

Homelessness in Bulgaria

Situation review May 2014

In the framework of my professional involvement within a project for homeless people I would like to attempt an objective situation overview for homelessness in Bulgaria. The pilot project I was able to follow was a cooperation of the Bulgarian Red Cross and SamuSociale International, delivering support to people living on the street, while at the same time aiming to collect data and mapping information on this group of people in selected regions in Sofia.

This overview is an academic research as well as some input from the mentioned project and personal interviews with volunteers and social workers.

In order to discuss a subject like this we would usually start by giving a precise definition of the target group. As in Bulgaria there is no official definition for homeless people or homelessness this proves rather difficult. Consequently this deficit paired with the lack of statistics concerning homeless people results in an inconsistent political framework around the topic. As of today there is no national strategy on tackling homelessness.

Homeless people in Bulgaria face a mixture of unique challenges. The most serious of which are institutional discrimination due to complicated administrative structures. As homeless people are hardly able to follow administrative procedures in order to retain for example ID documents, social services as well as financial support are almost inaccessible to those people. Furthermore, due to the lack of identification, lack of statistics and the lack of a definition of homelessness many people living on the street become “invisible” to the system altogether. Another big problem is the lack of sufficient shelters. Most shelters only exist in bigger cities and lack capacities for the growing number of people in need of support. There are very few cases of recovery. Homelessness usually spirals into or from a diverse mix of additional problems such as drug addiction and psychological problems. Programs such as “Housing First” or Protected Livings are not introduced to the country so far. The tense political situation stalls implementation of planned policies and services while the housing stock is also deteriorating.

Groups of people most affected as defined by a Bulgarian Social worker almost match the definition of the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless (FEANTSA).

FEANTSA names 5 groups in Europe including people who have gone bankrupt in business activities; homeless migrants who have sought employment abroad; elderly victims of fraud; young

migrants and immigrants, some of whom are illegal. In consultations with social and street workers they have indicated 4 groups of people affected in Bulgaria by homelessness including Roma (youth mostly); People with psychological problems, mental illnesses, drug addictions, alcoholism; Elderly who have become victims of fraud and People without social contacts and financial means.

People end up without a home for various reasons. Mostly those circumstances consist of individual and unique mixtures of problems, which make it especially hard to tackle them with a unified strategy. The reasons for exclusion are universally similar. SamuSociale international summarizes those reasons as follows.

- Loss of employment
- Financial fraud
- Loss of spouse
- Conflict with family
- Changing the city in which to live
- Illness
- Addictions

Furthermore, there are four stages of de-socialization defined. The first stage is Aggression accompanied by shock, denial of the situation and hyper activity. This is followed by a stage of Devaluation. The person is feeling failure, frustration as well as loss of confidence, isolation and guilt. The third stage is Fixation. Attempting conflict resolution, the person changes identity and adopts its new state. Most often severe addictions are formed in those states. The last stage is complete abandonment.

While of course these processes are different for individuals there are various symptoms of permanent exclusion that can be observed in homeless people in different variations. People living on the street often forget and break the intrinsic codes of man in society. Simple social and interpersonal interactions become alien. Other symptoms can include personality disorders. Moreover, the body changes the threshold of pain tolerance. Often the body becomes a bargaining chip resulting for example in prostitution, begging etc. A loss of sense of time can be witnessed resulting in an impaired ability to project into the future, even very close. People lose the ability to take initiative.

Of course this is accompanied by a dysfunctional relationship with others including distrust, aggression, shame and loss of own existence.

Health Consequences can be the consumption of psychoactive substances such as tobacco, alcohol, benzodiazepines, opiates etc. Other consequences are trauma, infestations, respiratory pathologies, tuberculosis, hepatitis, STDs, HIV/ Aids, metabolic disorders, psychiatric pathologies, dental pathologies and so forth.

The Responsible Institutions in Bulgaria are the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Agency for Social Assistance and 146 regional offices with each one directorate for social activities that belong to the municipalities.

There are limited services available for people living on the street. However those services are insufficient and hard to access for homeless people due to various reasons.

Community-based social services which provide shelter and other support for homeless people are Centres for temporary accommodation; Shelters; Protected housing; Centres for Street Children; Crisis Centres; Transitional homes; Supervised homes; Units "Mother and baby"; Family-type centres. Social services are performed by the State, the municipality, by physical persons registered according to the Trade Law and by legal entities.

During the project activities the interviewed people articulated serious distrust and complaints toward the governmental service facilities. Many homeless people avoid the shelters and crisis centres all together.

Sources

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- SamuSociale International Guide Book for Mobile Teams