

THE FIGHT AGAINST HOMELESSNESS: THE APPROACH OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC IN 2021

After following a concrete national action plan to combat homelessness in 2020, the Czech government decided against a new iteration of it for 2021, leaving the country without a systematic approach to address homelessness. While this did not prevent some positive changes in homelessness policies, other developments and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic were worrisome. This article by NADĚJE provides insight into the Czech Republic's fight against homelessness over the past year and considers what the future might bring for their country and organisation.



By **Jakub Dutka**, Chief Methodologist, NADĚJE

In the first place, it is crucial to note that in the light of the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who have been fleeing from Ukraine and arriving in the Czech Republic, it is extremely difficult to look back and reflect on the last year. It will be necessary to overcome countless challenges on the journey of helping such an enormous number of people who had to leave their homes behind. Some of the challenges we will have to face in the fight against homelessness are well known. They include managing fear and other strong emotions - our own as well as those of people in need-, searching for a dialogue, sources of solidarity, being able to improvise but also having a solution concept in place, having an honest and legit approach while working with information. What can we say then about the fight against homelessness in the Czech Republic in 2021?

Let us start with a brief description of a systematic approach at the national level. Until 2020, the Czech Republic had a specific national concept of prevention and management of the issue of homelessness (*Koncepce prevence a řešení problematiky bezdomovectví v ČR do roku 2020*), which helped to identify problems, suggested goals and individual subjects who would be responsible for meeting them. However, at the ministerial level, it was decided that

there would not be a 2021 conception. Suddenly, there was no strategic plan approved by the government to fight homelessness. However, after negotiation in 2021, it was decided that some key topics, such as improving health and social care accessibility for homeless people, would be part of the Social inclusion strategy 2021-2030.

We can talk of two partial successes in terms of legal changes in the last year. After two years of lengthy negotiations, the amendment of Code of Enforcement of conduct was voted upon and approved. Although the result is not optimal, it is certainly an improvement that puts the debtors in the Czech Republic in a better position. Indebtedness and distraint are often the cause of people becoming homeless, and the difficulty in overcoming them hinders their way out of social exclusion. Another important achievement of 2021 was made by the Constitutional Court: the cancellation of geographical areas ineligible to claim housing benefit. Since 2017, this legal measure did not allow people living in certain areas to claim housing benefits. The measure affected poor people in socially excluding locations and represented an unequal approach to helping people in need. On the contrary, there has been no progress in two key areas: the amendment of social services law and the creation of social housing law. The social services law is crucial for fighting homelessness in the Czech Republic because

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it legally defines social services and social work, determines relevant subjects and organisations, and the flow of financial resources. Most of the tools for helping people without a home are outlined by this law. Unfortunately, the law is from 2008 and it does need a number of revisions so that it can work more efficiently in the areas of prevention and support for people in need of housing; revisions could also improve the position of NGOs and support other helping professionals. The prepared amendment has been yet again postponed. Lastly, it needs to be highlighted that there is no law covering social housing. Last year, in Autumn, the Czech Parliament Elections brought political change with the election of a new government. It remains to be seen whether the new government will manage to prepare a law that would improve the access to housing for underprivileged people, help them find standard accommodation and provide professional support.

The most significant factor affecting the degree of support to people experiencing homelessness in 2021 was, without any doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic. Regions and cities were more or less intuitively establishing temporary housing facilities for homeless people, with empty hotels often being used. Similarly, some places successfully coordinated help with the pandemic such as testing, vaccinating, providing food, accommodating people from the street in new facilities, and isolating and treating ill individuals. Collective efforts prevented people experiencing homelessness from being among the most affected groups. It cannot be said that everything worked perfectly, but thanks to restrictions and the enormous personal commitment of many of the healthcare professionals, NGO workers, volunteers, and also cities and councils, the worst consequences were avoided.

A negative side effect of the pandemic is the discontinuation of work on new tools and developments to fight homelessness. This happened in our organisation, NADĚJE, as most of our resources had to be used to prevent and ease the impact of the pandemic. However, we - alongside other non-profit organisations and cities- began to work on a plan focusing on how to develop help for homeless people through the European Social Fund Operational Programme 'Employment'. We would like to focus on strengthening the role of our organisation in the field of social housing; we are considering three or four projects in different regions with specific attention to vulnerable groups (women, young people, families from socially excluded locations). In relation to the programs that are being prepared, we can also mention the initiative of the umbrella organisation *Sít aktérů pro domov* which has been, for the last year, working on the possible creation of a new systematic project to support professionals providing services to help people experiencing homelessness.

Unfortunately, 2021 was not a successful year for the fight against homelessness in the Czech Republic. Despite the indescribable commitment and effort of so many people, who have been going beyond their strength, most of the challenges and problematic areas remain unsolved. Let us hope for a better future, even if scepticism creeps into our minds.