Homeless Migrants and EU Mobile Citizens in Europe[1]

Marie-Therese Haj Ahmad and Volker Busch-Geertsema

GISS Bremen (Association for Innovative Research and Social Planning), Germany

Introduction

Data from the EASPN-Report (Baptista and Marlier, 2019) on national policies against homelessness and housing exclusion in Europe showed that in more than half of the 35 European countries covered by this study "a majority of homeless people are nationals or belong to the national majority population, although in some of them there are reports of overrepresentation of some ethnic minority populations and/or of recent rising trends (e.g., DE, DK, FI, NL, SE)". But on the other hand, "in several countries the available data show that the immigrant population and/or population from ethnic minority groups make up a majority among homeless people or, at least, among some sectors of the homeless population (e.g., people sleeping rough)" (Baptista and Marlier, 2019, p.43). The study mentions in particular Austria, Belgium (Brussels Region), France, Italy, and Luxemburg as examples for the latter.

Over the previous five years since the aforementioned EASPN-Report, the situation may well have changed again, and the numbers of migrants experiencing homelessness may have risen further in several countries. In Germany, for example, a national survey among persons who were homeless, but not sheltered by NGOs or municipalities, was undertaken in the first week of February 2022, in order to complement a point in time count about sheltered homelessness. It revealed that among the 38500 people who were sleeping on the street on at least one of the

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seven days of the first week of February, little more than one third (37%) were of foreign nationality or stateless, and about a quarter (26%) were among the 54 800 "hidden homeless" persons or "couch-surfers" (Brüchmann et al., 2022).[2]

Among the 178 100 people experiencing homelessness who were in temporary accommodation in Germany on the night of 31 January 2022, more than two thirds (69%) had a non-German nationality, including a large number who had finished their asylum seeker process and had been granted international protection (BMAS, 2022, p.42).[3] Amongst all sheltered homeless households who lived as couples with children, 91% had a non-German nationality; among single parents the proportion was 79% (BMAS, 2022, p.43). This also means that in Germany, and also in many other countries, you cannot talk about families experiencing homelessness without talking about migration specific issues. The proportion of non-nationals might not be as high as in Germany, but there are limited data that support this, e.g., from Ireland, showing that 39% of people experiencing homelessness in temporary accommodation had non-Irish nationality in early 2023 (refugees experiencing homelessness are not included in the Irish homelessness statistics).[4] In 2017, the European Observatory on Homelessness stated (based on research in 14 EU Member States) that "family homelessness cannot be dissociated from the flaws in migration policies of the European Union and the Member States. Migrant families are disproportionally affected by homelessness" (Baptista et al. 2017, p.5).

This paper is about homelessness of migrants and EU mobile citizens in Europe. While the main focus is on homelessness of EU mobile citizens, it also takes into account homelessness of third country migrants due to the reality in many Member States. As a large part of third country migrants come to European countries as asylum seekers and stay there after having completed the asylum seekers procedure as refugees (by definition those who have been granted international protection), this population will also be included in this report, insofar they have not succeeded to find a permanent home after being recognised as refugees. Finally, in some countries, national and local authorities are faced with the enormous challenge of providing temporary accommodation for Ukrainian war refugees (who have been granted international protection without having to pass through an asylum seekers process). Therefore, this group will also be included in this report.

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2 Total numbers provided here are extrapolated from the sample survey and include children, for whom nationality was not explicitly asked for.

3 Throughout the report, data from Germany are mentioned more frequently because very recent national data on homelessness allowing for the same depth of analysis are available only for very few EU countries.

4 Irish Times, from 24 February 2023, Homelessness in Ireland hits record peak of more than 11 700.

It should be noted that the various data sources often use different definitions of migrants. Some refer to nationality, while others to the place of birth. This can make a significant difference because quite a large proportion of persons born elsewhere may have the nationality of the country where they currently live, as is often the case in countries like France, the Netherlands, and also in Germany.

The Heterogeneity of Migration Inside and from Outside EU

Third-country migrants

Asylum seekers

According to the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), in 2022 almost one million people (966 000) started an asylum application in the EU+ countries (the Member States plus Norway and Switzerland). The largest groups of asylum applicants were Syrians, Afghans, Turks, Venezuelans, and Colombians. Around 43 000 applicants claimed to be unaccompanied minors. In the same year, the EU+ recognition rate (decisions that granted refugee status and subsidiary protection) was 40%. Recognition rates were especially high for Syrians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Eritreans, Yemenis, and Malians.[5]

Asylum seekers have a right to basic temporary accommodation until they are granted (or denied) international protection. In many – but not all – European countries this type of shelter is organised separately from homelessness services and is therefore not further elaborated in this report. A comparative study by the European Observatory on Homelessness, published in 2016, on "The Humanitarian Crisis and the Homelessness Sector in Europe" concluded that in most of those 12 EU countries which were selected for the study (Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, and the United Kingdom), "asylum seekers, refugees and individuals who had not been granted asylum were not present in homelessness services in large numbers", but also emphasised the different situation in France, Italy, and Greece, where the limited resources of formal systems for dealing with asylum seekers and increased pressure by rising numbers of applicants had led to increased numbers of them sleeping on the street and using homelessness services (Baptista et al., 2016, p.9). Meanwhile, the situation might have changed in a number of other countries, at least in relation to refugees experiencing homelessness.

5 See https://euaa.europa.eu/latest-asylum-trends-annual-overview-2022.

There are recent reports, for example from Ireland and Belgium, that – due to the pressure on reception centres – asylum seekers (especially single men) were sent to homeless shelters or on the street by the authorities (see, for example, the most recent report by EUAA, 2022).

Refugees

Refugees face obstacles in various Member States in accessing the labour market and thus becoming financially independent. In their report from 2021, the European Union Agency for Asylum stated that the COVID-19 pandemic had worsened the situation of refugees, making it more difficult for them to find jobs. The pandemic caused unemployment or lower wages and made refugees more vulnerable to homelessness (EUAA, 2021).

As mentioned in the introduction, homeless numbers in Germany include refugees if they were provided by municipalities or NGOs with temporary accommodation on the night of 31 January 2022 and have a clarified legal status, i.e., have already been granted international protection. More than one third (36%) of the 178 100 "sheltered" people experiencing homelessness came from the current 'main' countries of origin for asylum seekers (like Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq; BMAS, 2022). So it can be estimated that a minimum of 64 000 refugees were homeless and "sheltered" in Germany on 31 January 2022 (probably much more, as refugees still living in accommodation for asylum seekers were not fully covered by the statistics and not all refugees come from the three countries mentioned).

This was before the war in the Ukraine started, and it is expected that numbers of foreign people experiencing homelessness will have risen sharply over the period January 2022 to 2023. This will in all probability also shape the household and gender structure of homelessness in Germany, as most of the Ukrainian refugees are women with children.

In the case of Ukrainian nationals fleeing the Russian war against their country, it is important to mention that since 4 March 2022 they do not have to undergo an asylum procedure, but can register for temporary protection in EU+ countries under the Temporary Protection Directive (DPT). By May 2023, the total number of refugees from Ukraine recorded across Europe was given by the UNHCR with over eight million.[6] The reception process for Ukrainians is much quicker and smoother than the regular asylum procedure and under the DPT most people (mainly women and children) arriving in the EU have immediate access to the job market, social and health care services, and the education system in the country of their arrival. However, even with these clear advantages vis-a-vis asylum seekers, and despite remarkable efforts by governments as well as by civil society to help them with

6 See https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine.

housing and job integration, many have only secured low paid employment and limited access to decent or long-term housing, resulting in many having to stay on in reception centres and other types of temporary accommodation.

Of the countries neighbouring the Ukraine, Poland, with 1.6 million refugees from Ukraine recorded in the country, and Czech Republic, with more than half a million people, were the countries recording the highest numbers. In other European countries, Germany, with over a million Ukrainian refugees, recorded the largest numbers, followed by Italy and Spain, with around 175 000, and France, with almost 120 000. How many of these refugees are currently living in temporary accommodation remains unknown and will also change considerably over time. Further, in many cities with tight housing markets, their risk to remain homeless after having lost their homes by fleeing the war remains high, despite their privileged position in comparison to many other third country migrants.

Irregular migrants

Another group of migrants experiencing homelessness are third-country migrants with an irregular status, who no longer have a legal residence status for various reasons (e.g., through overstaying their visa, divorce from a spouse with permanent residence without having acquired an independent residence status yet, unauthorised entry into the country). No reliable figures are available about this group and an estimate is problematic, as those without valid papers do not identify themselves anywhere in order to avoid becoming identified as irregular with the possibility of deportation. In 2008, 1.9 to 3.8 million migrants were estimated to be living irregularly in Europe – less than 1% of the EU27 population at the time. This group is diverse in many ways including country of origin, gender, age, and education. Just as most migrants live in urban regions, those with irregular status also tend to live in cities. Irregular migrants may be employed, living with family or friends, and have few support needs, others live in destitution (Delvino and Spencer, 2019). As research shows, "that insecure or irregular status creates an imbalance of power that puts people at greater risk of exploitation in the workplace, in personal relationships, and other settings" (PICUM, 2023, p.2). In general, legally and practically irregular migrants have the most limited access to social rights and services (Homberger et al., 2022; Hermans et al., 2020).

EU mobile citizens

According to latest data from 2023, in 2021 10.2 million EU citizens have been residing in an EU country other than the country of their citizenship – usually because of work. Among them, Romanian citizens have been the largest group (24% or 3.1 million people), followed by Polish and Italian citizens (11% or 1.5 million people each), and Portuguese citizens (7% or one million people) (EC, 2023). There is no reliable data on the numbers of homeless mobile EU citizens available. Based

on the employment rate of mobile EU citizens, which stood at 72.7% in 2020, it can be assumed that only a small minority of this group has become homeless at some stage (Eurostat, 2021).

There are several local reports about homeless and destitute EU mobile citizens, but no European overview of their situation is available. In Barcelona, Arrels Foundation interviewed 99 EU mobile citizens sleeping on the street; looking for a job or joining family or friends were given as the main reasons for moving to Barcelona (Arrels, 2021). In Brussels, information about EU mobile citizens experiencing homelessness was collected from 314 people, more than a third of them living on the street. They also reported to having moved to Brussels mainly to find a job. Eighty five percent became homeless in Brussels; only five people had been homeless already in the country of their origin. The majority resided longer than five years in Brussels, and 25% longer than one year, but shorter than five years (Diogenes and FEANTSA 2022).

For Germany, some data about the extent of homelessness among EU mobile citizens exist from the aforementioned studies. Taking sheltered people experiencing homelessness, sleeping on the street, and couch surfers together, and taking into account some double counting, we can assume that around 262 600 persons in Germany were homeless at the end of January 2022. Of these, about 23 100, or 8.8%, were nationals of another EU Member State. The group most discussed by the public, because they are often especially disadvantaged, are people experiencing homelessness from Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania. Their number in Germany at the end of January 2022 was at 17 700, or 6.7% of the total. The majority of these EU citizens experiencing homelessness (around 10 700) were sheltered, but among those people experiencing homelessness who were not provided with a formal shelter from NGOs and municipalities, the proportion of EU mobile citizens was higher (8.3% instead of 6.7%; own calculation on the basis of Brüchmann et al., 2022 and BMAS, 2022).

Another particularly vulnerable group of migrants experiencing homelessness are people of Roma ethnic origin. Although no accurate data is available, anecdotal evidence of practitioners as well as the before mentioned report of Brussels suggest that a significant share of Roma experiencing homelessness living in the EU are EU citizens, but not all of them.

Migration-Specific Challenges

Challenges of migrants and EU mobile citizens

No matter the individual profiles, migrants and mobile EU citizens are more likely to be at risk of precarity compared to nationals experiencing homelessness within a given Member State. There are some migration-specific aspects, which make migrants and mobile EU citizens more vulnerable for homelessness and precarity and make it difficult to overcome destitution. These refer mainly to (a) residence status, (b) discrimination, (c) language barriers, and (d) transnational living.

(a) Residence status

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the legal status is highly intertwined with access of a migrant person to public social services. Both migration policies and social policies are with limited competencies at EU level as well at the level of Member States. Due to the special character of EU citizenship, which differentiates forms of mobility and legally hierarchises migrants within the EU as well as in the member states, the residence status is crucial to both excluding migrants and mobile EU citizens from social services or giving them access to those services and so to sustain or to overcome destitution (van der Mei, 2005). Asylum seekers, for example, in many Member States have a limited access to the labour market and therefore are not able to become financially independent. Also, their access to the regular housing market might be limited by law. Mobile EU citizens in turn are in some circumstances, as will be elaborated later in this paper, excluded from social benefits, and might not have built up sufficient rights for unemployment, thus running the risk of homelessness. On the other hand, for example in Belgium and likely in many Member States, housing, or at least an address, is a prerequisite for a regularised legal status, which then in turn allows access to social services (Striano, 2019).

(b) Discrimination

Another migration-specific aspect (not only) of homelessness is racism.[7] Data on this topic is very rare still, though this highly sensitive issue is of great relevance for the everyday life of migrants experiencing homelessness and mobile EU citizens before and after migration. The available data suggest that when it comes to homelessness, racism goes beyond individual behaviour and is to be understood rather as a socially effective system of producing and demarcating 'others', which serves to clarify 'one's own' and preserve one's own privileges and adapts accordingly to the respective circumstance. Therefore, discrimination takes different forms in this field when it comes to mobile EU-citizens, especially

7 Another form of discrimination, that all people experiencing homelessness are faced with, is povertyism, which means "discrimination on grounds of socioeconomic disadvantage" (UN, 2022, p.5).

anti-Roma discrimination and Anti-Slavic racism (e.g. Teodorescu and Molina, 2021; Westeson, 2022). People of Roma ethnic origin are the largest minority in Europe and have been persecuted and discriminated against for centuries. So far, none of the EU's inclusion frameworks and Roma action plans have been able to end this: In France, for example, Antigypsyism culminates in the eviction of informal settlements without offering the residents better alternative housing (cf. Cherief 2020; Kóczé 2018). Evictions are part of the everyday experience of Roma in Romania and Slovakia. And with regard to recent refugee movements from Ukraine, it should be noted that all over Europe Ukrainian Roma are not that openly welcomed like Non-Roma and non-white refugees (FEANTSA 2020; ERRC 2023). Racism against non-EU migrants is also a major challenge. It is important to keep in mind that discrimination does not refer to people's self-identification, but to all people that are identified as 'other' by the majority. Discrimination and racism in all forms manifests itself both overtly and subtly in every day-practices and discourses and excludes people. Last, but not least, the politically enforced discourse in the public about migrants becoming an "unreasonable burden on the social assistance system" (Wathelet 2014, n.p.) has some discriminatory, especially antigypsyist content (e.g., Ratzmann, 2022; Giansanti et al., 2022; Clahn and Guild, 2010). In the field of homelessness especially antigypsyism is a relevant factor all over Europe (FEANTSA, 2020; ERRC, 2023).

(c) Language barriers

According to the available data, another crucial barrier against accessing the formal labour market, regular housing, and social services is the lack of necessary language skills. As reports, e.g., for Germany, show, "many mobile EU citizens are not able to meet the requirements or provide the required documents due to language barriers and ignorance of bureaucratic procedures" (Bischof-Hermann-Stiftung, 2021, p.51). Even if there is a right to reimbursement of costs for interpreters and translation services, this is rarely taken up because it is not known, or the application is too complex. Consequently, migrants and mobile EU citizens are more likely to be excluded from social services and the housing market. Refugees, moreover, are not always entitled to attend language courses until their asylum procedure has been completed. Due to homelessness, it is often difficult for migrants and EU mobile citizens to quickly improve their language skills to the necessary level because the lack of a private and safe study space. Also, there is often a lack of time to acquire a certain level of language skills when migrants and mobile EU citizens have to work to ensure their income and/or to sustain their workers' status, or due to the lack of childcare in case of families. Finally, practice experience shows a hierarchisation of languages, by which some migrants are more marginalised than others because of their language.

(d) Transnational living

The available data show that a notable proportion of migrants experiencing homelessness and mobile EU citizens live a transnational life with a social net crossing borders. Some support their families financially in their country of origin or in another country and some travel back and forth between different countries to keep in touch with family members or friends. Transnational lifestyles are accompanied by the fact that, depending on the situation, it can be difficult for individuals to manage their current everyday life with the requisite level of attention (e.g., Durst and Nagy, 2018; Cherkezova, 2013). However, if migrants and EU mobile citizens stay (repeatedly) for only a short period of time in another Member State, their risk of precarious living conditions such as homelessness increases (Kovacheva and Vogel, 2012).

Heterogenous challenges for EU Member States

Migration varies from one Member State to another and also within one state. In many Member States, there is the tendency to refuse accommodation to mobile EU citizens and migrants. In Germany, for example, only 23% of 167 municipalities surveyed, reported sheltering EU citizens experiencing homelessness in 2019, with many more municipalities reporting EU citizens experiencing homelessness (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2019). Some of them accommodate them with lower standards than others. Even though the EU's Reception Conditions Directive for asylum seekers exists, which applies equally to all Member States, the directive is implemented very differently in Member States, although it is supposed to ensure a common standard of reception for refugees with a minimum of social rights. Therefore, migration and homelessness are in different forms highly interconnected within the EU. While the situation of mobile EU citizens and homelessness is elaborated in the following chapter, this paragraph focusses on the different ways to deal with migration of third-country nationals into the EU. On the one side of the current possible spectrum, refugees in the EU have been living in extreme destitute conditions for years, for example in camps on Moria and other Greek islands or in the forests of the Polish-Belarusian border. On the other side of the current possible spectrum, European municipalities welcome them within the framework of alliances of so-called solidarity cities and provide them with housing and various types of support.

While extraordinary pressure of asylum seekers is experienced by Southern Member States (especially Greece, Italy, and Spain), Member States in the North East and South East, like Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania, and Latvia, are losing population as countries because of inter European movements (the so-called 'brain drain'). Some Member States in the East have been, for a long time, very critical against reception of asylum seekers, but now some of them are main recipient countries of refugees from Ukraine. Others are now restricting their access after several years of being more open to immigration. The various policies can lead – often unintentionally – to

homelessness and the exclusion from social participation of people who have found their way into the EU. On the one hand, this concerns those whose asylum application has been rejected and who therefore cannot formally show any prospects of staying vis-à-vis landlords, which disadvantage them compared to other housing applicants. But this also concerns people who gained a protection status and can, from a legal point of view, look for an apartment. But due to little experience in or knowledge about finding housing, as well as prejudices and language barriers, they are disadvantaged, especially in a tight housing market.

The different policies make it clear that the actual number of immigrants is not the only reason for governments and societies to be more open to migrants than others. While Member States are not limited by the EU in the maximum support they offer to migrants and mobile EU citizens, the debates on national and local level are mostly about providing no more than the minimum required by law.

Intra-EU-Migration and Homelessness

One of the freedoms enjoyed by EU citizens is the right to free movement, which is linked to further conditions, in particular to employment status. Free movement of workers allows EU citizens to move freely between and to reside and work in another EU country for an unlimited period. Consequently, regulating migration within the EU is hardly possible, if at all, within the framework of residence law. Some member states are therefore resorting to other legal areas in which the EU has so far had little competence, such as social law, and hope for indirect migration-controlling effects, e.g. by restricting on the national level access to minimum subsistence benefits for persons who are classified as not being part of the labour force. In this context, the notion of 'worker' is repeatedly negotiated as there is no concrete definition. Consequently, not all EU mobile citizens are exempt from basic rights, but a considerable proportion is.

EU mobile citizens experiencing homelessness – a special target group?

Although there is a lack of systematic comparative research, there are a few local studies on the profile of migrants experiencing homelessness (for example Striano, 2019; Bischof-Hermann-Stiftung, 2021; Arrels, 2021; Stockholms Stadsmission, 2021; Kastanje and Hoff, 2017). All of them show that migrants experiencing homelessness and mobile EU citizens experiencing homelessness are a heterogeneous group when it comes to nationality, age, gender, education, professional experiences, health, household type, etc.

> It ranges from those who have good opportunities to find a job and therefore mainly need to be guided into the labour market, to those who have a high level of mental health, alcohol and drug abuse problems and therefore urgently need access to services that can help them to recover or at least to stabilise. […] people who are working poor or experience precarious working conditions, people who had a job without a contract and had an accident, elderly people, people with disabilities or chronic illnesses, single parents, pregnant women, children, victims of domestic violence – to mention just a few. (FEANTSA, 2018, pp.1-2)

A few similarities can be stated: the majority are male and rather young, being a national of Central and Eastern European countries, with increasing numbers of EU mobile citizens from southern countries, especially Spain and Italy. EU mobile citizens predominantly move to another Member State aiming to improve their living situation by accessing the labour market, but also with the hope of finding better housing and healthcare conditions. Thus, the homeless population also reflects the diversity of society and it is not enough to speak of 'the' migrants experiencing homelessness, but the situation of homelessness is different for different people.

As mentioned earlier, families make up a considerable proportion of migrants experiencing homelessness. Homelessness is a particular risk for families, as it is a challenge both for parents who have responsibility for their children and for the children in particular. Often, the accommodation facilities for people experiencing homelessness are neither family friendly nor child friendly. There is often a lack of retreat possibilities and space for development and creation, as well as a lack of protection against assaults. It is reported from some countries that the child benefit, to which all EU citizens living in a Member State are entitled to in the same amount as nationals (ECJ, judgement of 07.02.2019, ref. C-322/17; ECJ case C-328/20), is repeatedly challenged politically, for example in Austria (EC, 2019). However, in practice, this family benefit is subject to attempts to regulate migration, even if not by law. For Romanian and Bulgarian nationals in Germany, for example, the access to the child benefit is significantly more difficult than for nationals and other foreigners because the family fund asks for a lot more documents and explanations then for other nationals. In consequence, Romanian and Bulgarian families sometimes wait many months for payment (BAGFW, 2021).

Ways of EU mobile citizens into homelessness

Regardless of the group, migrants are more likely to be at risk of precarity. As several studies have shown (e.g., Diakonisches Werk Hamburg, 2022; Riedner and Haj Ahmad, 2020; Striano, 2019), arriving and stabilising the living situation in a new country brings considerable challenges that have to be overcome. Mobile EU citizens experiencing homelessness often find themselves in a vicious circle and bureaucratic maze where various actors point to each other and from which it is

almost impossible to escape without external support and/or an authority taking ownership. The absence of employment, income, housing, address, and access to services and welfare benefits generates a vicious circle that often arises with arrival and may be resolved, or not, due to a legal framework. However, this framework excludes certain groups of people on the ground of their legal status and further hinders progress due to a lack of knowledge of one's rights and of knowledge about the system. Moreover, it takes time to escape this cycle, and the longer it takes, the more difficult it becomes to overcome it since more problems arise.

Therefore, to better understand homelessness of migrants, it is crucial to consider the interaction between individual migration decisions, structural factors like housing and labour market, migration policies, and social policies (Haj Ahmad, 2022; Hermans et al., 2020). As an effect of this complexity, migrants are more vulnerable to precarious living conditions, such as homelessness, labour exploitation, insufficient health care, etc. Systematic research on the emergence and course of homelessness of this target group is largely absent. Some ways into homelessness can be described prototypically:

- Entering the country with the promise of a job, but nobody there to pick up at the bus station as agreed before departure and nobody answering the phone, running out of money;
- Entering the country with the hope of profiting from a strong economy and finding a well-paid job quickly, which does not happen;
- Escaping from an exploitative employment relationship in which the job was linked to a place of residence and thus becoming homeless;
- Losing the job and therefore not being able to pay the rent for a long time;
- Not being entitled to social and/or unemployment benefits; and
- Fear of returning to country of origin after losing job/housing because of shame or not having any money to return, or worse, debts.

Often, EU mobile citizens experiencing homelessness at some point of time run out of financial resources to bridge the time without a job and housing, and due to a lack of local language understanding and insufficient knowledge of both one's rights and of the welfare system, they do not ask anywhere for support. Also, information about rights and bureaucratic procedures might be inaccessible. Others find their way to the authorities and apply for support and/or accommodation and are turned away due to a lack of language skills, or their application is rejected because they cannot show a residence status that qualifies for benefits. Thereafter, they are stuck in limbo and have to rely heavily on social networks and so-called 'humanitarian' support that is often – not least due to limited resources – based on the distinction

of ‘deserving’ and ‘non-deserving’ instead of an individual right to support (Willen and Cook, 2016). For many people this situation remains for years and precarity becomes chronic. Problems that could have been solved earlier lead people into extreme exclusion. From an economic point of view, it would save costs to support migrants and mobile EU citizens in their socioeconomic integration because when individual problems are entrenched, the costs for solving them is high.

Ways out of homelessness of EU mobile citizens

Migration is more complex than can be depicted in a simple push-pull model. Rather, many different aspects come together (Mezzadra/Neilson, 2013 Hermans et al, 2020) and many of the considerations at individual level can contribute to a migration decision. Also, in order to solve this social problem of homelessness, different aspects and stakeholders need to be taken into account. Migration poses new challenges for the homeless system and all actors involved need to question their own rules and practices.

In many cases, the homelessness systems with their various actors are still insufficiently adapted to the diversification of their clients, and migrants and mobile EU citizens are perceived as ‘challenges’. As an example, Slobodzian and Ketelsen (2023) note for Berlin, Germany, that the more complex the social legal situation, as well as the language barriers that require specific knowledge, the more tools and time it takes to resolve. This is often lacking both in counselling services and in services of state authorities. Furthermore, the contact of authorities with EU citizens are characterised by an attitude that leads to a restrictive interpretation of possible scopes of action (Slobodzian and Ketelsen, 2023). However, it is worthwhile to look away from the limits of what is possible and toward the options for action. Due to the complex causes of homelessness of mobile EU citizens, various stakeholders are involved in the emergence and existence of this social problem.

What should be done?

First of all, EU citizens experiencing homelessness should be offered humanitarian support, including emergency accommodation by the competent authorities, regardless of their residence or social status, unless they voluntarily sleep on the street. This contributes to the prevention of many subsequent problems. It also enables them to stabilise, and thus develop a viable perspective for the future. The argument of the ‘welfare magnet’ thesis – which is expressed again and again in conversations, when things are said like “when we offer mobile EU citizens more support than other municipalities, then they will all come to us” – must be countered by a compensation mechanism at national as well as at EU level. This could be a

financial compensation payment for those municipalities or Member States that invest in the integration of mobile EU citizens. It is also recommended that the standards of emergency accommodation be harmonised.

Furthermore, access to housing and the labour market should be created in cooperation with the stakeholders because integration into the labour market is crucial to overcome homelessness. This applies particularly to voluntary and state services and authorities for labour market integration as well as emergency housing assistance and the central stakeholders of the housing market. It is important to create new cooperation structures on the one hand, and on the other hand to use (legal) scopes by the authorities for the purpose of integration instead of interpreting it restrictively, since there is no reasonable alternative to integration. Finally, the attitude of all involved stakeholders (administration, policy makers, NGOs, media, public) that EU citizens experiencing homelessness are also potential workers who practice exactly what the EU freedom of movement promotes – the migration of labour – is crucial here.

Concerning the legal framework, national governments are to review their existing legislation with regard to (possibly unintended) exclusionary effects that lead people into homelessness and destitution, and change it. The extent to which mobile EU citizens are protected in their fundamental and social rights in the event of a migration decision should also be examined at EU level. Thus, at the EU level, the development of a legal framework of European social citizenship should be promoted in the frame of its competencies, e.g., by making Directive 883/2004 more inclusive.

At the level of individual support, a rights-based approach is needed that understands EU mobile citizens experiencing homelessness as rights-bearers and supports them in implementing their rights, if necessary, through legal action. This requires the appropriate legal know-how and cooperation with lawyers. In addition, services and facilities in the field of homelessness and related areas can make their services as open and inclusive as possible. This includes linguistic diversity as well as non-verbal communication and an inclusive culture of diversity.

Finally, effective measures against discrimination must be developed and implemented at all relevant levels of society. Regarding EU citizens experiencing homelessness, this concerns in particular measures to fight discrimination against Roma people. Roma action plans at local, national, and EU levels are a possible start, but due to its deep roots within European society, none of them have been able to end it yet.

All these recommendations do not refer exclusively to solving the situation of mobile EU citizens experiencing homelessness, but ultimately concern all migrants. In addition, the same measures for preventing and overcoming homelessness apply to migrants experiencing homelessness as to non-migrant persons: prevention, basic provision including emergency accommodation, access to (mental) health and social services, permanent housing, and housing support.

Good Practice

In practice, migrants experiencing homelessness and their support needs are dealt with in different ways. In many cases this is characterised by exclusion and limited access, but there are also examples of good practice. Some examples are presented here:

FEAD

The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) has been a fund on its own and is now part of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), which is a main instrument for implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights and for EU's engagement in social policies. The FEAD is intended to contribute to alleviating the worst forms of poverty in the EU. While most of the Member States decided to use FEAD funds for food programmes, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden decided to offer non-material assistance to the most deprived. In these countries, FEAD projects intervene in a humanitarian way in situations of exclusion from further assistance that result from restricted access to national benefit systems, without fundamentally changing them. Guided by a rights-based approach, social workers, often multilingual and outreach-based, advise EU-citizens experiencing homelessness and support them in overcoming their social problems, e.g., in securing a livelihood, health care, childcare, etc. One example is MOCT – Berliner Brücke zur Teilhabe [MOCT – Berlin Bridge towards Participation] of GEBEWO GmbH, Berlin, Germany.[8] In Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands, similar projects successfully support EU mobile citizens experiencing homelessness favouring a rights-based approach over humanitarian aid. Beyond this individual support, which in many places was only made possible by FEAD, the programme also contributes to making the effects of exclusions from national social benefits visible.

8 https://www.gebewo.de/MOCT-berliner-bruecke-zur-teilhabe

Multilingual counselling

One of the migration-specific challenges of migrants experiencing homelessness described above is overcoming language barriers. In many places, this practical problem is addressed by employing multilingual staff and/or bringing in interpreters. For example, KOMPASSET in Kopenhagen, Denmark [9], benefits from intra-EU migration and has employed multilingual staff to advise migrants experiencing homelessness.

However, the necessary translation services go beyond purely linguistic translations. Rather, in individual cases, an explanation of the systems, the circumstances, and the bureaucratic requirements is required, and thus an explanatory mediation between the migrants experiencing homelessness and the representatives of authorities and other institutions that are in contact with them. In this way, for example, the staff of the Brückenschlag of the Bischof-Hermann-Stiftung in Münster, Germany [10], enables access to landlords, to medical care, and to schools and other educational institutions. When legally secure counselling is needed, they call in professional interpreters.

Medical care for everybody

There is evidence of a high prevalence, particularly among those experiencing long-term homelessness, of different mental and physical illnesses (Pleace, 2023). Due to legally restricted access to national social and health care systems, as well as non-needs-based and/or discriminatory structures of regular assistance systems, precarious migrants often do not receive the medical care they need. Human rights organisations such as Doctors of the World provide basic medical care for migrants in various European countries. In Sweden, the organisation provides primary care for, mainly, European citizens and undocumented migrants at several locations. The medical services are complemented by legal advice and psychosocial support. All services are provided in several languages. [11]

In Vienna, Austria, the Neunerhaus Health Centre [12] offers free medical, ophthalmological, and dental care as well as social work support for people experiencing homelessness with and without health insurance coverage. The dental services cover the same spectrum as those insured people in Austria get covered by their medical insurance. In addition to medical care, social workers clarify the health insurance status of EU citizens and, if the result is positive, the treatment costs are reimbursed by the Vienna Regional Health Insurance Fund. Language barriers are

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9 https://kirkenskorshaer.dk/koebenhavn/the-compass

10 https://bischof-hermann-stiftung.de/unsere-taetigkeitsfelder/projekte/brueckenschlag

11 https://lakareivarlden.se/vart-arbete/

12 https://www.neunerhaus.at/hilfe/arzt/

bridged by video interpreting, which is financed by ESF funds. The work of the health centre is complemented by mobile doctors who provide medical care at 23 service centres for people experiencing homelessness in Vienna.

Social integration / access to social services

Inspired by the idea of shaping the urban community on the ground in a participatory and human rights-based way, as well as strengthening the local economy, municipalities around the world are joining forces to jointly develop ways toward inclusive urban communities. Such networks are also growing in Europe, for example Alliance Migration [13], Moving Cities [14], or Solidarity Cities. [15] More and more cities from many Member States are engaged in one or more such networks, e.g., Palermo (Italy), Barcelona (Spain), Gdànsk (Poland), Berlin (Germany), Grenoble (France), Thessaloniki (Greece), and Ljubljana (Slovenia). One measure among others is the conceptualisation of so-called Municipal ID cards, which are issued to all residents of a city regardless of their nationality and residence status. Such a card gives them access to social services and thus enables them to realise their social rights. Citizenship is thus complemented by urban citizenship. In Zurich, Switzerland, a municipal referendum decided that a proposal for the introduction of the so-called Züri City Card should be presented by 2024/2025 (Morawek, 2019).

Anti-discrimination

In order to counter the migration-specific aspect of discrimination on a structural level, a nationwide Reporting and Information Centre on discrimination of Roma and people identified as of Roma origin was created in Germany in 2022. [16] It documents incidents against (presumed) Roma people in Germany, offers counselling to those affected, and informs the public. Among other things, physical attacks, threats, damage to property, graffiti, insults, hate comments, and propaganda material such as inflammatory writings, posters, or stickers are registered. In addition, awareness-raising and empowerment measures such as workshops and regional conferences for state actors, civil society organisations, and those affected are carried out.

The European Roma Rights Centre [17] is a Roma-led international organisation that documents human rights compliance and the impact of discrimination on access to economic and social rights in different countries. To this end, it conducts research on specific topics such as hate speech against Roma, school segregation,

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13 https://alliance-migrations.fr

14 https://moving-cities.eu

15 https://solidaritycities.eu/about

16 https://www.antiziganismus-melden.de

17 http://www.errc.org

forced evictions of Roma, and other topics. The main objective of the ERRC is to highlight discrimination against Roma people in its breadth and diversity and to empower Roma organisations and individuals to use a rights-based approach – especially litigation – to combat it. Therefore, in addition, they support proceedings before national courts in cases of discrimination and, in cases of doubt, proceedings before the European Court of Human Rights.

Transnational social work

In order to adequately support mobile EU-citizens who move within the EU for the purpose of employment within the framework of the EU free movement, the complex interconnections generated by transmigration practices must be taken into account. Within the framework of the ERASMUS+ project Transnational Social Services[18] with German and Bulgarian participants, practical concepts for professional support of safe mobility in a transnational context were developed. Strategies for both an informed migration decision and support in the destination country are discussed to ensure, for example, that the legal requirements and restrictions are communicated before leaving the country or that legal claims are enforced after a return.

Conclusion

Homelessness in Europe is in many terms heterogenous in its composition. Migrants and mobile EU citizens are especially vulnerable to homelessness and destitution. To overcome it, it is important to better understand the mechanisms that lead them into such situations of extreme exclusion. A complex interplay of legal framework, political decisions, bureaucratic requirements, a lack of resources (such as emergency accommodation), and individual aspects (e.g., language proficiency, health, education) can lead to homelessness and make it difficult to overcome it. Although the situation is complex, there are scopes of action on the individual, local, national, and EU levels, which show that homelessness of migrants and EU citizens is solvable. To promote the debate about necessary steps toward a solution, both the possible scopes of action and limits of each stakeholder should be elaborated on concretely at each level. Despite the existing limitations, joint ways to reduce and end homelessness among this target group can be found.

[18] https://tss-net.eu/de/

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