

FEANTSA Migration and Asylum study visit to Poland

Wrocław (13 October 2022) and Poznań (14 October 2022)

FEANTSA has worked on the relation between migration and asylum to homelessness for over a decade, given that immigrants are highly represented amongst the homeless population across the EU, with some cities welcoming more immigrants than nationals in their homelessness services. Both third country nationals, including refugees and asylum seekers, as well as mobile EU citizens exercising their right to free movement, are pushed into situations of destitution and homelessness because of continuous restrictive migration rules, combined with discrimination and administrative barriers.

As part of its activities, FEANTSA strives to facilitate the exchange of information and knowledge between experts and members working in the area of migration. To this end, in October 2022 we organised a study visit in Poland to learn about the work of our members in relation to the reception of refugees from Ukraine, and to discuss the topic of reconnections of mobile EU citizens facing homelessness. During the first day, we visited several reception centres and shelters in Wrocław, and we shared good practices from across the EU concerning the material reception conditions for refugees arriving from Ukraine and for asylum seekers in general. On the second day, we visited Barka headquarters in Poznań, where mobile EU citizens are accommodated and supported in the context of reconnections to their countries of origin.



The study visit gathered organisations from several European countries together with representatives from European and local authorities, which allowed for different perspectives to feature in the discussions. Participants from FEANTSA members were Simona Barbu and Sergio Pérez, FEANTSA secretariat; Nicoletta Coppola, DePaul (Ireland); Kristina Peters, Europa.Brücke.Münster (Germany); Maëlle Léna, Fédération des Acteurs de la Solidarité (FAS, France); Maurizio Dogliotti, Stockholms Stadsmission (Sweden); Heini Puurunen, Vvary (Finland); Saskia Neibig, Crisis (UK) and our hosts Jakub Wilczek, from the National Federation for Solving the Problem of Homelessness; and Małgorzata Sieńczyk, from St Brother Albert's Aid Society. Guest participants in Wrocław were: Yosr Dallegi, Fondation de France; and Szymon Pogorzelski, European Commission (DG HOME). Guest participants in Poznań were: Jan Strączyński and Paweł Walaszczyk (Agape Częstochowa); Aleksandra Krugły (Habitat for Humanity); Agnieszka Radziwinowiczowna (University of Warsaw).

13th October - Reception and housing conditions for Ukrainian refugees, Wrocław

The first day started with a visit to *Przystanek Grochowa*, a temporary shelter set up by FEANTSA member St Brother Albert's Aid Society where refugees from Ukraine are hosted, and which is coordinated by Małgorzata Sieńczyk. After visiting the facilities and meeting the team of the shelter, the participants, including delegates from Wrocław city council and representatives from other CSOs supporting refugees from Ukraine in Wrocław, had the opportunity to share their experiences. We started the exchanges with an overview of the local context from Wrocław. According to the latest estimations, at the time of the visit around 100,000 people from Ukraine arrived in the city after the start of the war, out of which 2,500 were living in facilities for people in homelessness. *Przystanek Grochowa* is the largest one, hosting around 400 people. It was mentioned that being entitled to the same welfare benefits as Polish nationals (a right granted under the Temporary Protection Directive, TPD) is key in preventing further exclusion of Ukrainians. Specifically, this type of support is important regarding housing benefits, seeing that most Ukrainians in employment earn minimum wage (around €650/month) and the housing costs skyrocketed in Poland even before the start of the war.

The main challenges for the adequate reception of refugees were underlined, one of them being that the programme to host Ukrainians in private accommodation is not sufficiently coordinated or supported by the government. The risk of discrimination in the job and housing markets in the near future was mentioned, as well as the precariousness of employment, making it difficult to live independently. Most importantly, it was highlighted there are no plans from public authorities to cope with an expected massive influx of people during winter. The lack of a medium/long term strategy for securing independent and adequate housing for people remains worrying, together with the fact that in many cases the shelters that were meant to be temporary are now being used for long term accommodation. The issue of EU funds was discussed, noting that local CSOs supporting the most vulnerable, such as homeless service providers, have reduced access to them. Further delays in agreements between the EU and the government in Poland also contribute to this situation.



Presentations were made during the visit by the participants. Szymon Pogorzelski, Policy Officer within DG HOME, talked about the EU response to the arrival of refugees from Ukraine, notably the implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive and the use of EU funds. The fact that beneficiaries of TPD should have access to suitable accommodation and the necessary means of subsistence was insisted on. Regarding funding, we learnt more about the flexibility introduced in the ESF+ to address the needs of Ukrainians, and the upcoming possibilities of financing under the 2021 – 2027 Programming period. The EC has also continued to consider ways to work closer with relevant CSOs and local authorities. Housing and accommodation to ensure dignified reception conditions for refugees is a priority for the EC and other relevant stakeholders like UNHCR, which will set up further initiatives in this area. The Commission will allocate funding to support the development of the Safe Homes initiative, beyond the guidelines and financial aid that the governments can offer to the private hosts at present.

Maëlle Léna (FAS) presented the situation in France with the reception of people arriving from Ukraine, while at the same time highlighting the differences in treatment of asylum seekers arriving from outside Europe. She also underlined that many service providers for people in homelessness have been noticing rising numbers of Ukrainians in the weeks prior to the study visit, which might continue and even intensify during the winter months. However, with some people also leaving to return to Ukraine, it is hard to predict what the overall tendency will be in the coming months. Despite the rights conferred in the TPD, the traditional restrictive approach embedded in the French asylum management system continues to impact the access to rights. FAS has identified key factors that have enabled an effective form of “reception first” approach to the Ukrainian crisis, which could serve as inspiration to develop better reception conditions for all: a) *beneficiaries of temporary protection have had access to extended rights; b) effectiveness of these rights was ensured; c) action to prevent homelessness was taken (access to emergency shelters is secured right away) and d) working relations between different types of actors have evolved, mobilising all relevant ones.*



In Ireland, the reception assistance is provided almost immediately for people from Ukraine, including social welfare support or allocation of a General Practitioner. Nicoletta Coppola (DePaul) explained that this creates of course differences between Ukrainians and asylum seekers in the mainstream system, since the latter often seek the same services but their access to them is much more difficult and lengthier. The arrival of approximately 50,000 Ukrainians since the start of the war, who are now mostly staying in government facilities, will likely put more pressure to the already saturated housing market in the future.

Yosr Dallegi from Fondation de France (which gathers the major private donors in the country) offered an overview of the funding they are providing to NGOs on the ground in Ukraine, Poland or Romania. Around €5 million have been already spent in a large number of projects focusing on two strands: coping with emergencies and ensuring dignified living conditions for Ukrainians.

During the second part of the day, the group visited ‘the Ukraine House’ which is hosting around 200 people, mostly mothers with their children. Ukraine House offers units of independent housing, together with psychological support, schooling, training in job skills for the mothers, and leisure activities for both children and women. Despite having renovated the building where they host all these families, the team noted that they will have to leave the facility in 2023 because the owner of the property cannot renew their lease. The last visit of the day was to the MiserArt centre, where people experiencing homelessness engage in the restauration of furniture which is later sold, and the money is then reinvested back into the activities of the day centre.

Recommendations formulated following the discussions:

1. The European Commission should develop a medium to **long-term strategy** to ensure that housing Ukrainian refugees is possible in safe and adequate conditions. Furthermore, solutions for housing refugees independently are needed in order to avoid temporary shelters becoming long term solutions.
2. The Commission should coordinate with Member States to ensure that **funding** is being allocated to the organisations involved in supporting the reception of refugees from Ukraine, such as the homelessness service providers.
3. The solidarity witnessed in the initial period of the war should be analysed to ensure **a reception capacity for all asylum seekers**, to prevent newcomers from becoming roofless and provide adequate living standards. Differential treatment between people in need of protection, on the basis of their country of origin, should not be allowed in the EU and everyone should have access to the same type of support.
4. A balance needs to be identified between offering housing solutions to asylum seekers and ensuring that all those experiencing homelessness in the territory are also adequately housed. For this to happen, Member States (MS) and the EC must invest in **improving the existing housing stock**.
5. The Commission should improve the existing knowledge at national level on the **Safe Homes Guidance** issued in June 2022, as not enough awareness on the initiative has been observed. Furthermore, communication with MS on the possibility to extend the allowance for private hosts needs to be streamlined, to avoid cases where people need to leave this type of housing because of the rising cost of living and energy for the hosts.
6. The situation of **people in vulnerable situations** must be taken into consideration and targeted measures must be implemented, to ensure that all persons fleeing the war are offered dignified reception conditions. Particularly, the situation of women and children is worrying, seeing that they are the ones fleeing Ukraine primarily, as well as communities which have been experiencing marginalisation and discrimination prior and during the war (e.g., people with disabilities, Roma).



14th October – Reconnections of mobile EU citizens & Healthcare, Poznań

The second day of the study visit took place in the city of Poznań, where the group visited the headquarters of Barka and learned about the work of this organisation. The group was joined by other Polish organisations (mentioned above), which work with people in homelessness from other parts of the country.

Barka is a Polish organisation working across Europe (primarily in Poland but it also has offices in the Netherlands, the UK, Belgium, Ireland or Germany) to ‘provide severely excluded Eastern European migrants with the opportunity for reconnection and social reintegration.’¹ Beneficiaries are supported within Barka Network projects in Poland, and they are also helped to connect again with their families or address addictions. The site in Poznań comprises housing units (flats), a social integration centre offering Vocational Education and Training and job skills for people in long-term unemployment, as well as a service to facilitate the setup of cooperatives or social-purpose companies. After the war in Ukraine broke out, Barka has adapted its services to receive Ukrainian refugees as well, as was shown to the group during the visit. Some of the rooms in the Barka building in Poznań were occupied by women and children coming from Ukraine.

Most people supported by Barka come from Central and Eastern European countries, and ‘reconnections’ (the possibility to return to countries of origin) are offered when no other solutions are available. Barka estimates that around 25,000 people have been voluntarily reconnected since they started these programmes more than 10 years ago. Their work model is based on teams comprised of one ‘leader’ who has lived experience of homelessness, and one social worker supporting the ‘leader’ in their work. They also work in partnership with the consulates of origin countries and local authorities, which sometimes commission Barka’s reconnection programmes.

Following the visit and the presentation of Barka, participants engaged in discussions around the possibilities and challenges of conducting reconnections while preserving people’s rights and choices. The vulnerabilities that people in homelessness face were considered, as well as the pressure from many host States to send intra-EU migrants sleeping rough to their countries of origin. The case of the UK was discussed in more detail, as Barka has been operating in this country for a long time and, in the context of Brexit, the issue of reconnections remains relevant. The participants agreed that more attention should be given to this topic, including more coordination between the governments of the countries involved (host and origin countries) and the European Commission. Furthermore, good principles to be respected when conducting reconnections need to be set in place, in order to ensure that any such returns are conducted only at the request and with the fully informed decision of the people involved, particularly when it comes to persons experiencing homelessness and other vulnerabilities.

¹ <http://barkaie.org/kim-jestesmy/>

Recommendations of principles to be followed during reconnections:

1. Actors involved must make sure that the individual concerned **genuinely wants to return** to their country of origin, and that all support measures have been exhausted in the host country (unless otherwise desired by the person concerned).
2. An **individual plan** should be designed and put in place in partnership with the individual concerned, whose involvement is paramount in the whole process of reconnection. Drawing up this plan requires time, often weeks.
3. All efforts have to be made to **guarantee the physical and mental stability** of the person before they leave. A health assessment must be carried out to check if there is a need for medical help or for rehabilitation if the individual suffers from substance misuse. Some people might also need help with gathering the necessary identity documents.
4. Coordination and cooperation with the different stakeholders involved is crucial to facilitate an **adequate social and healthcare support in the individual's country of origin**: local cooperation needs to be enabled in order to take into account different approaches and expertise among NGOs, hospitals and services provided by the municipality. Likewise, transnational cooperation through contacts with consulates, NGOs working in the country of origin, families and friends must be ensured.
5. Unless desired otherwise by the individual concerned, it is important that **someone accompanies the person to their country of origin** and stays with them for some days (or more if needed) to make sure that the person arrives safely to the country of origin and settles down adequately.



The last stop of the day in Poznań was at the organisation ‘Akceptacja’, a provider of medical services for people experiencing homelessness. This is a small, first-stop health clinic where a medical team (consisting of doctors and nurses, some hired and some working on a volunteering basis) offers care to people at risk of social exclusion. They also have an ambulance for cases that require emergency treatments or travel to other places when a specific support is not available in the Poznań county. After the war in Ukraine started, Akceptacja

started receiving refugees from Ukraine as beneficiaries. In that regard, we were able to learn about the main health-related challenges the team deals with, as well as how they work with Ukrainian refugees since they are unfamiliar with the Polish healthcare system. Being established by transgender people, the organisation also conducts educational courses and activities to raise awareness about transgender people, while promoting their engagement towards counteracting exclusion and discrimination in the public space.



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