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# Milestones in the Development and Implementation of a Governmental Strategy on Homelessness in the Czech Republic

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- › **Abstract\_** *The goal of this paper is to assess the first ever government strategy on homelessness in the Czech Republic. The paper also aims to describe the main milestones in the implementation of the strategy and in securing its legitimacy in the context of a welfare state regime that is not yet clearly defined. The results show that the strategy was prepared at an opportune time, when it was already possible to draw on relevant data from other studies produced by Czech researchers. This meant that the strategy was distinct from policies elsewhere as it was tailored to the Czech socioeconomic context. However, the vague formulation of measures relating to the priority area of social housing means there is a risk that many of the planned activities may not ultimately be implemented. In addition, the chaos that ensued during its preparation – as has been typical in transition countries – may mean that important steps in tackling homelessness will not be realized in the foreseeable future.*
- › **Keywords\_** *Forming homelessness policy, post-socialist economies, media discourse, policy evaluation*

## Introduction

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This paper seeks to assess the 2013 government strategy on homelessness adopted in the Czech Republic. The review outlined in this paper is distinct to other policy reviews; for example, it is not possible to assess the Czech strategy in the same way as strategies adopted in Ireland (O'Sullivan, 2008) or Scotland (Anderson, 2007) have been assessed. The reason is that only one year has lapsed since the Czech Republic adopted its first ever strategy on homelessness and most of the measures proposed have not yet been implemented. Consequently, no measurable effects – such as a decrease in the number of homeless people or improved success in reintegration or prevention – have yet been determined. It was possible, however, to look at the level of public support and the level of consensus secured across various stakeholders using in-depth interviews and an analysis of media discussions on the topic. The degree of public support and consensus for government policies usually predetermines how successful they are. For this purpose, media articles and discussions on the strategy that were available on the Internet were reviewed. In addition, five interviews were conducted with eminent stakeholders involved in policy implementation: a researcher (one interview), NGO staff members (two interviews), a municipality representative (one interview) and a state administrator (one interview). Two of these respondents were actively involved in the preparation of the strategy. The second source for assessing the national strategy are the results of a local strategy on homelessness that was adopted a year earlier in the capital city of Prague. Given the longer time lapse since this strategy was implemented, it is possible to carry out a better assessment of the degree to which the initial objectives were met. It serves to inform our understanding of the potential success of the national strategy.

However, the goal of this paper is more than just a policy review. It also aims to describe the milestones leading up to the first government strategy on homelessness in a specific context of social transformation, which is characterised by the transition from: 1) a planned to a market economy, 2) a centralised system to decentralised administration, and 3) a situation marked by the imposition of a single ideology to freedom of expression, as well as the clash and competition of ideas and interpretations. The description of these milestones, although pertaining specifically to the Czech context, may parallel other countries undergoing major transformation. It also has important implications for comparing the success of homelessness strategies between countries with different welfare and housing systems. In other words, in countries with traditional welfare state regimes, the strategies for creating and implementing policies may differ from the strategies used in transition countries, where reforms have resulted in the abolition of many previously powerful institutions and where there has been unprecedented freedom in critical public discourse targeting the basic pillars of society. Unlike Western

societies, existing institutional structures (weakened by regime change) and prevailing attitudes (disqualified by the former regime) in the Czech Republic have had little ability to limit the scope and openness of the process of re-conceptualising fundamental aspects of society.

It is therefore no surprise that 'reforms in the public sector (...) are unfinished, that institutions in different welfare sectors follow different principles even within one country, and that there is a big gap between rhetoric and the actual implementation of programmes' (Hegedüs, 2011, p.15). And it is no surprise that the application of theories of welfare regimes to European post-socialist states is made problematic by the lack of congruence in power structures and the uncertainty of collective ideologies, which follow a sudden breakdown of political systems (Stephens *et al.*, forthcoming). It is still not clear whether post-socialist states represent a unique type of welfare state regime or whether they are still in the process of evolving into an existing type of welfare state according to Esping-Andersen's (1990) influential typology. The role of path dependence also remains crucial for our understanding of post-transition events; uncertainty as to the effects of reforms often led politicians to opt for 'tried and tested' solutions from the past, or for a mixture of old and new approaches. Such measures often proved unsustainable, ineffective and poorly targeted in the context of new socioeconomic conditions (Pichler-Milanovic, 2001; Lux *et al.*, 2009; Hegedüs *et al.*, 2013).

The goal of this paper is thus also to demonstrate how the issue of homelessness ultimately reached the national agenda and was 'institutionalised' in a country that had witnessed, and is still witnessing, the transformation of discourses, and where this transformation often involves short-term, quick-fix policies that combine old recipes with new ideas.

The first section of the paper situates the homelessness strategy in the socioeconomic context of the Czech Republic, with a specific focus on housing policy. Understanding the housing context provides an explanation as to why the Czech Republic adopted its first government strategy on homelessness 23 years after the change of political regime. The second section of the paper describes the current legislative framework. The goal of the third section is to define the milestones leading up to the government's strategy on homelessness. The final section then describes and evaluates this strategy before setting out the paper's conclusions.

## A Changing Housing Context

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Visible homelessness is an entirely new phenomenon in post-socialist countries. It first emerged after 1990 as a consequence of the transformation of the economic and housing systems. Under socialism, unemployment and homelessness were officially non-existent as the right (and obligation) to work came with the right to adequate housing – and the state was obliged to provide both. Before 1990, most of the economy in the Czech Republic was in state ownership and was controlled centrally. In the field of housing, this meant that state intervention was directed toward the decommodification of housing through extensive housing subsidies, property expropriations and rent/price regulations. These state interventions resulted in a large public (and semi-public) rental sector where rents were kept at extremely low levels. Due to the decommodification of housing, state support for housing construction, and the extensive interference of the totalitarian regime in the private life of households (through police and other forms of control), there was very little visible homelessness under state socialism.

After 1990, the Czech Republic abandoned central planning and substantially cut (or eliminated) housing construction subsidies. However, successive governments maintained a conservative form of rent control and tenure security for all existing tenancies and subsidised the increased interest rates on housing loans taken out by housing cooperatives or homeowners before 1990. Consequently, despite the state's immediate withdrawal from housing provision, sitting tenants and homeowners remained relatively well protected due to the remnants of rent regulation and 'old debt' subsidisation. In a situation of high uncertainty, the first Czech post-socialist governments used housing as a 'shock absorber' to make the transition process politically feasible (Struyk, 1996; Hegedüs and Tosics, 1998).

The conservative rent control regime applied to all existing tenancies (i.e. all open-term contracts concluded before 1993). The maximum rent levels per square metre of dwelling floor area for these contracts were determined in a decree issued by the Ministry of Finance (Decree No. 176/1993 Coll.) and were amended in July each year between 1990 and 2002. Between 1999 and 2006 the rents for running tenancies were frozen (first in real values and since 2002 also in nominal values). Throughout the 1990s, sitting tenants also retained extensive tenant security, a legacy inherited from the socialist period. They enjoyed the following rights:

- Rents could not be increased unilaterally by a landlord (and without state intervention, rents would remain frozen at low levels);
- An open-term contract (called a 'deed')<sup>1</sup> could not be terminated by the landlord in any circumstances other than those specified in the Civil Code;<sup>2</sup>
- Tenancy rights to the flat following from an open-term contract (deed) could be transferred by a tenant to his or her descendants, other family relatives or exchanged with other 'deed-holders';
- A landlord could only give a tenant notice via the judicial system and if the tenant did not agree with the grounds for notice a long legal procedure ensued. According to the estimates of private landlords, justified termination of tenancies took on average between two and three years during the 1990s;<sup>3</sup>
- Even in the case of valid notice, the landlord had to secure substitute housing acceptable to the tenant. A landlord had to offer at least three alternative dwellings and the tenant had the right to refuse all of them. Moreover, the tenant had the right to similar security and contract conditions in the substitute housing as they had in the original dwelling, including a low regulated rent. If the tenant refused to cooperate, the court could make the decision on the substitute housing. However, the arrangements described above (i.e. the obligation of a landlord to find another empty flat with regulated rent) made eviction practically impossible.

Strong tenure security gave rise to a black market and relatively extensive rent arrears. This kind of strong tenure security and conservative rent control could only function in a static society where there is no migration, household changes or divorce.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, tenants often did not have a real rental contract; they only held a 'deed to the flat' that in most cases allowed them to use the dwelling for an open term. After 1948, when housing allocation began to be centrally controlled by the state, tenants who were allocated flats obtained unlimited personal occupancy rights in the form of a 'deed' to the flat. 'Personal use' (or user rights) became an institution somewhat distinct from that of traditional tenancy – it could be inherited or transferred to relatives, or exchanged with some other holders of user rights. The tenants arrogated the right to renovate and repair the flat according to their wishes and without the owner's permission, or even to illegally sublease the flat without the owner's permission. When flats of different implicit values were exchanged, people claimed the right to request financial compensation for the unequal exchange for themselves – all this was later called quasi-ownership of housing (Lux, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Justifiable reasons for terminating a contract included: the tenant was in rent arrears for three months (more precisely, cumulated arrears amounted to three months' rent); the tenant owned or resided as a tenant in another dwelling; or the tenant very seriously violated the rules of good conduct or tenant duties.

<sup>3</sup> The first court decision concerned the justifiability of notice, the second concerned the justifiability of eviction and the third concerned the implementation of eviction. If the tenant was in arrears, he could stay in the dwelling until the courts made all three decisions.

As the government could not guarantee the same security to all, in 1993 free market rents in newly signed rental contracts were introduced. These new tenancies operated under very liberal conditions: the legislation did not set any caps on initial rent levels, subsequent rent review or the terms of tenancy. Consequently, the effort to use housing as a 'shock absorber' led to the split of the housing market into two segments: 'privileged' and 'non-privileged' (Lux, 2009). Strict first-generation rent control with open-term contracts for all existing tenancies operated simultaneously alongside an extremely liberal, unregulated rent and leasing system for new tenancies. This was an untenable situation, particularly given that rent regulation was benefiting many high-income households, while vulnerable and low-income (young) households were often outside of this protection (Lux *et al.*, 2009).

The market split also served as a barrier to any re-integration of the increasing numbers of homeless people. Once housing privileges were lost (due to the termination of a tenancy for rent arrears, or the fact that a person could not inherit any housing privileges), it became almost impossible to regain them. Consequently, the numbers of people sleeping rough or in shelters has increased since then. The situation was aggravated by the absence of any state social housing strategy. The Czech Republic had, and still has, an extremely fragmented array of municipal social housing policies with, in effect, no central coordination or regulation. The municipalities are the only owners of long-term rental housing provided at below-market rents. Although there was no governmental right-to-buy policy that would oblige the municipalities to sell their housing (as is the case in most other post-socialist states), they voluntarily began to sell them, in most cases to sitting tenants, and at a low price. The share of public housing thus substantially declined from 39 percent of the housing stock in 1991 to 8-9 percent in 2011.<sup>4</sup>

In 2000 the Constitutional Court ruled that the decree regulating the level of rent should be rendered null and void by the end of the following year. However, Parliament did not adopt a new act until 2006. In 2006 the situation suddenly changed when Polish landlord Hutten-Czapska won her case against the Polish state in a dispute heard before the European Court of Human Rights. The Czech government quickly prepared a plan to deregulate all rents by 2010 (later extended to 2012 in large towns) to avoid the possibility of having to pay financial compensation to landlords of rent-controlled dwellings (Act on Unilateral Rent Increase 107/2006). This led to an increase in regulated rents and a reduction in the gap between free market rents and regulated rents.

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<sup>4</sup> Conversely, the share of private rental housing increased from almost zero in 1990 to 13-14 percent of housing stock in 2011.

During this time, the government introduced a generous housing allowance system. Housing allowances had been paid since 1996 but the system was substantially amended in 2006 by the Act on State Social Support 117/1995 and the Act on Assistance in Material Need 111/2006. Since 2006, all tenants and homeowners registered as permanent residents in a given property are entitled to a housing allowance if 30 percent (in Prague 35 percent) of the family income is insufficient to cover housing costs and if this 30 percent (in Prague 35 percent) of family income is also lower than the relevant prescriptive housing costs as set out by law. The amount to be paid by a household is calculated in relation to its income and remaining housing costs are covered by a housing allowance. Prescriptive housing costs gradually increased during rent deregulation and they have recently been set at levels that reflect rents in the free market.

Moreover, an additional benefit – the housing supplement – is provided where the income of the person or family, even with the housing allowance, is insufficient to cover housing costs. The benefit is provided to owners or tenants who are entitled to an allowance for living costs (living minimum). If approved by the Labour Office, the benefit can also be allocated to beneficiaries who have neither an ownership title nor a rental contract (such as subtenants, or people living in dormitories, lodging houses and other less secure housing forms). The amount of the supplement is determined on a case-by-case basis and is calculated on the basis that households should be left with a basic or minimum disposable income. In other words, for families with no income, the housing supplement may actually cover total housing costs. These provisions, like those in the early 1990s, again reflected a strong political will to ensure housing affordability – this time not only for those households that retained ‘privileges’ from the past, but for all Czech households.<sup>5</sup>

The conservative form of tenant security inherited from socialism has also been gradually weakened since 2000 through several amendments to the Civil Code. For example, it was originally the landlord that had to approach the civil court to pursue a notice of termination. Following a subsequent amendment, tenants could be given a notice of termination and it was then up to the tenant to approach the civil court if he/she disputed the termination of the lease – otherwise the notice was deemed valid. Tenant security was further weakened by the new Civil Code passed in 2014 where the right of the tenant to receive substitute housing was abolished. In the extreme case of a very serious breach of good conduct rules by a tenant or a tenant’s family members, the landlord has the right to give a tenant notice of

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<sup>5</sup> In 2012, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs paid out CZK 5.7m (€228 000) in housing allowances to about 4 percent of Czech households, and about CZK 1.7m (€68 000) in housing supplements to about 1 percent of Czech households. Tenants are the main recipients of both benefits.

termination without any notice period (which is otherwise three months). Rent arrears are explicitly mentioned as an example of such a serious breach of good conduct rules.

As mentioned above, despite the abolishment of some elements of tenure security and regulated rent increases after 2007, the state implemented tenancy protection in the form of a generous housing allowance/supplement and left the basic elements of tenure security untouched. Unlike the situation in other post-socialist countries, the overwhelming majority of private rental contracts in the Czech Republic are written and legally binding, and the new Civil Code ensures that a landlord can give sitting tenants notice of termination only for the four specific reasons outlined in the law.<sup>6</sup> As such, a fragmented social housing policy and a declining level of public housing was largely compensated for by generous demand-side subsidies that were of equal help for households in the municipal and private rental housing sectors.

However, the changing housing conditions and policies produced considerable barriers to the re-integration of homeless people into long-term housing (Lux and Mikeszová, 2013). The reason for this is very simple. Homeless people, ethnic minorities, immigrants, unemployed persons, and single mothers are at a disadvantage in the free market because they are regarded as 'risky' households. If they are able to secure rental housing in the market, these properties are often in spatially-segregated areas with low-quality housing and short-term leases. Demand-side subsidies address the problem of housing affordability, but not the problems of disadvantage, social exclusion and discrimination. In the Czech context, where most rental properties are owned by small private landlords, risk-aversion among landlords is logically high. Small landlords favour tenants who pose minimum risk; their caution is bound up in anxieties about tenants failing to pay rent, which could pose a threat to the landlord's own financial stability. The same analogy applies to the position taken by small municipalities. The Czech Republic operates as a decentralised system of local administrations with more than 6000 municipalities serving 10 million inhabitants. Such small municipalities will be much more circumspect about how they assist 'risky' households than larger municipalities. This situation could be considered a paradoxical consequence of decentralisation. If decision-making is decentralised to a large number of agents that are financially and politically weak, these decision-makers will be strongly risk-averse and tend to avoid decisions that are deemed costly or politically unpopular. This was confirmed by Hradecký (2006b) for Prague: the capital city of Prague is divided into 22 independent municipalities, each with its own administration; without the agreement of these independent municipalities, the City of Prague cannot locate a

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<sup>6</sup> Taking into account the whole legal process of eviction, valid termination of tenancy still takes more than one year.



homeless shelter in any of the municipalities though it ranks more highly in the administration. This paradox is reflected in the decision to locate a shelter on the Vltava River.

The number of homeless people has therefore grown gradually over recent years. According to estimates based on various sources, the number of homeless people in 2012 had reached approximately 25 000–30 000 people (0.25–0.30 percent of the population). Programmes for the reintegration of homeless people that are run by municipalities, charities or NGOs use a ‘Housing Ready’ approach. Due to the lack of available housing at higher levels, however, programmes tend to be more developed at the first level of the stair-case model (e.g. short-term, emergency shelters), but the provision of long-term housing for homeless people is minimal.

## Legislation Relating to Homelessness

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The right to housing is not an explicit part of Czech legislation, but it is implicitly present throughout the legislative system. The Charter of Fundamental Rights and Basic Freedoms state that ‘everyone who suffers from material need has the right to such assistance as is necessary to ensure her a basic living standard’ (Art. 30). On an international level, the Czech Republic signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which includes the right of every person to an adequate standard of living (Art. 11). The right to housing has been recognised in the Housing Strategy of the Czech Republic to the Year 2020 (*Koncepce bydlení ČR do roku 2020*). The legislation does not, however, contain a clear definition of the terms ‘homeless person’ or ‘homelessness’. According to various acts, a homeless person may be someone without state citizenship (Act No. 40/1993) or a person with a permanent residence at the address of a municipal authority (Act No. 133/2000). The Act on Social Services (No. 108/2006) identifies only ‘people without shelter’ as homeless, with no clearer definition.

No housing act or social housing act has been approved to date. All attempts to draw up a central social housing strategy have been unsuccessful (including the last attempt made by the Ministry for Regional Development between 2012 and 2013). Recently, the new government led by the Social Democrats has made it a priority to prepare a strategy to address the provision of social housing; the deadline for the new act is set at 2016 such that the legislation should be effective from 2017. However, preparations started only few months ago. Related to this, there is no specific legislation on not-for-profit housing or housing associations. Not-for-profit organisations and charities usually own or manage only temporary housing facilities (night shelters, hostels, half-way houses etc.) for homeless people, victims of domestic violence, refugees or ethnic minorities. These temporary facilities are operated by both NGOs

and municipalities as a social service under the Act on Social Services (Act No. 108/2006).<sup>7</sup> The obligations of the municipalities in the field of housing provision are only vaguely defined and include no explicit requirement to ensure the provision of housing to poor or vulnerable citizens.<sup>8</sup> As mentioned above, the paradox of decentralisation and the continuing demand to privatise the remaining public housing create barriers to effective local social housing policy. Additionally, municipalities are only responsible for helping residents, but many homeless people in big cities are registered as permanent residents of other municipalities.

### **Milestones on the Path to a Government Strategy on Homelessness**

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The first studies of homelessness did not appear until the mid-1990s and even by 2007 (i.e. 17 years after the change of regime) only a very small number of researchers had worked on this issue (Hradecký, 2005). The studies and reports written or edited by Ilja Hradecký, the director of an NGO "The Hope",<sup>9</sup> were of particular importance to our understanding of homelessness. Besides these, there were only few papers (Horáková, 1997; Obadalová, 2001; Janata and Kotýnková, 2002) and student theses (Šafaříková, 1994; Le Rouzic, 1999) on the topic. Although many Czech economists and sociologists have addressed the problem of increasing social and income inequalities (for example, Večerník and Matějů, 1999), until 2007 homelessness remained on the margins of social research. This is related to the legacy and social conditions of the pre-transitional period described above, as well as the fact that until the turn of the millennium there was little visible homelessness; and because of strong tenure security, rent regulation and low rates of poverty and unemployment,<sup>10</sup> homelessness was often viewed as a consequence of personal

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<sup>7</sup> This Act signified a positive turning point in defining and providing social services, but it employs a categorisation of social services that is hard to apply to some target groups and lacks some specific services; for example, support for independent housing, homelessness prevention and the operation of homes with special programmes for homeless persons.

<sup>8</sup> The Act on Municipalities (No. 128/2000) states only that the municipality is responsible for ensuring the conditions for the provision of social assistance and for satisfying the needs of its citizens, such as their need for housing, health protection, transport, information, education, overall cultural development and protection of public order.

<sup>9</sup> Ilja Hradecký, together with his wife Vlastimila, founded the NGO "Hope" in 1990. He has worked as Chairman and Director of the NGO for 24 years and he has also been chairman of the Czech Federation of Food Banks since 1994. He has participated in numerous projects for the Czech government, the City of Prague, the European Commission, the University of Dundee, the University of Wayne, FEANTSA, the European Observatory on Homelessness, Ostrava University and others. In 2013, he received the Award of the Senate of the Czech Republic for his outstanding work on homelessness issues.

<sup>10</sup> Until 1998 the unemployment rate was below 5 percent.

failure (addiction and crime) or a personal choice. This perception of homelessness as a consequence of a person's character or choice has persisted in public opinion and expert studies right up to the present day (Vašát, 2012).

A 1996 study by Hradecká and Hradecký entitled 'Homelessness: Extreme Exclusion' can be regarded as an important milestone on the path to the preparation of a government strategy on homelessness, because it highlighted the issue of homelessness and brought it into public debate. It introduced the first working definition and typology of homelessness and is the first analytical study that has withstood the test of time. Similarly, the founding of the Association of Shelters in 1993 represented an important institutional milestone; this is a civic association that acts as an umbrella agency for all those working with homeless people or people at risk of losing their housing, and represents them at governmental negotiations and in international organisations (FEANTSA).<sup>11</sup>

In 2004, The Hope, under the direction of Hradecký, organised the first census of homeless persons in Prague; it was later followed by censuses conducted in other Czech towns (Petřík *et al.*, 2006; *Magistrát města Ostravy*, 2007; Baláš *et al.*, 2010; Toušek and Strohsová, 2010; Váně and Kalvas, 2014).<sup>12</sup> In cooperation with FEANTSA, Hradecký also published the first National Report on Homelessness in the Czech Republic (Hradecký, 2005, 2006b) and provided a profile of homeless people (Hradecký, 2006a).

The next important milestone on the path to developing a government strategy was the project 'Strategies for the Social Inclusion of Homeless Persons in the CR'. The project ran from 2005 to 2007; it was co-funded by the European Social Fund and the Czech state budget and coordinated by the Association of Shelters, and it led to a number of activities in the fields of health and employment for homeless people (*Sdružení azylových domů...* 2007). Most importantly, however, it included the adaptation of the ETHOS homelessness typology to the Czech context (Hradecký *et al.*, 2007). These activities were fundamental in the later development of government strategy.

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<sup>11</sup> The Association of Shelters is an umbrella organisation for organisations that run halfway houses and shelters for men, women and single mothers. These include NGOs, charity organisations, municipalities and state organisations. In 2014, it had 84 member organisations.

<sup>12</sup> Baláš *et al.* (2010) include all the censuses (a total of six) conducted up to the year 2010 in the four largest Czech cities. Although the censuses were carried out in different years, it was clear that visible and latent homeless grew over time. In just the four main cities it had reached more than 5000 people by the year 2010 (the estimate for the Czech Republic as a whole in this study was 25000 people). The censuses of homeless people, regardless of methodological shortcomings, yielded other important information: the structure of the homeless contingent of the population according to gender, age and education.

Adapting the ETHOS typology to Czech conditions<sup>13</sup> was not just the work of experts in the field. A working group, consisting of six representatives from public administration and not-for-profit organisations, drafted proposals that were discussed at two seminars organised by the City of Prague (Bill Edgar, coordinator of the European Observatory for Homelessness at that time, was present at the first seminar) and at three workshops organised by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in 2006 and 2007. It took more than a year to finalise the ETHOS typology. Hradecký and the NGO Hope, who were principal coordinators of work in the area during this time, played a major role in this process.

An advantage of the ETHOS typology is that it does not describe the causes of homelessness, which are highly complex and specific to each person. Instead, the typology is based on current living circumstances and housing conditions. While the adoption of this typology meant abandoning earlier attempts of categorisation (Hradecký *et al.*, 2007), it has proven to be easily applicable to the Czech context. Three main categories of homelessness were identified: visible, latent and potential. The inclusion of potential homelessness as a category along with an estimate of the number of persons in this category revealed the true scope of the problem and demonstrated that homelessness is not a marginal phenomenon and that it can potentially affect anyone.

The year 2007 also became an important milestone for a different reason – the number of studies on homelessness from various perspectives in the Czech Republic increased significantly. The studies emerged through various disciplines, including criminology (Štěchová *et al.*, 2008; Štěchová, 2009), psychology (Krylová, 2008), social psychology (Vágnerová, 2013) and health (Barták, 2004; Šupková *et al.*, 2007). The new literature included studies of biographies (Holpuch, 2011; Růžička, 2011), everyday practices (Vašát, 2012, Hejnal, 2011, 2012, 2013), and the social networks of homeless people (Toušek, 2009) as well as analyses of youth homelessness (Dizdarevič and Smith, 2011), the causes of homelessness (Hladíková and Hradecký, 2007; Prudký and Šmídová, 2010) and factors relating to successful exits from homelessness (Mikeszová and Lux, 2013). Many of these studies attempted to identify the personal and structural causes of homelessness. Lux and Mikeszová (2013) tried to overcome the structure-agency dichotomy by focusing on common routes into homelessness. Through this emerging debate, homelessness became a more prominent issue as various and competing concepts, ideas and perspectives were deliberated.

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<sup>13</sup> This amendment included, for instance, creating a special category for youth leaving institutional care.

These events and emerging discourses, together with the adaptation of the ETHOS typology and homelessness counts in Czech urban areas, provided the government with a more informed understanding from which to formulate a government strategy. This resulted in the development of a strategy informed by Czech-centred research and thus tailored for the Czech context rather than being based on housing policies developed and implemented in other countries.

## **Government Strategy and its Evaluation**

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The creation of a national strategy to address homelessness was preceded by the adoption of a similar strategy by the capital City of Prague in 2012. Based on interviews conducted by the author, it appears that the motivation for adopting the Prague strategy was related to previous attempts of Prague politicians to tackle the issue of homelessness with a so-called Action Plan in 2007. However, the Action Plan was never approved by the city council. The primary objectives of the Action Plan were to increase the repression of homeless people and prevent people from 'abusing' social services, rather than actually dealing with the problem. The first version was prepared by a security agency with no prior experience in this field. It was weakened by professional shortcomings and was based on a substandard public opinion survey. The last version (in 2010) contained the objective of creating a Centre for Antisocial Citizens, which meant earmarking a locality in which homeless persons who do not participate in reintegration programmes should be concentrated. This version of the strategy was widely criticised, including in the mass media, which sparked a wave of public outrage. In the interviews I carried out, the media's response to the Action Plan could be considered another milestone on the road to achieving a government strategy, as the issue provoked a strong public response. Indeed, a paradoxical consequence of these efforts was that almost every political party included the rejection of the Action Plan and the creation of a new, progressive strategy to deal with homelessness in its agenda.

After the next local elections, the new Prague political elite commissioned a new strategy from a working group of five people representing academics, municipalities and not-for-profit organisations, in which Ilija Hradecký participated. The strategy was drafted over several months but owing to the unstable political situation, it was not finalised for over a year and a half. The strategy was ultimately implemented in 2012 with 'acute measures' stipulated for 2013 and 2014.

The Prague strategy was based on the following understandings of homelessness: 1) it employed the ETHOS typology to draw attention to potential homelessness, and 2) it conceptualised homelessness as a process, the solution to which must encompass a prevention component, acute assistance and the provision of

long-term housing. For the period of 2013-2014, it proposed implementing numerous preventative measures (such as a system of social and training flats and social intervention among people at risk of eviction) and the reinforcement of acute assistance (such as greater subsidisation of field programmes, the establishment of new day centres and shelters, and setting up special surgeries for homeless people). By the end of 2014, there was to be a 're-socialisation fund' to contribute to the costs of activities aimed at the reintegration of homeless households, an information centre was to be created by social service providers and interdisciplinary research on the problem of social inclusion was to be carried out.

It is probable that the preparation of the Prague strategy indicated the willingness of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to prepare a similar strategy at national level. The Ministry subsequently set up a 25-member committee made up of public officials and representatives from not-for-profit organisations and municipalities. Thanks to the active involvement of several ministry officials, funding was obtained from the European Social Fund to put together the background analytical document necessary to develop such a strategy. This document was prepared by a seven-member working group including representatives from not-for-profit organisations (Ilija Hradecký was again an active member of the team) and headed by the same person that had headed the Prague strategy (university professor Libor Prudký). The study included a basic review of relevant legislation, a summary of available services and data on the target group,<sup>14</sup> and it also incorporated conclusions from previous Czech expert studies. The materials again stressed: 1) the complexity of the problem (and the consequent need for inter-ministerial cooperation); 2) the need to apply the ETHOS typology to understand the homelessness problem adequately; 3) the need to understand homelessness as a process; and, for the first time, 4) the need to carry out a pilot test of the 'Housing First' model as an alternative to the more widespread 'Housing Ready' model.

The background study was prepared and the strategy drawn up without any significant obstruction by relevant stakeholders. According to the interviews, this is likely to have been the case because no substantial amount of public funding was involved. After thorough discussions of both the background document and the strategy proposal within the committee, the Strategy for the Prevention and Solution of Homelessness in the Czech Republic to the Year 2020 was submitted for an extensive feedback process, in which trade unions and academic institutions also took part. Common objections related to the ambitiousness of the strategy, its

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<sup>14</sup> The number of visible and hidden homeless people in the Czech Republic was estimated in the study at 27 000 or approximately 0.27 percent of the population. The estimate of potential homelessness was given as 55 000 people but methodological issues meant the number was probably closer to 100 000 people, or 0.55–1 percent of the population.

unmistakeably left-wing orientation and, that which proved to be the biggest issue, its coinciding with the implementation of another government strategy that was approved sooner (i.e. the Housing Strategy of the Czech Republic to the Year 2020). Finally, a year and two months after the background document had been prepared, the strategy was approved by the Czech government in August 2013.

The national strategy explicitly adheres to the ETHOS typology of homelessness (adapted to Czech conditions) and conceptualises homelessness as ‘a complex, dynamic and differentiated process’ that requires support for prevention, the provision of social services, and the return of homeless people to standard forms of housing. A multifaceted approach to the issue is reflected in the structure of the strategy and in the number of planned measures associated with each area of provision: housing (17 measures); social services (6 measures); healthcare (9 measures); and information, participation and cooperation (11 measures).

In total, the strategy contains 43 measures and for each, it identifies the responsible administrating body (or ministry). In the area of housing, the measures include social housing legislation, subsidies for social housing acquisition and pilot projects on social innovation (including the ‘Housing First’ model and a mechanism of prevention based on the FAWOS experience). It also seeks to tackle the problem of debt among the poorest citizens, systemise activities at different levels of administration and increase the coordinating role of municipalities. In the area of social services, the measures concern new definitions of social services that will meet the specific needs of homeless people and ensure their implementation (for example, the introduction of shelters for families). The area of health care focuses on the coordination of activities between the Ministry of Health, health insurance companies, and the regions and municipalities to secure complex health care for homeless people and the education of doctors and nurses as well as to reduce the stigmatisation of homeless people. Finally, measures in the areas of information, participation and cooperation include the establishment of a central information system on homelessness and the organisation of a conference to promote best practice and different educational activities both for field workers and the general public. Unlike the Prague strategy, however, the national strategy contains no estimates of costs or indication of funding sources. The source/method of funding was detailed to some detailed in the middle of 2014 but no cost estimates were given. The strategy does not contain a cost-benefit analysis for any one of the measures presented.

As mentioned in the introduction, the national strategy cannot be assessed using the standard methods of welfare economics, which involve the use of microeconomic techniques to determine allocative efficiency and income distribution simultaneously (Barr, 1998). As there are no outcomes as yet, we cannot measure the

efficiency and effectiveness/equity of these measures. Instead I have assessed the strategy using: 1) the degree to which the objectives set out in the Prague strategy, adopted a year before the national strategy, are met; 2) an estimate of the degree of consensus across different stakeholders based on reactions in the media and the interviews I carried out with selected stakeholders; and 3) an overview of its strong and weak points.

Although it is still too soon to make an assessment, it seems that despite adequate funding having been earmarked, the vast majority of activities planned by the Prague strategy on homelessness for 2013 and 2014 in the areas of prevention and reintegration will not be carried out. The issue of social and training housing has been left entirely aside and none of the set objectives are likely to be met. Objectives in the area of the prevention of homelessness have been limited to the announcement of a grant competition, in which the City of Prague is offering co-funding for activities proposed by individual Prague districts. Consequently, the City of Prague has partially resigned its governing role, something which lessens the probability of finding systemic, city-wide solutions for the reintegration of homeless people and the prevention of homelessness. In addition, the re-socialisation fund will not be created, objectives in the area of healthcare will not be met, and the interdisciplinary research will not be carried out. On the other hand, the planned increase in subsidies for field work with homeless persons (especially in the winter months) did take place, and it is very likely that new day centres and shelters will be opened. In conclusion, in the area of acute assistance, approximately 70 percent of the strategy measures planned for 2013 and 2014 will be implemented. In other areas, however, no more than 50 percent of the strategy will be implemented and almost none of the goals in the area of reintegrating homeless people into long-term housing will materialise. The drift away from systemic solutions towards grant support for various one-year prevention projects run by individual districts goes against the spirit of the strategy, even if some more general objectives may be partially met.

Based on interviews I conducted with principal stakeholders, the biggest problem with the national strategy is that its priority area – the measures for housing<sup>15</sup> – specifically alludes to conceptual and legislative work connected with social housing that was conducted at the same time by another Ministry (the Ministry for Regional Development). Interview data revealed that, with respect to housing-related measures, the authors of the strategy were forced to refer only to the Housing Strategy of the Czech Republic to the Year 2020 adopted earlier by the

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<sup>15</sup> It was clear from the number of measures in each area and the defined cornerstones of the strategy that measures in the area of housing were a priority in the strategy.



government; one of the tasks in this strategy was to develop a 'complex solution for social housing' and at the time work was already under way on the preparation of documents on this matter to be submitted to the government.

In the preparation of public strategies, government practice usually prohibits the creation of parallel strategies on the same issue. Unfortunately, such a situation nonetheless occurs and seems to be an effect of continuing ideological battles around establishing a long-term welfare regime in a transforming society. According to one interview, work on both tasks (homelessness and social housing) resembled a race to see who would submit first to the government, and this unnecessary competition was deemed harmful to both sides of the issue. The complex solution to social housing prepared by the Ministry for Regional Development was not adopted by the government while the strategy on homelessness prepared by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs was; however, because of the policy overlap, the section on housing measures was largely rendered void simply because it referenced a document that had not yet been approved.<sup>16</sup>

The absence of any estimate of costs or cost-benefit analyses for at least some of the proposed measures, and above all the annulment of the priority section of the strategy (housing measures), put the potential of the homelessness strategy at risk. Another shortcoming is that the expected results of the strategy are not clearly quantified; for example, there are no target numbers for reducing homelessness or for reintegration or prevention activities. This makes it far more difficult to make any transparent assessment of whether or not objectives were met.

It would not be fair to evaluate the formulation of strategy measures themselves, as there could be very different relevant views on what should or should not be included in the strategy. However, two respondents were sceptical of the assumption that the only possible housing for homeless people is independent housing. According to them, a substantial share of the target population requires special accommodation and care facilities in a long-term context. Another criticism surrounded the fact that a conference was planned to take place *after* the government strategy was adopted instead of before, which would be more productive. On the other hand, the strategy on homelessness is of a much higher quality than many of the previous government strategies due to the vigorous consultation phase. While it leaves out (or was forced to leave out) measures related to housing, which undermines its usefulness, the absence of these measures from the strategy meant less controversy during discussions. In other words, this strategy can be viewed as the first step towards solving a much more complicated problem and this gradual conceptual process may ultimately

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<sup>16</sup> Two respondents also mentioned that the strategy on homelessness overlaps with another government strategy – the Strategy against Social Exclusion for the Period 2011 to 2015, approved by the government in 2011.

prove prescient. The work on definition of social housing recommenced in 2014 under the direction of the same ministry that was responsible for the homelessness strategy. There is, therefore, a higher chance that in the future the priority section of the strategy – housing – will also take concrete shape.

The strengths of the national strategy thus include:

1. Application of the internationally recognised ETHOS typology; this aided in the formulation of a clear and ideologically-neutral definition of the target population, created a tighter link between the issue of homelessness and housing policy, and highlighted the problem of potential homelessness. Expanding the target group to include potential homelessness is altering the perception of homelessness in Czech society and adding legitimacy to the grounds for funding solutions.
2. The dynamic nature of the problem is taken into consideration; this means looking at homelessness as a process, the solution to which must necessarily include preventative measures whilst also ensuring that measures are in place to facilitate the transition to permanent housing. Instruments of prevention and reintegration have thus far been overlooked but several parts of the strategy emphasise their importance.
3. Early drafts of the strategy had a high level of expert input, and the strategy was informed by Czech-based studies conducted on this subject. The strategy was therefore drafted at an opportune time as it was already possible to draw on findings produced by Czech researchers and to use more reliable estimates and data, thus creating a more tailored solution to homelessness.
4. The composition of the working group (headed by the academic Libor Prudký and with the participation of Ilja Hradecký) ensured a high standard of expertise and the incorporation of experience from the field. On the other hand, the failure to include any practitioners or academics working on the issue of the housing market and social housing is one of its weak points, especially as the strategy targets this area.

The weaknesses and risks of the national strategy include:

1. An overly-complex approach: the large number of measures proposed significantly increases the likelihood that some of them will not be implemented. It is, however, possible that the large number of measures will lead to more measures being implemented than if the strategy had focused on a smaller number of measures in the first place. It is not certain if the assumption of 'the more the better' will work or whether the concept of the entire strategy will be considered unfeasible in a few years.

2. The annulment of measures in the area of social housing due to the coinciding of two strategies and the ensuing competitive clash between two ministries.
3. The conference ought to have preceded the adoption of the government strategy, and not to have taken place afterwards. Although the level of consensus was relatively high, the conference would nonetheless have assisted in further refining the formulation of objectives and measures.
4. The absence of cost estimates for individual measures and of cost-benefit analyses.
5. The absence of clear quantification of expected measurable outputs, which would allow for a transparent assessment of the strategy in the future.

The strategy was adopted by the caretaker government. After the elections in 2013 the Social Democratic Party, who had previously formed the opposition, became the ruling government party and adopted the issue of homelessness as an electoral priority. Due to the fact that the strategy did not represent a significant source of income for various interest groups, the strategy was accepted with a high level of political, expert and public consensus. Its discussion in the media, while limited, was positive and supportive in tone. The strategy was heralded as the first effective intervention by the state to tackle this issue. The main criticism of the strategy, which emerged from the interviews and not from comments in the media, was in reference to the overlap in policy submissions with regard to social housing.

The success of the Prague and national strategies to address homelessness thus largely depends on the efforts in the area of social housing – an area that both strategies deem a priority. Both strategies are therefore a useful step towards the main objective of reducing the scale of homelessness in the Czech Republic, but neither is fully sufficient. Overlooking the complicated area of housing and the housing market will place the potential of this strategy at risk.

## Conclusion

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This paper sought to offer a preliminary assessment of the strategy for addressing homelessness in the Czech Republic. However, its goal was also to describe the milestones in the passing of the government strategy and the factors behind its achieving legitimacy and support, specifically in the context of a society that is still in the process of significant transformation. By contextualising these milestones in the area of homelessness, it is possible to better understand the circumstances surrounding the adoption of such strategies in countries where the housing system is still going through a transformation and where the nature of the welfare state regime is not yet clearly defined. International alliances were evident here with the incorporation of the ETHOS typology, and cooperation between the Association of

Shelters and FEANTSA were very important during this process. Furthermore, the fact that the homelessness typology was adopted back in 2007 meant that enough time had elapsed for it to have gradually become more dominant in public discourse.

The strategy was prepared at an opportune time, as it was already possible to draw on the findings of Czech research studies, which provided more reliable data. The time was also right with respect to the slowly changing outlook of the mass media on the problem of homelessness; paradoxically, this change was a response to several proposals by conservative politicians in Prague for more oppressive solutions to homelessness. The level of public consensus was attained through the participation of Ilja Hradecký, a well-known scholar and practitioner in the field. It can be argued that a respected commentator such as Hradecký can have a majorly positive impact on reinforcing a wider consensus.

The strategy itself has a number of strengths and weaknesses. The composition of the working group appointed to draft the strategy is certainly one of its stronger points: not just the involvement of Hradecký but also the academic leadership involved. For the first time, homelessness was considered as a process and the recognised ETHOS typology was adopted to better understand the target population. On the other hand, the broad scope of the strategy and in particular the vague way in which its measures in the priority area of social housing are formulated means there is a risk that many of the planned activities may not ultimately be implemented. The disappointing performance of the Prague strategy on homelessness (as well as of a previous government strategy on social inclusion approved in 2011) adds to this risk. Overall, success thus largely requires the success of the social housing concept, which is under preparation.

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