (Stanley, 2010), and migrants may also face informal barriers such as discriminatory practices on the part of private landlords and local institutions offering housing for rent or sale (Perl, 2010).

It is increasingly acknowledged that homelessness among new European labour migrants is an issue of concern (see for example, *Homeless in Europe*, 2010), and in the last number of years Polish and other media sources have reported on homelessness among Polish immigrants in large European cities such as London, Dublin and Rome (see for example, Pszczołkowska, 2006; *Homeless Poles...*, 2006). Labour migrants are an especially vulnerable group on the housing market, not only because of their economic susceptibility, but also because of weakening ties with family members in the home country, limited language skills, and social and cultural differences. Strategies for obtaining accommodation are a crucial element in successful support networks among immigrants. One study of homeless migrants in Europe, although looking specifically at non-Western immigrants, stressed that homeless immigrants experience far greater loneliness, isolation and exclusion from mainstream society than their native counterparts. Those studied tended to distance themselves from other homeless people whom they held responsible for their predicament, while considering their own homelessness to be caused by forces beyond their control (Järvinen, 2003).

This paper will compare the situation of roofless Polish people in two different European countries, Belgium and Norway, and in their respective capital cities in particular. The comparison may be undertaken from a welfare regime perspective, based on the fact that many argue that levels of homelessness are influenced by the interplay of welfare regimes and housing systems (see for example, Stephens and Fitzpatrick, 2007). Thus, pressure on housing markets and levels of inequality, as well as social assistance policy and prevention policies and programmes, may alter the risk of homelessness. Although there are differences between the Belgian and Norwegian housing markets, both are dominated by owner-occupation and highly commodified private rental sectors. Both in Brussels and in Oslo, basic welfare provision for homeless people is largely in the hands of non-governmental

organizations, but this similarity on the provision side does not take into account the many other variables that can influence an individual's homelessness and coping strategies, such as personal characteristics, and human and social capital.

The situation described in this paper is not limited to the two cities studied. Rising numbers of rough sleepers from the new EU accession countries have also been observed in other Western cities, and the phenomenon is a cause for concern. In the UK, for example, the percentage of homeless people from Eastern Europe is increasing; currently about two thirds of them are Polish, and they are overrepresented in the street populations of Nottingham, Cardiff (Mackie *et. al.*, 2010) and London (Bowpitt *et. al.*, 2010), where in 2008 it was estimated that 20% of rough sleepers were from Eastern Europe (Lane and Power, 2009), and where the presence of migrant workers (not necessarily rough sleepers) in soup run queues was said to be raising fears of conflict among the "indigenous homeless" population (Lane and Power, 2009, p.20).

Social Welfare Capital

The concept that underpins this paper is that of 'social welfare capital'. Social welfare capital encompasses knowledge, awareness of, and access to welfare services (Wright, 1997), and it is located somewhere between human and social capital: education and skills on the one hand, and social networks and communicative competences on the other. Social welfare capital refers to eligibility, individual competences and social capital (generalized trust, norms of reciprocity and social networks), and it includes access to social networks or other sources of information such that it is not strictly an individual resource. It is thus a form of capital that depends partly on the nature of relationships with others, with trust being one of its crucial elements – not only in other people, but also in institutions. Social welfare capital, as with other forms of capital, can be turned into other assets or forms of capital – economic, social or human, and it is shaped by previous contact with welfare agencies (or the lack of such contact) and a sense of being fairly treated (Rothstein and Stolle, 2003).

The resources of labour migrants are likely to differ from those of the native population in terms of human capital and social safety nets, as well as in the interplay of those competences with regard to entitlement to services – that is, social welfare capital. Finally, access to assistance is influenced by the daily practices of all actors involved: the actions of those enforcing the policies and regulations of support organizations, migrants' strategies in approaching certain places and avoiding others, how migrants present themselves, and so on.

This paper focuses on how social welfare capital is used by Eastern European, and specifically Polish, rough sleepers in the two Western cities of Brussels and Oslo, and attempts to answer the following questions: what are the survival strategies of Polish rough sleepers? What kind of service providers do they approach? What is the role of support providers in their strategies? What role do language and social skills play in excluding them from services? What institutional policies include/exclude foreigners from provision? What do employees and volunteers of these institutions think about Polish clients? How do Polish rough sleepers evaluate these services?

In the first part of the paper, background information on Polish migration to Belgium and Norway and on rough sleeping in Brussels and Oslo is presented, as well as the methodology used in the project. The main part of the paper involves a discussion of which services are accessed by Polish rough sleepers, why certain services are avoided and what these are, and the reasons that Poles are included in or excluded from certain practices. Attention will be paid throughout to the interplay between eligibility and social competences that enable recourse to these services. How Polish migrants are viewed by employees and volunteers of the institutions used by these migrants will also be considered before some concluding remarks are outlined.

Polish Migration to Belgium and Norway

The situation of Polish migrants in Brussels and Oslo has not received as much attention as their situation in cities like London or Dublin. There has, however, been substantial Polish migration to Belgium and Norway, with the former representing an 'old' migration destination and the latter being a 'new' host country for Poles. Patterns of Polish migration to Belgium and Norway thus vary to a large extent, but there are also similarities.

Polish migration to Belgium

There is a long tradition of Polish migration to Belgium, but the largest inflow of Polish workers, largely from rural north-eastern Poland, took place in the 1990s. In 2008 there were about 30 000 Polish citizens officially residing in Belgium (Statistics Belgium, 2010) and many more irregular migrants; in 2007 this was estimated at around 50 000 (Kaizen and Nonneman, 2007) and it was further estimated that over 60% of Poles working in Belgium, of which about 20 000 were based in Brussels, did not have a permit (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2001; *Współczesne migracje...*, 2008). 45% of all Poles in Belgium worked in construction, the majority of which were men, while undocumented female migrants usually worked in domestic services. Since Polish accession to the EU and the subsequent opening up of the labour market, migratory strategies have diversified, yet a large proportion of Poles in Brussels continue to work off-books and to circulate between the sending and receiving countries.

Pendular migration to Brussels was the focus of a large ethnosurvey conducted by the Centre of Migration Research in the years 1994-96 and 1999 (Igllicka-Okólska, 1998; Okólski, 2001; Kaczmarczyk, 2005). This revealed some characteristics of migrant households, as well as particular links between Brussels and local communities of the Podlaskie voivodship province in north-eastern Poland. It was shown that many households from this sending region used 'incomplete migration' as a survival strategy; the resulting circular mobility meant that the receiving country was perceived only as a working place, while investment, family and other status-related interests continued to be based in Poland. In the 1990s this became an easy option for virtually every household, and the study showed that during this time the typical migrant to Brussels was male, the head of a household, quite poorly educated, and often unemployed or having problems finding stable employment in Poland (Kaczmarczyk, 2005).

Qualitative studies have demonstrated, however, that 'incomplete migration' usually leads to the marginalization of migrants in both the host and the sending country (Osipowicz, 2001). The provisional nature of arrangements, undocumented work and absence from home can lead to marginalization in the home country, while in the receiving country migrants often consent to long hours of exhausting work and very poor housing conditions in order to accumulate as much money as possible. The undocumented nature of work and the tendency to treat migration as temporary led to a willingness among Polish immigrants in Belgium to put up with very poor housing conditions. They lived in overcrowded apartments, often with no basic facilities and with equipment in poor technical condition. Accommodation was rented without legal agreements, and temporary housing was sometimes provided by the employer; Polish migrants slept at construction sites, in vehicles, abandoned buildings and temporary shacks and tents, or in public spaces (Pauwels *et. al.*, 2007). They barely learned the local language, and contacts were limited to within the national groups.

According to self-reported data from a study carried out in 2007, only 10% of Polish workers in Belgium had a proper contract for their rented accommodation at that time; 30% had living quarters arranged by their employer (mainly those doing live-in housework or working in agriculture, and thus mostly outside of the main cities); 35% admitted that they sublet accommodation without a contract (*Współczesne migracje...*, 2008); and many shared dwellings with friends or acquaintances. In 2007, 60% of respondents claimed that they paid less than 100 euro per month for accommodation and that the dwellings often lacked a separate bathroom, kitchen, refrigerator or proper furniture (Pauwels *et. al.*, 2007).

Polish migration to Norway

Poles are currently the largest foreign national group in Norway. The number of Polish migrants registering in Norwegian communities rose steadily for many years, most sharply between 2004 and 2008, and reached a peak in 2008; since then numbers have begun to decrease, probably due to the economic recession. In 2010 there were more than 50 000 Poles officially registered in Norway (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2010). Polish migrants are predominantly young and male; more than two thirds of those granted work permits in Norway in 2008 were men (Daugstad, 2009, p. 17).

From a 2006 survey conducted by the FAFO institute, it is known that more than 90% of male Polish migrants in the Oslo area worked in construction, while three quarters of female migrants worked in the cleaning business. The survey showed Polish women in Oslo to be generally younger than their female counterparts elsewhere, and that the majority held undocumented positions. The construction sector is a grey zone for Polish workers who are often paid less than their Norwegian counterparts. Poles have been found to have, in general, very little knowledge about their rights and entitlements to benefits such as healthcare; many were unemployed prior to migration and believe they would have difficulties finding employment in Poland, making them unlikely to plan a return home within the next number of years (Friberg and Tyldum, 2007).

The living conditions of these Poles have not been studied, but a number of fires in which Polish workers died (including the incident that claimed seven lives in Drammen in November 2008) have suggested that at least some of them live in very overcrowded and insecure conditions. A recent survey of the Polish community in Oslo shows that there may be a trend towards more settled migration patterns: in 2010, compared with 2006, there were more Polish women in Oslo; more Poles reported having a partner in Norway; and there were more reports of stable jobs at Norwegian firms. There was also a significant drop in the number of people sharing accommodation with colleagues or friends (from 58% in 2006 to 27% in 2010). Still, it seems that employment in the construction sector has changed very little, and there are signs of permanent segregation between Polish and Norwegian workers; in 2010 a large proportion of workers continued in undocumented positions and Polish firms continued to be subcontracted for work. In the second half of 2008 there was a sharp rise in the number of Poles registering as unemployed, and at the time of the latest survey, 46% of Polish men taking part in the study in Oslo claimed to be out of work (Eldring and Friberg, 2010).

In sum, Polish migrants in Brussels and Oslo work in similar sectors – men in construction and women in domestic services, with a significant number working in the informal economy. Brussels, which is also a larger city, probably has a larger concentration of Polish migrants than Oslo, and it would appear to have more

unregistered workers. The share of females and older migrants is probably higher in Brussels than in Oslo, and informal migration networks are more firmly established here; circular migration in this group of migrants is more prevalent, while in Oslo rising numbers of family reunions indicate movement towards more settled patterns of migration.

Street Homelessness in Brussels and Oslo

In this paper the concept of homelessness is used to mean exclusion from all three domains of 'home': physical, legal and social. This study was therefore interested in two operational categories of the ETHOS typology of homelessness: persons sleeping rough and those staying in short-term night shelters. Those persons referred to in ETHOS terminology as 'roofless' are deprived of physical protection from weather conditions, of privacy and intimacy, and of any legal title to the spaces they inhabit (Edgar *et. al.*, 2004). In this paper the terms 'rough sleepers' and 'homeless persons' are used interchangeably.

Like in many other large cities, there are no reliable estimates of the number of physically homeless persons in Brussels. We do know, however, that there are about 970 beds in 22 shelters and 180 beds in crisis centres, and a city count in November 2008 registered 995 homeless persons, 545 of which were rough sleepers (*Resultaten av telling...*, 2009). The largest crisis centre, Centre d'Action Sociale d'Urgence (CASU), receives more than 400 phone requests for shelter and houses an average of 175 people every night. In 2008, 5600 individuals spent a night there, 11% of whom were from Eastern Europe (*Centre d'Action...*, 2008).

In Norway, studies are carried out on the situation of homeless people every couple of years, from which it is known that most Norwegian homeless people are middle-aged men and that almost two thirds of them are addicted to drugs. Further, almost a third of Norwegian homeless people stay with friends or relatives, and only about 3% in the country are rough sleepers. These surveys tell us little about homeless people with foreign backgrounds, though they have shown Oslo, with its 1500 homeless persons, to have the largest share of homeless people of African or Asian background, and they reveal that, of over 6000 homeless people in the whole country, about 2-3% are from Eastern Europe (Dyb and Johannessen, 2009). These figures alone provide little information, and considering the methodology used in these surveys it is likely that East European migrants are underrepresented, as these tend not to come into contact with public agencies.

Methodology

The first aspect of the project involved an exploration of the ethnographic field of both city centres: public spaces, institutions, and other places where Polish rough sleepers gathered. Participant observation was the main method used in those areas; I visited the same places and institutions on many occasions and talked with the same people, both individually and in groups. Contact was made in such situations as standing in line for free food, waiting for shelters or day centres to open, and spending time and having meals inside soup kitchens, churches and so on. In this way I had the opportunity to observe interaction between staff and the group or individual I was with, and I was often considered a member of the Polish group by employees.

The other data used in this paper was obtained from individual interviews with Polish migrants sleeping rough in Brussels and Oslo, in which I asked, for instance, about their survival strategies and their evaluation of service provision. The principal fieldwork data from both sites is compared in Table 1. As a Polish researcher, my nationality initially gave me a high level of trust among informants. Although my role as a sociologist was probably not well understood (and was often confused with journalism), I was seen as a person completely outside of the Belgian or Norwegian welfare system, and my informants were aware that I could not help them in getting access to specialized services. Even in Oslo, where I volunteered at a faith-based organization, I believe my informants perceived me more as their peer than as a social worker.

Fieldwork in Brussels took place in three rounds: 12-26 August 2008; 3-13 February 2009; and 17 August-22 September 2009. Although I visited a variety of locations, I spent most of my time with one group of between five and ten Polish rough sleepers. These were my principal informants; they guided me to new locations and provided contact with other informants, and they also commented on a text I wrote. Altogether, in Brussels, I was in contact with about 80 different people of different nationalities, not all of whom were homeless. Of those, 45 were both Polish and homeless (sleeping rough) at some time during the fieldwork. Six of them were women, 39 were men, and the age range was wide; I talked to 13 men who were older than 55, while 16 persons were under 35. At the time of my fieldwork, seven of my informants were in very poor physical condition. Most were living in Brussels, or had been coming regularly to work in Belgium for many years – often more than ten. Younger informants in their twenties and early thirties had usually been in Brussels for a couple of years, while still others had been in Belgium for a very short time, only ‘passing by’ on their way to Germany, Ireland, France, Spain or Poland. I was aware, and had seen, that the population of Poles living in public spaces in Brussels city centre was much larger than the group I was in contact with. When

asked how many Polish homeless people lived in Brussels, my informants could not provide any reliable information; typical answers included “very many”, “hundreds”, and “at least a couple of thousand”.

Fieldwork in Oslo took place between January and June, and in August of 2010. There, I was in contact with about 40 Polish men who were either sleeping rough at the time, or who reported having had previous episodes of sleeping rough in Oslo. Apart from carrying out participant observation at sites where Polish street regulars gathered – food distribution places, cafeterias and soup kitchens, I also volunteered at one of the faith-based centres that distributes food packages and clothes. All of my informants in Oslo were men; their ages varied between 23 and 62, but most were between 35 and 55 years of age. For all of them, the principal reason for coming to Norway was to look for work, and most of them had worked or were working in construction or renovation. Most of my respondents had come to Norway for the first time in the years 2005 – 2007, but some had been in Norway for much longer, and there were also men who had arrived only a few days or weeks before I met them. The groups and individuals that I observed in Oslo probably constitute the entire population of Polish rough sleepers in that city, especially during the winter months. The circumstances of my informants in Oslo were also much more changeable than those in Brussels; not only did some of them disappear from view having only met them once, but friendships and alliances between informants changed quickly according to opportunities, and according to personal animosity or goodwill between respondents.

I estimate that there were about 100 Poles sleeping rough in the centre of Brussels every night in 2008 and 2009. Due to large queues and the large numbers of people served at various service points, it was difficult to estimate what share of those seeking help was Polish, but I would guess that approximately one in ten was a Pole. The same was true for Oslo. According to my observations and estimates, Polish people made up about 10% of the total number of those seeking help at various street-level help organizations such as the ‘night bus’, food distribution lines and cafeterias. Of all the places I observed in Oslo, the largest share of Polish users during the January-March period was at the ‘night bus’ – a bus parked in front of the railway station while the building is closed at night during the winter months; in February and March my informants themselves estimated that the core group of Polish rough sleepers in Oslo numbered between 12 and 15 men.

For both cities this data is supplemented by interviews with the employees and volunteers of various help organizations, and with members of the wider Polish communities in Brussels and Oslo.

Table 1. Information on fieldwork and informants in Brussels and Oslo

	Brussels	Oslo
Fieldwork	7 weeks: August 2008, February 2009, August-September 2009	28 weeks: January-June 2010, August 2010
My informants (rough sleepers)	circa. 80 men and women	circa. 40 men
Ethnographic field	Public spaces, gathering places, services	Services, gathering places, public spaces
Polish rough sleeper population	About 100 people	About 15 people (in the winter months)
Duration of rooflessness	Usually long periods of rough sleeping	Usually short episodes of rough sleeping
Groups of rough sleepers in the public space	Well established groups in the public space	Individuals in public space
Institutional perspective	7 interviews with employees and volunteers	11 interviews with employees and volunteers; volunteer work

Institutional Help in the Daily Survival Strategies of Polish Rough Sleepers in Brussels and Oslo

The daily survival strategies of my informants included both informal economic activities and access to service providers. As these two kinds of resources are complementary, I will briefly sketch the informal means of daily survival outlined by my informants, and their individual language and social skills, before focusing on institutional provision.

In Brussels, Poles living on the streets often beg. Other strategies to supplement income include collecting deposit bottles and scrap metal, and petty theft. In Oslo, on the other hand, Poles do not beg; this is considered a degrading activity in which only drug addicts and Roma people engage. Homeless Polish migrants in Oslo do, however, collect deposit bottles and cans, and they are involved in small-scale barter deals (for instance the exchange of food packages for smuggled alcohol and cigarettes) and theft – often as proxies for others. The high price of alcohol in Norway makes shoplifting a daily practice, while in Brussels rough sleepers usually buy alcohol with money acquired from begging.

In Brussels I was in contact mainly with people who worked, or used to work, off-books and who had few language and professional competences. However, some of the street regulars and rough sleepers could speak French and had been in Belgium long enough to know their way around various institutions; while temporarily out of work or during a drinking binge, they would join their friends on the streets.

My informants in Oslo, on the other hand, could be divided into two groups. People in the first group were entitled to some benefits and there was a strong sense of entitlement among them. They made no distinction, however, between the public agencies from which they obtained allowances, and charities or other non-governmental organizations such as soup kitchens. Knowing the welfare system and knowing how to use it was a highly valued skill for them, and they bragged about how they had approached or even tricked the system – for instance, by collecting unemployment benefits while working off-books, or by saving money by coming to soup kitchens for dinner. While the system was not transparent to them, once they were in it they wanted to make the most of it and were very demanding. They felt that because they had been paying taxes, they were entitled to all kinds of help. It was through being out of work and using the services or coming to meet friends that they entered my ethnographic field.

People in the second group in Oslo, which I will compare with the group in Brussels, had much fewer social and language skills. Most often they were working illegally in Norway and hence were not entitled to any benefits. They didn't know how the welfare system or other service providers functioned, they didn't know the names of institutions, and they were not familiar with street names – they were getting around 'blindfolded' and arriving at destinations by chance, through word of mouth, and by trial and error. They feared exclusion from low-threshold services, and were in fact excluded from some of them. They evinced a great deal of resentment and bitter feeling towards other groups of service users, including Norwegians, people of other races and, for instance, drug-addicts.

The next part of the paper focuses on the use of shelters, soup kitchens and other food providers, as well as on medical help, in an effort to gain a better understanding of 'social welfare capital' and the interplay between eligibility, and individual and collective resources that enable or limit the use of services. The observed frequency of institutional help being used in the two cities is compared in Table 2.

Use of shelters

Securing a place for the night is a major concern for Polish street homeless people in both cities. There are, of course, some individuals that sleep outside in all kinds of weather and do not use any shelters, but most seek a refuge for the night. In Brussels some groups of Poles had informal agreements with managers that allowed them to stay in metro or railway stations. In emergency shelters in Brussels, documents are not checked and there are no eligibility criteria; due to high demand, different selection techniques are therefore used. One involves calling a toll free number and reserving a bed for the coming night, while in another, playing cards are drawn to decide randomly who gets in and who doesn't. Other rules may also apply, such as not being allowed to spend two nights in a row in the same place.

Polish rough sleepers acknowledged that there aren't sufficient places and that finding a sleeping place is the biggest problem. They alternate between railway stations, walking the city, and sleeping in warehouses, or in abandoned buildings and shelters. The system of random admission to the shelters is generally regarded as fair; one just has to be persistent and plan in advance, as this informant explained:

Q: But... isn't there a problem with spending the night?

A: [...] It's the worst problem.

Q: What about shelters? How many are there? A couple?

A: No, no, not a couple. A couple of hundred. [...] There are 48 beds [in one of the shelters]. There with the black and red [system of drawing cards] where you were yesterday. There it's not so crowded. But the others... there are a lot of fucking people there

Q: [...] And what if you don't get into a shelter? What do you do?

A: You'll get in. You just can't drink. There is no shelter you cannot get into (Brussels, 48-year-old man, 07.02.2009)

My informants in Brussels used only low-threshold shelters with a 'no questions asked' approach. They helped each other to make phone calls, and introduced each other to new places. They exchanged information about addresses and admission systems, and news from different shelters, so that everyone was moving within the limits of a well-known shelter system equally accessible for everyone.

In Oslo, on the other hand, the lack of shelters was the most pressing and the most frequently discussed problem. It was often mentioned that a couple of years earlier the situation was different; at that time Poles were admitted to some of the shelters, but now "there is nothing for normal people", my informants complained, meaning that non drug-addicts and non-Norwegians are not admitted anymore. Since it was 'general knowledge' that "there are no shelters in Oslo", many Polish rough sleepers did not even attempt to find a place in such institutions. Strategies for securing shelter included staying with friends; sleeping in basements, attics, abandoned buildings, caravans, railway and bus stations; and the 'night bus'. The night bus was frequented more by Polish rough sleepers than any other users, and many spent all their time there. In Oslo, eligibility for shelters did not arise as an issue as it was assumed by my informants that they were not allowed into any night shelters, despite the fact that many of them had not themselves been rejected.

Table 2. Services used by informants

Service	Brussels	Oslo
Low-threshold services		
Soup runs	++	+
Soup kitchens	+++	+++
Street workers/street nurses	+	-
Food distribution	+	+++
Clothes distribution	+	++
Showers, laundry	++	+
Night shelters	+	-
Longer-term shelters	+	-
Emergency medical assistance	++	++
Welfare/unemployment benefits	+	+++
Social housing (rent allowance)	+	++

- not at all, + seldom, ++ sometimes, +++ often.

Using a service depends on availability (provision), eligibility, knowledge and skills.

Food provision and day centres

One of the basic survival strategies of Polish rough sleepers in both cities is using the provision of free food. Soup kitchens and other places are visited on a daily basis, and food is quite widely available; often there is much more than one can eat, and Poles usually take whatever food is distributed for free, often discarding it later. The quality and quantity of food, the ‘no questions asked’ approach, and the clear rules about queuing make many Poles talk warmly about welfare and prosperity in Belgium and Norway. Unlike shelters, soup runs, soup kitchens, cafeterias and food distribution centres are generally very well regarded, though there were also discouraged and sceptical voices, particularly of those who had experienced exclusion. Even where exclusion criteria were clear – such as age in the case described below – exclusion seemed to them to be unfair and to hurt them personally.

Q: They say there is good welfare here. That they help. What do you think? Do they help a lot or not?

A: It's no good! (pause) Here you come to [faith-based organization] for dinner. They let in people over fifty [years old]. I pay for this dinner. Not much, but I want to pay. I want to eat. No, you are not fifty years old. They didn't let me in. (Brussels, 30-year-old woman, 11.02.2009)

Due to high demand, access to day centres where one can shower, wash one's clothes, or request medical assistance is usually limited, and information on how to gain access is valuable. In one such place in Brussels, people are asked to provide a ‘certificate’ from a night shelter – a sort of ‘proof of homelessness’. Among the Polish street regulars, these slips are traded for other goods and favours. For Poles

in Oslo, the main problem with some soup kitchens and day centres is that they are targeted at persons with drug related problems; not being in their target group, Poles are often turned away at the door, as in the case of this young man:

28-year old man who doesn't drink, uses only cannabis, tells how he lived in a basement and had no shower. He went to the [institution] to get a shower. But they told him that it's only for drug addicts. "What am I suppose to do? Go and buy heroin and pump it up my vein so that I can have a shower?" (Oslo, fieldnote 11.05.2010)

Experiencing such exclusion exacerbates resentment towards Norwegians, 'drug heads' and 'Blacks'. In fact, this exclusion is based on prejudice and a lack of communication rather than the enforcement of explicit policy. In one of the soup kitchens, after having a meal with my Polish informants, we were asked not to come back. For my informants, this was the only message that could be conveyed, whereas I, being able to speak with the gatekeepers in English, learnt that as a foreigner I have to 'prove' that I have an addiction in order to be allowed access to the service.

A: This is not a place for you. This is a place for drug addicts, not for everyone to save money on food. Those [Polish] people are working; they have money to buy their own food. You have to have papers to prove that you are a drug addict or have a serious alcohol problem.

Q: What kind of papers?

A: A certificate from a Norwegian doctor. (Oslo, fieldnote 16.05.2010)

It seems, therefore, that the gatekeeper used different eligibility criteria for natives and migrants. He said he could "recognize drug addicts by looks", but for a foreigner (someone that doesn't speak Norwegian well) 'looks' were not a sufficient criterion and a doctor's certificate was also required. In this case, eligibility had to be enforced by a migrant using his or her personal resources – such as language skills. In order to utilize social welfare capital, one has to control all of its components.

Medical help

Emergency medical help is provided in both countries regardless of legal status. However, once a health problem becomes prolonged, eligibility for health care must somehow be regulated. In Belgium everyone may receive an emergency medical card, but obtaining such a card demands knowledge and language skills. Polish migrants that speak French or know the system may help others in obtaining a medical card, sometimes in exchange for other favours. Generally, however, Poles try to avoid the health care system; they put off their visits and wait with their ailments as long as they are able to. In my informants' view, treatment of chronic illnesses may lead to "problems with insurance", which they would rather avoid. In Oslo one Polish rough sleeper who could no longer walk was admitted to hospital only to be deported to Poland a couple of weeks later because he had never worked

in Norway legally. Still, many Poles find themselves in the emergency room of a hospital because they were found drunk on the street, had an attack of epilepsy, or were beaten or even stabbed. The quality of medical help in both Brussels and Oslo is very highly valued.

Not having the necessary individual competences to communicate, my informants generally avoided the health care system. At the same time, most of them have been admitted to an emergency room, and they were therefore confident that in acute cases they would be taken care of, regardless of their documents or language skills. This gave them a sense of security and confidence in the health care system.

In Brussels, Polish street regulars come into contact with outreach workers; because some of my informants had relatively stable spots in the public space, they were regularly visited by street workers distributing food, the city police, street nurses, or a mobile team offering to take them to an emergency shelter in the winter. I did not observe the same kind of contact in Oslo, probably both because there is less outreach work in the city and because Polish street regulars do not have fixed spaces where they can be approached.

Institutional Perspectives

Service providers in Brussels and Oslo, mainly non-governmental faith-based organizations, do not have any programmes targeted specifically at homeless migrants. They acknowledge, however, that there are growing numbers of foreign nationals seeking help. Among the different groups of migrants, Eastern Europeans (and Poles in particular) are recognized as the largest. In one place I heard the opinion expressed that Poles are aggressive and demanding, while in another it was said that they are more passive than other migrants, particularly non-European migrants. The main issue that service providers say they encounter in dealing with Poles is that of communication, as Polish people rarely speak foreign languages. In Brussels two main points were stressed by the representatives of service providers. First, that help is taken by people that do not really need it and are taking advantage of free services to save money.

Help is for the homeless. And mainly for Belgians. Belgium cannot pay for those who don't feel like working here. There are many people who work hard, and then it's all right if something happens – we have to help. But you mustn't abuse this help. (Brussels, volunteer at a faith-based organization, 09.09.2009)

The other problem identified by Belgian institutions is that Polish people tend to come in large groups and cannot therefore be dealt with easily.

Normally, homeless Belgians come individually. They are individual clients. And here all of a sudden groups are coming, people who stick together and are often aggressive. (Brussels, fieldnote from conversation with head of a faith-based organization, 29.08.2009)

The same concerns were raised by employees of a Norwegian faith-based day centre.

Now there is a group of about 15 Poles coming every day. We gave them a sort of green card for two months because, honestly, we don't know what to do with them. They learnt very quickly what to say at the interview; they all answer the same. We are not going anywhere with this. For Norwegians and English-speaking people we have the same rules – we treat them individually. But for the Polish people we have no rules. We have to treat them as a group, and this is not our policy. Norwegians think that the Polish people are taking THEIR place; they come and they see them, and they say, they're taking over MY café, MY table, MY place (Oslo, volunteer at a faith-based organization, 01.03.2010)

Eastern European immigrants are seen as labour migrants – employed workers who have sufficient means to provide for themselves. Poles are also viewed as in a distinct category from the 'drug addicts' who are the principal beneficiaries of Norwegian homelessness programmes; they are seen as the ones that cause trouble and steal, that do not obey the rules, and that have conflicts with the 'indigenous' clients.

Norwegian clients complain to me that I let those East Europeans in; they do not feel comfortable. If something is stolen from here, unfortunately it appears to be the East Europeans. Norwegians know that they cannot steal in here – they know the rules here. (Oslo, doorkeeper at a faith-based organization, 16.05.2010)

From the interviews with those working or volunteering for Norwegian service providers it appeared that having to deal with the influx of Poles and other migrants seeking help was something quite new for them; they had no explicit policies. During my fieldwork in Oslo I observed how the daily practices of employees and workers changed over time, and how these changes impacted on official policy and evolved into more institutionalized regulations. This was clearly a case of bottom-up policy-making, where street-level employees and volunteers became the principal gate keepers and negotiated or enforced existing rules, thereby taking part in the process of defining new ones.

Dealing with new types of clients also led some organizations to limit their services. One soup kitchen excluded East Europeans from everyday services in 2009, on the basis that they are enforcing their policy of targeting drug addicts. Since then Poles have been coming only on Sundays, but in 2010 there were attempts to exclude migrants even from Sunday meals. A food and clothes distribution centre implemented a computerized registration system in 2009 to enforce the limit of one food

package per household per month; in 2010 the centre excluded asylum seekers from their services, stating that they do not have the capacity to serve everyone and that asylum seekers receive basic help at their asylum centres.

Another faith-based cafeteria and day centre in Oslo, whose principal funding comes from drug prevention programmes, and who therefore targets primarily people with drug-related problems, tried to include Poles in their programme. Admission to the service was granted based on individual interviews, and Poles who did not speak Norwegian or English were helped by a peer acting as an interpreter. All of them provided the same answers and claimed to have an addiction problem, and they were admitted conditionally. The organization sought legal advice from the city council on whether it could admit the migrants or not, but it did not receive a clear answer – in 2010 it remained the only cafeteria in Oslo where groups of Poles were served on a daily basis. Employees of the centre further expressed their wish to accept migrants onto other programmes, not limiting help to the provision of food, and later the same year a Russian-Polish native speaker was hired. This step towards improving communication was treated with suspicion by my informants, however, who believed that the organization was looking for ways to exclude them.

Some homeless Poles continued to go to places they had previously been asked to leave. They went individually – trying to disguise their foreign identity – stayed only a short time, and behaved well so as not to be perceived as a problem. In this way the strategy of coming with a group of peers, which helped them to feel more secure in a foreign environment, was sometimes replaced by a strategy of coming individually, and thus not raising suspicions about their foreign status and consequent entitlement to services.

Conclusion

For Polish migrants living on the streets of Brussels and Oslo, accessing low-threshold services was a basic survival strategy. The provision of services varied in the two cities – for instance in terms of emergency night shelters, which in turn influenced migrant survival strategies and demand for some forms of assistance. Organizations that provide low-threshold services for the homeless are facing growing demand from European labour migrants, leading to the negotiation of daily practices of assistance and an ongoing process of policy adjustment. In the case of Polish homeless migrants, it has been shown that the three elements of social welfare capital – entitlement, social capital and individual resources – interact and influence how and whether certain services are accessed. Eligibility, for instance, may be negotiated depending on individual's language skills. Social networks

provide information and peer guidance but, as with the example of shelters in Oslo, may also hinder the use of some services. The welfare system, and the provision of services, is not well understood by Polish rough sleepers; they rarely speak foreign languages and usually avoid services that require any sort of communication. In addition, not knowing the language may lead the migrant to believe that s/he is not eligible for certain services. Polish migrants tend to favour the places they know or those which are recommended by other Poles via word of mouth, and they tend to arrive in groups. However, competition with other groups over access to those services generates conflict; Polish street regulars compete for space with other panhandlers on the streets, and they compete with other migrant groups for access to night shelters in Brussels. The rules for access in Brussels are, however, clear and rarely questioned. In Oslo, on the other hand, Poles feel they are treated differently, and they feel excluded because low-threshold services are targeted at drug addicts. This lowers their trust in the welfare system as a whole. In addition, organizations may treat migrants differently where they cannot communicate with them, such as by requiring them to provide certain documentation. In these ways homeless migrants face exclusion on a number of levels.

Economic migration in the enlarged European Union has become an increasingly accessible option. The dynamics of migration indicate that the concept of citizenship, and therefore eligibility for particular benefits in Europe, is in the process of redefinition. Migrants are not only particularly vulnerable in terms of the housing market, but they may also find coping with physical homelessness much more difficult. It seems that for assistance programmes to function successfully, all resources of a target group should be taken into consideration. For instance, generalized trust is lowest among the marginalized segments of society (Hooghe and Stolle, 2003), and some characteristics of welfare regimes (degree of universality of eligibility for welfare provision) may further lower trust in institutions (Rothstein and Stolle, 2003).

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