Migration and Asylum

FEANTSA

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Editorial

A decade has passed since *Homeless in Europe* was last dedicated to migration and asylum. During this period, the European Union has confronted new challenges - from a war waged at its borders to the intensification of conflicts, persecutions, and regime changes outside Europe. Since February 2022, more than four million individuals fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine have settled in EU countries. The activation of the Temporary Protection Directive has enabled swift entry and access to rights; however, in the context of the protracted war, signs suggest that support measures are being rolled back at the national level. In 2024, the highest numbers of refugees arriving in Europe were from Syria, Venezuela, and Afghanistan, with a record number of Palestinians (12,000) applying for asylum. Palestinians fleeing Israeli military occupation, or living in refugee camps such as those in Lebanon, arrived in high numbers in Belgium, becoming the largest group of asylum seekers in the country. No other EU country has received more Palestinian asylum seekers than Belgium, where they are often among those forced to sleep rough, squatting, or in homeless shelters, in a context where, since 2021, more than 10,000 applicants have not been accommodated by FEDASIL (the Belgian Federal agency for the reception of asylum seekers).

Despite several attempts to reform and harmonise European legislation on migration and asylum over the last 10 years, the situation on the ground has remained, worryingly, very similar to the one in 2015. Homelessness has become an integrated part of the asylum process in too many countries, and beneficiaries of international protection continue to be at high risk of homelessness after they have obtained refugee status. Meanwhile, the criminalisation of undocumented migrants (and those supporting them) has proliferated in the current policy context. Adding to this, the ongoing affordable housing crisis combined with heightened levels of discrimination against migrants fuels a similar reality in 2025: migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees, continue to be denied their fundamental rights, and are forced to sleep on the streets of Europe.

European migration and asylum laws, and how Member States choose to implement them, often work to restrict access to rights (including housing) and support rather than enable it. Instead of creating paths to security and inclusion, they create barriers which lead people into precarity, destitution, and homelessness. The EU's newest legislation under the Migration and Asylum Pact is expected to inevitably lead to increased border control, criminalisation of immigration, increased detention of migrants and decreased safeguards; simultaneously, the EU and its member states are strengthening their focus on returns, to the detriment of a system based on shared responsibility and support measures for the inclusion of migrants.

The prevalence of homelessness among migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees, is not, and never has been, an accidental by-product of flawed systems; it is a predictable outcome of legislation and policy choices. FEANTSA rejects the idea that homelessness can be addressed while excluding certain groups or without first addressing the systems that push people further into the margins. Ending homelessness means ending homelessness for everyone; migrants are no exception. This means recognising access to housing as a basic human right, not a privilege based on residence status. Housing rights are universal.

The articles in this edition of *Homeless in Europe* address a variety of issues at the intersection of homelessness and migration. From the importance of trauma informed approaches, insights into how Housing First can be adapted for undocumented migrants, and reflections on the impact of policy, we return to the topic of homelessness among asylum seekers and refugees, not because it is new, but because it persists. The prevalence of homelessness among migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees, is directly tied to political will. As the articles in this edition highlight, if the system fails to change, and it will be the most vulnerable who continue to pay the price.

By **Simona Barbu**, **Policy Officer, FEANTSA** and **Bryony Martin**, **Communications Officer, FEANTSA**

The Role of Shelter in Supporting Migrant Mental Health

By **Khadim Diagne**, Peer Worker, at Fondazione Casa della Carità Angelo Abriani, and **Laura Arduini**, Psychiatrist, Fondazione Casa della Carità Angelo Abriani

In this reflective article, Khadim Diagne and Laura Arduini discuss the work of Casa della Carità in Milan, a shelter that supports migrants facing complex mental health challenges, in particular the psychological aftermath of torture. Drawing on years of experience and national guidelines, the authors explore how holistic, multidisciplinary, and trauma-informed care in shelters is essential for supporting migrants experiencing homelessness. They advocate for shelter spaces that are not only physically safe, but emotionally stabilising, offering dignity, community, and timely, individualised care.

Casa della Carità Angelo Abriani is a charitable foundation that runs a shelter in Milan. It opened in 2004 with the aim of providing a reasoned and integrated response to the needs of the most marginalised in society. With a structure that can accommodate up to 140 people, and with the support of 80 members of staff and as many volunteers, Casa della Carità accompanies and cares for each individual with a tailor-made approach, making use of the educational, social, clinical, psychiatric, legal and relational skills of a multidisciplinary team. This framework guarantees that every individual's unique needs are addressed, with a particular focus on their mental health.

The multi-faceted problems that people face have made the nature of our work increasingly complex in recent years, this is also due to the hosting of migrants with psychological problems. The increase in migrants arriving in Italy has led to a growing demand in Milan for shelter for asylum seekers or refugees who are either psychologically or physically vulnerable. Our 20 years of experience working with individuals with increasing complexities, who would otherwise have struggled to find suitable shelter elsewhere, has led us to develop a care model tailored to complex cases.

According to UNHCR data for 2024, 122.6 million people are forced migrants. They are forced to flee their countries for political, economic or social reasons. Of these, approximately 22.5 million are refugees, i.e., persecuted as defined in Article 1 of the Geneva Convention, more than half of whom are under the age of 18. Globally, these numbers mean that 1 in 113 people are now either asylum seekers, internally displaced persons or refugees. In recent years, the number of migrants has progressively increased in Italy and, among these, the proportion of applicants for international protection has also increased. In 2024, Italy was the third-highest recipient of asylum applications in Europe, after Germany and Spain.

If we define torture as "the deliberate, systematic or wanton infliction of physical or mental suffering by one or more persons acting alone or on the orders of any authority, to force another person to yield information, to make a confession, or for any other reason"[1], it is not difficult to grasp how widespread of a phenomenon it is. Its devastating impact has far-reaching consequences beyond the individual, also affecting the community.

In a world where vast numbers of refugees are fleeing wars, persecution, ethnic cleansing, and bloody dictatorships, the repercussions are widespread. Although it is not easy to provide a precise number of people who systematically suffer physical or psychological violence, our experience indicates that a significant proportion of refugees have been victims of severe forms of torture.

Torture is the systematic infliction of pain: research by Amnesty International has shown that beatings are widely the most common method of torture in over 150 countries. Beatings are inflicted with fists, sticks, gun butts, improvised whips, iron pipes and electric wires. Victims suffer bruises, internal bleeding, fractures, even damage to vital organs and death. Rape and sexual abuse of prisoners are widespread. Other common methods of torture include electrocution (in 40 countries), suspension of the body (in 40 countries), blows with sticks on the soles of the feet (over 30 countries), suffocation (over 30 countries), mock executions and death threats (over 50 countries) and prolonged solitary confinement (over 50 countries). Other methods include immersion in water, the extinguishing of cigarettes on the body, sleep deprivation, and sensory deprivation.

This disturbing list is an opportunity to explore the subject of this article beyond its relevance to clinicians or the development of new healthcare services. It is not merely a discussion about addressing the management of a phenomenon that leads to psychopathology and socio-economic distress, but rather a highly sensitive ethical and anthropological issue that concerns human dignity, the undeniable rights of every individual, and the fundamentals that define humanity and civilisation across the world. Donatella Di Cesare (2016) notes that because it is intentionally inflicted by others, torture is an especially harrowing form of trauma. Its effects leave lasting wounds that are often difficult to heal. She is echoed by Paul Ricoeur (1989), who states that at its core, beyond the physical suffering it inflicts, torture is a deliberate act designed to break down and dismantle a person's very sense of self.

The Italian Ministry of Health's 2017 guidelines for the care of refugees and victims of torture and international violence focus on the importance of creating suitable reception facilities, the value of the relationship between practitioners and victims of torture, and the importance of an integrated multidisciplinary approach. The guidelines refer to the 'exhausted migrant effect', asylum seekers who arrive in Italy and have already suffered a high degree of physical and psychological trauma. They describe how experiencing violence can trigger a cascade of psycho-neuro-endocrine-immunological responses in victims, which may compromise their immune system and make them more vulnerable to infections and long-term health conditions. These are people with whom we can almost never speak of a 'timely response' when it comes to trauma, because they come to our attention only after enduring months or even years of harassment in their country of origin, or in stalemate countries such as Libya. There is, however, an opportunity to act as soon as possible to address the re-traumatisation associated with the journey to Europe and to prevent further damage that may result from the impact of arriving in our country.

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While our work does not focus on the initial first reception of migrants upon arrival in Italy, we provide second reception shelter for vulnerable migrants (some are accepted into the Reception and Integration System (SAI) Mental Illness programme, and others arrive spontaneously at the Foundation from outside the national reception centre network). We dedicate significant energy to ensure that each migrant guest encounters a welcoming environment of warmth, familiarity, and recognition.

Based on our experience, we believe that specific criteria are essential in order to meet a good standard of care. We try to keep these principles in mind when working at Casa della Carità:

- It is crucial for migrants to be able to refer to a central hub that is well known within the community and that can respond to a myriad of complex problems all under one roof, without having to travel to multiple locations across the city;

- It is important to have knowledgeable staff who not only have expertise in their individual fields but also have a broader understanding beyond their specialisation: doctors who are familiar with legal matters, lawyers who know how to support vulnerable people, social workers who have expertise in multiple disciplines, and educators who are aware of political and transcultural policies and dynamics;

- Projects and pathways should be tailored to each individual, taking into account their unique history and specific needs. There is no set length of stay, nor a predetermined sequence of responses;

- Responding promptly is crucial - whether in an emergency, or when faced with new requests – whilst also demonstrating an ability to adapt and find creative solutions;

- The type of reception centre should be adaptable, particularly for those who are highly vulnerable, ensuring a swift transition from closely supervised community living to housing arrangements that foster greater independence, whilst also being ready to respond to potential setbacks;

- Acting as a bridge between Milan's citizens and the state, complementing the public system and proposing ideas and policy recommendations;

- Offering a warm, family-like setting where individuals can live for a period of time or can spend a few hours of the day, sharing relationships based on dignity and respect.

- Providing operators with spaces for one-on-one discussions with more experienced colleagues to support them during challenges and emergencies; periodic group supervision is also offered with an educational, psychological and social slant, and to help prevent burn out.

Supporting individuals who have suffered repeated trauma, torture, and extreme violence is a difficult and deeply engaging journey that raises very challenging questions. Italian government guidelines outline some procedures for intervention, acknowledging the right of forced and tortured migrants to receive care and peaceful citizenship. However, establishing best practices and dignified procedures is only the start of a broader conversation that must engage the entire community, in all its components. When considering the care of those affected by violence, there needs to be a focus on the most vulnerable - women, minors, and those with mental health issues. These are the voices that are least heard, often unable to recognise or articulate their suffering. Many questions remain concerning the link between health and the violence suffered, as well as a preventive view of stopping the transgenerational cycle of violence.

"Supporting individuals who have suffered repeated trauma, torture, and extreme violence is a difficult and deeply engaging journey that raises very challenging questions."

ENDNOTES

1   WMA Declaration of Tokyo – Guidelines for physicians concerning torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment in relation to detention and imprisonment, Tokyo, October 1975

Refugees on the Streets as a Deterrent for Those Yet to Come

By **Daan Walpot**, Lawyer in asylum and migration law, Antigone Advocaten

Belgium is systematically denying asylum seekers their legal right to shelter. This article by Daan Walpot outlines how the Belgian Government's refusal to provide reception places, despite repeated court rulings, has become both a humanitarian and constitutional crisis. Beyond logistical failures, the policy appears to be a deliberate deterrence strategy. The consequences are stark: thousands sleeping rough, essential services out of reach, and a growing erosion of the rule of law in Belgian asylum policy.

'*Because Belgium respects human rights.*' This is the response of many refugees when asked why exactly they chose Belgium as their destination country. In stark contrast is the raw reality facing many refugees once they arrive in Belgium. Instead of honouring this reputation and shaping asylum policy to effectively respect human rights, Belgium is rapidly trying to get rid of it.

Since October 2021, asylum seekers have been systematically denied shelter by the Belgian asylum authorities. Since then, thousands of people in search of international protection have slept on the streets for months before gaining access to the Belgian reception network. The Belgian government claims it is already doing more than its share of the European work, blames other EU member states for not complying with their obligations, causing refugees to travel on, and emphasises that the focus should be on reducing the influx rather than increasing reception capacity. Fedasil, the Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, has already been condemned thousands of times for its reception policy.[1] The European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg has also reprimanded Belgium on numerous occasions.[2] Its claim that there is a situation of force majeure has repeatedly been established as unfounded by national and European courts.

> *"Since 2021, Fedasil has been convicted more than 12,000 times by the Brussels Labour Court for refusing to provide shelter to applicants for international protection who are entitled to it."*

However, Belgian reception law leaves very little room for interpretation: '*The right to material assistance applies to every asylum seeker from the moment they submit their asylum application and remains in force throughout the entire asylum procedure, including the appeal procedure.*'[3] This material assistance takes the form of accommodation in a reception centre. The right only applies to first time applicants for international protection. In principle, subsequent applications do not entitle the applicant to accommodation in a reception centre, unless the Belgian asylum services consider that there are significant new elements. The Belgian law implements the EU Reception Conditions Directive of 2013. Among other things, this directive

sets the equal treatment of applicants throughout the European Union as an objective that should contribute to '*limit the secondary movements of applicants influenced by the variety of conditions for their reception*'.[4]

These crystal-clear rights and objectives are fine in theory, but in practice they prove to be very relative. In 2023, Fedasil unlawfully refused to provide shelter to 8,816 applicants for international protection. In 2024, this number rose to more than 10,000. Since 2021, Fedasil has been convicted more than 12,000 times by the Brussels Labour Court for refusing to provide shelter to applicants for international protection who are entitled to it.[5] In each of these cases, the Labour Court also imposes daily penalties for each day that shelter is not provided. However, the Belgian government systematically refuses to pay these penalties. Attempts to seize government assets have also come to nothing. Even when the European Court of Human Rights orders the Belgian government to provide shelter to applicants who are entitled to it, Belgium simply continues to ignore its obligations.

The Council of State, the highest administrative court, has already twice overturned an instruction from the State Secretary for Asylum and Migration to refuse shelter to single men and only offer shelter to women, children and families. Despite the established illegality, this practice is nevertheless being continued. In this way, the 'reception crisis' is also becoming a constitutional crisis in which the executive power systematically disregards the law and the judiciary.

The numerous convictions reflect the lack of legal arguments to justify the shortage of reception places. The 'crisis' is a politically orchestrated emergency for which the Belgian government bears full responsibility. Since 2021, civil society organisations have been sounding the alarm about the impending shortage of reception places. Despite the well-known fluctuations in the number of refugees arriving, buffer capacity has been systematically reduced. In addition, due to a lack of funding for asylum authorities, applicants sometimes have to wait more than three years for a final decision, which means that it takes a long time before reception places become available again. In the past, however, the Belgian government has shown that it is capable of creating reception places at short notice. Tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees were rightfully welcomed in 2022.[6] Even during the large influx of refugees in 2015, the government was able to create 15,000 places within a year.[7] This stands in stark contrast to the political unwillingness and indifference of today.

Due to the ongoing lawlessness, asylum seekers denied reception are looking for alternatives. They organise their own accommodation in empty buildings where they at least have a roof over their heads. Instead of supporting such initiatives while waiting for regular accommodation, the police are clearing these sites by evicting people into street homelessness or by making them uninhabitable by drilling holes in the roof so that rainwater can pour in. The law is only enforced when it works against the refugees.

> ## *"Despite the established illegality, this practice is nevertheless being continued."*

Meanwhile, Dutch and Danish courts have already ruled that asylum seekers cannot be sent back to Belgium under the so-called "Dublin procedure", which determines which country is responsible for processing an asylum application. The judges ruled that, even though Belgium is in principle the responsible Member State, returning the applicant for international protection to Belgium entails a risk of inhuman treatment.[8] While the Belgian government blames other EU Member States for failing to fulfil their obligations, it is itself contributing to secondary movements of refugees through a self-established 'reception crisis'.

The new Belgian government is continuing along the same path and will be even more restrictive where possible. The government plans to reduce the number of reception places from 35,000 to barely 11,000. Although the coalition agreement states that it is "*unacceptable that applicants for international protection are sleeping on the streets*" and that "*we must fulfil our obligation to provide reception,*" the focus is once again on reducing the influx of refugees.[9]

In addition, the government wants to refuse shelter to refugees who have already been recognised in another EU Member State. In practice, this mainly concerns refugees with status in Greece, where they are removed from their reception centres no later than 30 days after they received a protection status and left to fend for themselves. Most of them end up on the streets and therefore decide to travel on.

The government solemnly promises to first reduce the number of refugees and then cut back on reception facilities. In practice, however, the exact opposite is happening. In May, the Minister for Asylum and Migration, Anneleen Van Bossuyt, announced a significant reduction in Fedasil's budget from 826 million euros this year to 138 million by 2029, even though the current budget is already grossly inadequate to meet needs.[10]

It becomes even more cynical when the same minister launches a new discouragement campaign on YouTube.[11] Messages such as '*Don't come*

to Belgium' and '*The asylum centres in Belgium are full*' accompany videos showing photos of asylum seekers sleeping on the streets. '*These videos do not show a dream image, but the facts,*' says Van Bossuyt. '*Too many people are travelling to Belgium because our system has been far too generous for far too long. Our message with these campaigns is honest and clear: Belgium is no longer the land of milk and honey.*' The victims of the current mismanagement are thus being used to deter refugees from coming to Belgium. Following the same logic, the Belgian government refused to temporarily accommodate asylum seekers in hotels while they await a permanent place of reception.

> *"The victims of the current mismanagement are thus being used to deter refugees from coming to Belgium."*

The revised Reception Conditions Directive of 2024 further restricts the rights of refugees during their asylum procedure.[12] EU Member States will be obliged to exclude refugees from reception centres as soon as they are notified of the decision to transfer them to the Member State responsible for examining their application for international protection. This arrangement must be transposed into national law by 12 June 2026 at the latest and will partially transpose the deterrence policy into law. The possibility of ending up on the streets should make refugees decide to remain in the EU Member State where they first entered EU territory, even if these are the Member States under the most pressure, such as Greece and Italy. Conversely, asylum seekers for whom Belgium is responsible are at risk of having to choose between homelessness elsewhere in the EU or homelessness in Belgium.

In addition to undermining the rule of law, Belgium's policies also have real consequences for asylum seekers. Traumas suffered in their country of origin or en route are not given time to heal, they are merely compounded by new traumas. In practice, access to a lawyer is often only possible once an asylum seeker has been assigned to a reception centre. Thorough medical assistance is extremely difficult to obtain without an address. Working is impossible. Crucial documents are also at risk of being lost in the harsh life on the streets.

It is high time that the Belgian government stopped participating in a relentless race to the bottom and once again fulfilled its legal obligations. The erosion of the rule of law must stop immediately, first and foremost for the refugees who are its primary victims.

1   Amnesty International, "Belgium: Unhoused and unheard – How Belgium's persistent failure to provide reception violates asylum seekers' rights", 1 April 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur14/9161/2025/en/.

2   https://strasbourgobservers.com/2022/12/02/the-belgian-reception-crisis-before-the-ecthr-the-court-orders-belgium-to-respect-the-rule-of-law/#:~:text=By%20Jean%2DBaptiste%20Farcy,which%20have%20remained%20deliberately%20ignored.

3   12 January 2007 – Law on the reception of asylum seekers and certain other categories of foreigners (NOTE: Consultation of earlier versions available from 07-05-2007 and updated as of 10-07-2024), available in French at https://refli.be/fr/lex/2007002066

4   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2013/33/oj/eng

5   Amnesty International, "Belgium: Unhoused and unheard – How Belgium's persistent failure to provide reception violates asylum seekers' rights", 1 April 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur14/9161/2025/en/.

6   https://emnbelgium.be/news/belgium-has-issued-temporary-protection-certificates-over-93000-ukrainians-early-2022

7   Amnesty International, "Belgium: Unhoused and unheard – How Belgium's persistent failure to provide reception violates asylum seekers' rights", 1 April 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur14/9161/2025/en/.

8   AIDA, « Country Report – Belgium update on 2024", June 2025, https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/AIDA-BE_2024-Update.pdf.

9   Coalition agreement federal government 2025, available in French at https://www.belgium.be/sites/default/files/resources/publication/files/Accord_gou-vernemental-Bart_De_Wever_fr.pdf.

10   De Standaard, "Minister Van Bossuyt snoeit fors in asielopvang, ook al wijst niets op dalende instroom asielzoekers", 12 mei 2025, https://www.standaard.be/politiek/minister-van-bossuyt-snoeit-fors-in-asielopvang-ook-al-wijst-niets-op-dalende-instroom-asielzoekers/66426433.html.

11   https://emnbelgium.be/news/belgium-launches-social-media-campaigns-discourage-asylum-seekers-coming

12   Directive (EU) 2024/1346 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1346/oj/eng

Homelessness on Greek Refugee Camps: A Form of Institutional Racism and Discrimination?
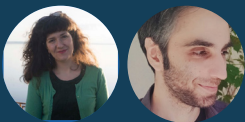
by **Agapi Chouzouraki**, Lawyer & Advocacy Officer at the Greek Council for Refugees (**GCR**) and **Spyros-Vlad Oikonomou**, Advocacy & Communications Officer at GCR, Secretary of the **Greek Housing Network**

This article explores how Greece's refugee reception system has evolved into a form of institutionalised exclusion. Since 2021, massive EU-funded camps known as "Closed Controlled Access Centers" have physically and symbolically isolated non-European asylum seekers under the guise of improved conditions. Agapi Chouzouraki and Spyros-Vlad Oikonomou outline how these securitised spaces resemble prisons more than humanitarian shelters, reflecting a racialised logic of containment.

The last decade's refugee influx to Europe has placed significant strain on border countries, with Greece becoming a central node in the reception of asylum seekers. While ongoing reports on the substandard reception conditions, even for children, highlight persistent systemic challenges, the model of reception employed by Greece, particularly since the start of 2023,[1] constitutes a one-way housing prospect with no available alternative.

Massive reception structures, based on the principle of out of sight and out of mind, seem to promote a simple message for refugees arriving in Greece: you are welcome to stay while your asylum case is examined, as long as you stay "somewhere else". This not-in-my-backyard syndrome heavily underpins the current racialised refugee management system.

Could this be considered a form of institutional racism and systemic discrimination towards non-European refugees and migrants? An examination of the UN Committee's on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 'Guidelines on deinstitutionalization' certainly seems to highlight that the Greek reception system employs quite a few of the "defining elements" of institutionalisation,[2] which in itself is a form of discrimination. According to the European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS), which has been termed by the European Commission as "[t]he best European classification of homelessness"[3], people in accommodation for immigrants such (e.g. reception centres) are also considered to experience homelessness; additionaly, there is a close connection between homelessness and racialised people.[4]

> *"Institutional racism refers to systemic policies and practices within institutions or states that, intentionally or unintentionally, produce unequal outcomes for racialised groups"*

Nevertheless, the answer cannot be a simple yes or no. Institutional racism refers to systemic policies and practices within institutions or states that, intentionally or unintentionally, produce unequal outcomes for racialised groups.[5] It operates not through overt individual prejudice, but through

laws, procedures, and norms that disproportionately affect racialised groups. Applying this framework to refugee management, camps can be analysed not just as spaces of asylum seekers' temporary reception facilities, but as institutional structures that embody and reproduce racial hierarchies.

A bit of context

Greece's geography situates it as a primary entry point for migrants crossing the eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Seas. Following the 2015 great refugee influx towards Europe, the European Union (EU) implemented the EU-Turkey Statement, effectively outsourcing migration control to Turkey, in exchange for financial incentives and political support.[6] This deal (in reality, a press release with no binding legal value) resulted in thousands of asylum seekers being trapped on Greek islands in squalid, overcrowded camps for prolonged periods of time. The reluctance of most other EU member states to share some of the responsibility through a meaningful number of relocations, as one would expect in a Union of solidarity, certainly has not helped either.

Yet, excluding this reluctance which remains embedded in the EU's to-be-implemented Migration and Asylum Pact, things have since changed, even if not really for the better.

In the aftermath of the 2020 fire that burned down the notorious Moria camp in Lesvos, the EU had to invest in improving reception conditions in Greece. And invest, it did. Some five(ish) years and hundreds of millions of Euros later, the new (from 2021 onwards) EU-funded facilities on the Aegean Islands, aptly named "Closed Controlled Access Centers" (CCACs), are a stark reminder of the political rules of the game: better to sweep the issue under the carpet, by "penning" asylum seekers "somewhere else", out of sight, rather than addressing the fundamental causes that to this day expose them to undignified and unsanitary living conditions.

> *"...these institutional choices and failures disproportionately impact on non-white, non-European asylum seekers, revealing an undercurrent of racialised exclusion."*

Part of the issue? A preconception seemingly shared by high level policy makers that improving conditions might serve as a dreaded "pull factor" for more to arrive, even though a track record of beating people at the borders and stripping them of their belongings (an approach shared by more member states than just Greece), imposing arbitrary obstacles to accessing asylum or arbitrarily detaining them, seem to have failed to convince those forced to flee their homes from just staying put.[7]

Of course, these institutional choices and failures disproportionately impact on non-white, non-European asylum seekers, revealing an undercurrent of racialised exclusion.

The Racialisation of Refugee Spaces and Homelessness

Greek refugee camps, such as Moria and its successor Mavrovouni camp, in Lesvos, or Vathy camp in Samos and its successor, the "model" Closed Controlled Access Center (CCAC) of Samos, have been widely criticised for inhumane conditions. Overcrowding, lack of sanitation, limited access to healthcare and medication, and exposure to adverse weather conditions are just a few of the more visible common complaints.[8] Less visible is the impact on the psychosocial well-being of asylum seekers, in what Médecins Sans Frontières (MsF) have identified as a "mental health crisis". These conditions are not incidental but symptomatic of a system that normalises the degradation of racialised bodies.

Refugees are routinely subject to containment policies that spatially segregate them from the general population, effectively creating racialised zones of exception[9], by state decision. The camps, surrounded by barbed wire,[10] are heavily securitised, resembling carceral spaces –something also acknowledged by the EU Ombudsman in 2022– more than spaces for the reception of those fleeing persecution, war, and severe material deprivation. This physical marginalisation mirrors the symbolic marginalisation of non-European others in Europe's racial imaginary.

The Greek asylum system's inefficiencies are compounded by EU policies that disproportionately place the burden of refugee management on frontline states. This unequal distribution reflects a racialised logic wherein Southern and Eastern European countries, often depicted as peripheral within the EU, become the main "gate-keepers" for non-white migrants that in lack of alternative, safe and legal pathways, arrive irregularly at Europe's borders.

The Public Discourse on the "other"

Greek and European media often portray refugees through a lens of security and threat, reinforcing racialised narratives and divides. Refugees –i.e. unarmed civilians– are depicted as invaders or burdens (the foe as opposed to the friend), rather than individuals fleeing violence and

persecution.[11] The fact that the theoretical underpinning of this foe and friend approach, of securitisation, lie in the work of Carl Schmitt, a jurist and political theorist that in 1933 joined the Nazi party, just reinforces the tragic irony of the situation.

This framing, in turn, legitimises harsh policies and fosters conditions for public indifference –at the end of the day, if "they" are a danger, why should "we" care if they are mistreated. It also reinforces a "Fortress Europe" mentality and approach that equates non-white migration with crisis and chaos. The fact that non-white refugees and migrants are frequently, in countries such as Greece, the reason why the rest of "us" can enjoy strawberries at our tables, seems to be forgotten in the equation –unless, of course, "they" dare to demand what is owed for their work.

> *"Greek refugee camps are not merely logistical responses to a humanitarian crisis but are also sites where institutional racism is enacted and becomes normalised."*

Public discourse in Greece has, at times, mirrored these narratives, fuelled by far-right rhetoric and anti-immigrant sentiment. While solidarity movements exist, they are often overshadowed by nationalist discourses that portray refugees as incompatible with Greek cultural identity, as Greeks mostly tend to believe that immigrants do not contribute to the country's development (neither economically nor culturally).[12] This discursive exclusion validates the mechanisms of institutional discrimination, as the "other" is to be placed "somewhere else", out of sight, as they are not part of "us".

Framing the issue within advocacy work

Despite these challenges and despite the cutting of US-based funding for human rights NGOs, including those in Greece, there are still voices pinpointing institutional racism. Organisations such as the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR) provide free legal aid and psychosocial support, document abuses, and advocate for policy change, regarding reception conditions, among others. Our work exposes the contradictions between the legal obligations (have you been to Samos?) and the lived realities of camp residents.

However, such efforts are often constrained by limited resources and political hostility. In recent years, Greek authorities have introduced laws that restrict NGO activities and criminalise humanitarian aid, framing these actors as complicit in irregular migration.[13] These developments reflect a broader trend of shrinking civic space and institutional entrenchment of discriminatory practices.

In conclusion

Greek refugee camps are not merely logistical responses to a humanitarian crisis but are also sites where people live and where institutional racism is enacted and becomes normalised. Through poor living conditions in massive reception facilities, inconsistent access to basic services and an unwelcoming public discourse, the camps function as tools of exclusion for non-white migrants. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing just and equitable refugee policies that dismantle, rather than reproduce, systems of racial inequality. This also entails recognising refugees not as passive victims but as rights-bearing individuals with agency and voice. Policies must move beyond securitisation and containment towards inclusion, participation, and justice. This does not mean "open borders" as scaremongering politicians frequently profess, but rather treating people in accordance with their rights and the EU's legal edifice.

Times are pressing for the Greek Council for Refugees and other human rights and humanitarian NGOs. Your support is invaluable for the continuation of our work, which consists of free legal and psychosocial services to asylum seekers and refugees. Please visit our website if you wish to support our work.

1   By decision of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, in December 2022 Greece terminated the last remaining alternative model of reception: the ESTIA accommodation programme which, through EU funding, had supported in a successful manner the dignified reception of asylum seekers. Since then, excluding (insufficiently) available dedicated shelters and apartments for unaccompanied minors, the only available option for reception are isolated large-scale camps.

2   For instance, asylum seekers residing in Greece's camps are in practice isolated and segregated from independent life in the community, lack control over day-to-day decisions, lack choice over with whom they live and so forth.

3   Reply to Parliamentary question - E-2564/2010(ASW), 2 June 2010, available at: https://tinyurl.com/595cau8t.

4   See Fowle, M.Z., Racialized Homelessness: A Review of Historical and Contemporary Causes of Racial Disparities in Homelessness, 30 March 2022, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2022.2026995; Bramley, G. et.al., Homelessness Amongst Black and Minoritised Ethnic Communities in the UK: a statistical report on the state of the nation, November 2022, available at: https://tinyurl.com/4a8h5566.

5   Among others, see E. Bonilla-Silva, Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation, American Sociological Review, Jun., 1997, Vol. 62, No.3, pp. 465- 480, available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/2657316

6   Papoutsi, A., Painter, J., Papada, E. & Vradis, A. (2018). The EC hotspot approach in Greece: creating liminal EU territory. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies. 45. 1-13. 10.1080/1369183X.2018.1468351.

7   It is interesting to note that following a 2-year period of decreased arrivals between 2020 and 2021

(which at least in part is attributable to the global 2020 pandemic and the exponential increase, since 2020, of reported pushback practices from Greece), since 2022 the number of arrivals has started increasing once again. As per UNHCR's data portal, arrivals by sea and land to Greece stood at 15,965 for 2020, 9,152 for 2021, 18,780 for 2022, 48,721 for 2023 and 62,119 for 2024.

8   Among others, see GCR & Oxfam International & Save the Children International Bulletin – July 2022, available at: https://gcr.gr/el/gcr-reports/item/2007-gcr-oxfam-bulletin-july-2022/

9   See more Agamben, G. (1998). Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life. Stanford University Press.

10   See also the Greek Ombudsman, The Challenge of Migratory Flows and Refugee Protection Reception Conditions and Procedures, April 2024, available in English and Greek at: https://tinyurl.com/546kmb76

11   Holmes, S. M., & Castañeda, H. (2016). Representing the "European refugee crisis" in Germany and beyond: Deservingness and difference, life and death. American Ethnologist, 43(1), 12-24.

12   Arvanitidis, P., Papagiannitsis, G., Desli, A. Z., Vergou, P., & Gourgouliani, S. (2021). Attitudes Towards Refugees & Immigrants in Greece: A National-Local Comparative Analysis. European Journal of Geography, 12(3), 39–55. https://doi.org/10.48088/ejg.p.arv.12.3.39.55

13   Amnesty International. (2021). Greece: Crackdown on human rights defenders. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur25/3397/2021/en/, GCR (2024) At Europe's borders, Pushbacks continues as impunity persists, available at https://gcr.gr/wp-content/uploads/EN-GCR_-Pushback-Report.pdf

What Can Be Done to Address Housing and Homelessness of Undocumented Migrants?

By **Garyfallia Mylona**, Advocacy Officer at the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), with contributions from **Laetitia Van der Vennet**, Senior Advocacy Officer at PICUM, and **Michele Levoy**, Director at PICUM.

This article from PICUM explores how undocumented migrants across Europe are systematically excluded from housing. As homelessness rises, so too does the criminalisation of those simply trying to survive. From legal barriers and administrative exclusion, to landlord discrimination and exploitative conditions, Garyfallia Mylona, with contributions from Laetitia Van der Vennet and Michele Levoy, calls for an urgent shift toward a rights-based housing approach: one that protects undocumented people from both destitution and state violence, and ensures no one is left without shelter due to their residence status.

> *"Housing is not a privilege tied to a person's migration status."*

In recent years, housing issues have gained increasing attention at the EU level, with 2025 marking a pivotal year for housing policy. A major milestone will be the adoption of the first ever EU Affordable Housing Plan.[1] Preparations are underway for the first-ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy,[2] alongside the renewal of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan.[3] Further, discussions on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) post-2027[4] have begun. These initiatives present an opportunity to reshape the housing landscape in Europe.

While housing policy reforms are being planned, homelessness has been on the rise.[5] This is particularly true for the most marginalised, including undocumented migrants, who are becoming a larger part of the homeless population. For example, countries like France[6] and cities such as Brussels[7] and Lisbon[8] are seeing growing numbers of undocumented people experiencing homelessness.[9] Still, much of the data on homelessness in the EU remains fragmented. Most national statistics[10] and strategies[11] to combat homelessness focus solely on regularly residing populations, perpetuating a policy blind spot which leaves undocumented people invisible in relevant discussions.

Although housing is a basic right,[12] it would be wrong to assume that everyone has equal access. Precarious residence status correlates with social and economic instability, making undocumented migrants highly susceptible to homelessness and housing exclusion. Such challenges are often exacerbated by structural discrimination and policies that systematically exclude undocumented individuals from basic housing protections, or link housing to migration management. Any policy efforts will fall short unless the needs and realities of marginalised groups such as undocumented migrants are explicitly addressed.

Barriers to adequate housing for undocumented migrants

Undocumented people across Europe face a unique combination of barriers that affect their access to adequate housing.[13]

These can be legal, administrative, social, and economic, and often result in their exclusion from both formal housing markets and public housing systems. As a result, many are left with little to no viable options for safe, stable, and secure accommodation.

> *"Although housing is a basic right, it would be wrong to assume that everyone has equal access."*

Legal and administrative barriers

People with temporary, precarious, or irregular residence status encounter various legal or administrative obstacles in accessing housing, including private rental accommodation, social housing, and public shelters.

Landlords typically require documentation that they cannot provide, such as proof of income, credit scores, and national identification. In many EU countries, undocumented migrants are excluded from public or social housing programs.[14] Access to public shelters or assistance with housing may also be hindered by requirements to show a residence permit or other documentation that irregular migrants cannot produce, such as a social security number.

Exclusion from state-subsidised housing or any other state support means that the only option is the private housing market, where undocumented people face another multitude of barriers. As a result, they are often pushed to the margins of the private housing sector.

Discrimination, exploitation, and other barriers

Discrimination plays a major role in excluding undocumented migrants from the formal rental market. Landlords often impose discriminatory practices, rejecting potential tenants based on their residence status, nationality, or ethnicity.[15] Even in countries where there are no legal barriers to renting to undocumented individuals, landlords may still refuse to rent due to biases, prejudice or (founded or unfounded) fear of legal repercussions. Discrimination can manifest as unreasonable, difficult to fulfil requirements, such as demands for excessive documentation and guarantees, including exorbitant deposits, abusive clauses and inflated prices. Racialised communities and persons with disabilities face compounded challenges, as being undocumented exacerbates barriers to accessing basic rights and services, including disability support.[16]

Many undocumented individuals live in severe poverty, working in low-paid, informal sectors with unstable incomes and no formal employment documentation, and are excluded from basic mechanisms of social protection that could provide a minimum social safety net. Undocumented workers are systematically underpaid and exploited, which impacts all aspects of their lives.[17] As rent costs rise, undocumented migrants are often priced out of the market or forced to accept substandard housing that may be unsafe or overcrowded. The fear of detection prevents many from entering formal rental agreements even if they legally could, pushing them into informal arrangements with no legal protections and a high risk of exploitation. These often involve exploitation by "slum landlords"[18] or informal brokers who rent substandard housing at inflated prices.

Language barriers and a lack of familiarity with the local housing market further amplify inequalities and bureaucratic barriers, particularly in countries where the process of renting a home can involve complex paperwork and bureaucratic procedures.

Exclusion from public shelters

Access to public shelters is often restricted due to national registration requirements, documentation checks, or municipality-specific policies. Those with irregular residence status are typically deprioritised, face long waiting times, or simply denied access.[19] Even when access to shelters is possible, stays are typically short-term and non-renewable, unstable, and sometimes deemed unsafe or inadequate – especially for families.[20] In that regard, families with children continue to face many challenges, despite the EU's commitment to ensuring access to adequate housing for all children in need, regardless of their migration status, as part of the European Child Guarantee.[21] Overall, shelter access for undocumented migrants remains largely dependent on non-state actors (e.g. churches) or local discretion.

The right to housing versus migration control measures

In some EU member states, landlords can face legal repercussions when renting to migrants with irregular residence status. Renting to undocumented migrants can either be explicitly punishable by law or fall under the application of laws related to the facilitation of irregular stay.[22] It can also be deterred through legislation that mandates landlords to verify tenants' residence status before renting, and penalises them if they fail to report undocumented migrants to the authorities.[23]

The criminalisation of solidarity actions across Europe is escalating, posing significant barriers to accessing housing and shelter for undocumented migrants.[24] The EU Facilitation Directive (2002/90/EC)[25]

criminalises the act of facilitating the residence of irregular migrants, and the broad definition of "facilitation" means that renting accommodation to undocumented migrants can be considered a criminal offence in several Member States.[26]

"The criminalisation of solidarity actions across Europe is escalating, posing significant barriers to accessing housing and shelter for undocumented migrants"

In November 2023, the European Commission proposed a recast of the 2002 Facilitation Directive, according to which, requesting or obtaining a "financial or material benefit" for assisting a third-country national to reside within the territory of a member state constitutes a criminal offence.[27] The currently negotiated text still fails to clearly protect individuals who obtain a lawful financial compensation when helping someone in an irregular situation or providing a service. This means that landlords and others providing services traditionally offered in exchange for money and without undue financial profit could still risk criminalisation. Unless activities such as providing shelter are exempt from criminalisation, the widespread criminalisation of solidarity that has occurred throughout the EU since the 2002 Facilitation Directive was adopted will most likely increase dramatically.[28]

Further, the Return Regulation proposed by the European Commission in March 2025[29] includes provisions that could criminalise undocumented migrants experiencing homelessness. The draft regulation permits immigration detention of up to 24 months for individuals deemed likely to try to avoid deportation or comply with deportation orders, including those without a fixed address. Mandatory reporting obligations are introduced, potentially requiring public sector workers to detect and report undocumented migrants. Additionally, the regulation mandates that returnees provide a current residence address and accept official communications, conditions that are often unattainable for undocumented migrants lacking stable housing. These provisions may further deter undocumented migrants from seeking essential services like housing due to fear of detection and deportation.[30]

Toward a rights-based approach to housing for all

To address homelessness and housing exclusion among undocumented migrants, it is essential to adopt a rights-based approach ensuring access to safe, adequate housing for everyone, regardless of migration status, involving the following elements:

Invest in inclusive social policies: Develop and implement EU and national social, anti-poverty and housing policies that truly reach people in poverty and/or at risk of homelessness, regardless of their residence status.

- Recognise housing as a fundamental right: Ensure that legal safeguards against eviction, housing exclusion and inadequate housing conditions extend to all and are accessible to all, regardless of their residence status.

- Adopt a Housing First approach: Provide undocumented individuals with immediate and unconditional access to stable housing (e.g. emergency shelters, transitional housing or more permanent housing), along with psychosocial and legal assistance, to help resolve their irregular residence status.

- Enforce anti-discrimination measures: Implement and enforce anti-discrimination policies in both public and private housing markets to ensure equal access for undocumented migrants.

Ensure unhindered access to emergency shelters, regardless of residence status.

- Remove legal and practical barriers: ensure that undocumented individuals can sign a lease, deposit rent guarantees, and open bank accounts.

- Establish firewalls between housing services and migration enforcement, ensuring that access to housing does not depend on a person's migration status.

- Decriminalise renting to undocumented people: remove legal penalties for renting to undocumented individuals, shifting the focus to protecting people from exploitation.

Housing is not a privilege tied to a person's migration status. Despite housing being recognised as a fundamental human right, undocumented migrants continue to have this right systematically denied. As homelessness rates rise across Europe and EU institutions, along with member states, try to respond, it is essential to ensure that undocumented people are not left behind. Failing to do so is both a failure of policy and a breach of human rights obligations.

A joint PICUM-FEANTSA report, on the issue of homelessness and access to housing for undocumented migrants, focusing on undocumented children, families, and young people, is scheduled for publication in late 2025. The report will analyse relevant frameworks and practices in several EU member states.

ENDNOTES - What Can Be Done to Address Housing and Homelessness of Undocumented Migrants?

1   European Commission, European Affordable Housing Plan.

2   Social Platform, 2025, Position Paper Anti-Poverty Strategy.

3   Social Platform, 2025, The Next European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan.

4   PICUM, 2025, PICUM's priorities for the next EU long-term budget: contribution to the European Commission consultation.

5   According to FEANTSA's 2024 Annual Overview, homelessness increased by 28% between 2020 and 2024, with over 1.28 million people affected, including 400,000 children.

6   Fondation pour le logement, 2021, Fabrique des personnes «sans-papiers», fabrique des mal-logés.

7   In Brussels, 7 in 10 people living in Samu Social's emergency shelters were undocumented in 2023.

8   Portugal Resident, 2024, Immigrants in majority among Lisbon's homeless.

9   Homelessness extends beyond the mere absence of a physical dwelling, encompassing various forms of housing exclusion. See e.g. ETHOS - European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion.

10   OECD research reveals that the majority of national statistics exclude undocumented migrants. OECD, 2024, Challenges to measuring homelessness among migrants in OECD and EU countries.

11   In June 2021, the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH) was launched, reaffirming a joint commitment of Member States and EU institutions to work towards ending homelessness by 2030. National strategies vary, with some integrating homelessness into broader housing or anti-poverty policies, while others have dedicated homelessness strategies. Only a few mention migration. Some measures may exist at federal, regional, or local levels, but comprehensive data on these initiatives can often be limited or inaccessible.

12   OHCHR, Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, The human right to adequate housing. The European Social Charter, in Article 31, requires state parties to promote access to housing of an adequate standard, prevent and reduce homelessness with a view to its gradual elimination, and make the price of housing accessible to those without adequate resources (Council of Europe, 1996).

13   For a better overview of these issues, read PICUM, 2013, Housing and homelessness of Undocumented Migrants in Europe: Developing Strategies and Good Practices to Ensure Access to Housing and Shelter.

14   For example, in Frankfurt, Germany, eligibility for social housing is restricted to individuals who can demonstrate permanent residence or hold a valid residence permit for at least one year, meaning that migrants with precarious statis are generally excluded from both social housing and homelessness assistance. City Initiative on Migrants with Irregular Status in Europe (C-MISE), Migrants with Irregular Status in Europe: Guidance for Municipalities.

15   The European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), recorded that between 2016 to 2022 31% of people of African descent faced racial discrimination when trying to rent or buy an apartment or a house in Europe, while in the case of Muslims, 26% perceived discrimination in accessing housing. FRA, 2023, Being Black in the EU. Experiences of people of African descent – EU Survey on immigrants and descendants of immigrants, p.42.

16   For more, read PICUM, 2024, Navigating disability and irregular status in Europe.

17   PICUM, 2020, A Worker is a Worker: How to Ensure that Undocumented Migrant Workers Can Access Justice.

18   Housing Rights Watch, 2021, Unfit Housing and Slum Landlords in Europe: Learning from Different Legislation to Protect Vulnerable Tenants, p.2.

19   Exceptions exist, such as the LVV (Landelijke Vreemdelingen Voorziening) program in the Netherlands that provided basic shelter and support services to undocumented migrants, often through temporary accommodations and essential services such as healthcare and legal advice. Unlike state-run shelters, LVV did not require migrants to provide proof of regular residence. However, the program had strict criteria and was limited in scope and duration. For more, read PICUM, 2023, A snapshot of social protection measures for undocumented migrants by national and local governments pp. 16-19.

20   For a better overview of the impact of homelessness on undocumented children and families, read PICUM, 2021, Navigating Irregularity: the impact of growing undocumented in Europe.

21   For more, read PICUM, 2021, EU Council adopts Child Guarantee that benefits undocumented children.

22   FRA found in 2011 that five EU member states (Cyprus, Greece, Denmark, Estonia, and Lithuania) explicitly punish landlords for renting accommodation to migrants in an irregular situation. Criminalisation of migrants in an irregular situation and of persons engaging with them p. 13. In eleven EU member states, landlords renting accommodation to migrants in an irregular situation may risk a fine and/or imprisonment based on rules on facilitation of stay; a further seven EU member states punish landlords with a fine. Ibid, p.13.

23   For example, in the UK, landlords and letting agents are required to perform "right to rent" checks under the Immigration Act 2014 (Chapter 1, Part 3). Specifically, they must endure that an adult tenant is not disqualified

from renting due to their migration status. If a tenant is found to be disqualified after passing the initial check, landlords must notify the Home Office "as soon as reasonably practicable" to avoid liability.

24   In 2024 alone, 142 human rights defenders in the EU faced judicial proceedings for supporting migrants, including providing shelter. For more, read PICUM, 2025, Criminalisation of migration and solidarity in the EU 2024 report.

25   Council Directive 2002/90/EC of 28 November 2002 defining the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and residence.

26   See also Carrera et al., 2018, Fit for purpose? The Facilitation Directive and the criminalisation of humanitarian assistance to irregular migrants: 2018 update.

27   Proposal for a DIRECTIVE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL laying down minimum rules to prevent and counter the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and stay in the Union, and replacing Council Directive 2002/90/EC and Council Framework Decision 2002/946 JHA, Article 3, par. 1a.

28   For further analysis of the new Facilitation Directive, read PICUM, 2024, How the New EU Facilitation Directive Furthers the Criminalisation of Migrants and Human Rights Defenders.

29   Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union, and repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC

30   For further commentary read PICUM, 2025, New Returns Regulation ushers in dystopian detention and deportation regime.

Experimental Housing Solutions for Migrant Homelessness in Italy

By **Nicolò Cassano**, Caritas Cuneo Fossano; **Elisa Gondolo**, Housing and Migration Officer, Social Cooperative "Momo", Cuneo; **Paolo Infurna**, Housing Sector Contact Person, Mondoaltro Religion and Worship Foundation, Caritas Diocesan Agrigento; and **Caterina Cortese**, Social Policy and Senior Research Officer, fio.PSD ETS (Italian Federation of Organizations working Homeless People)

As migrant homelessness rises in Italy, two community-based projects are offering new models of support. In Cuneo, the Accoglienza Diffusa 2.0 project evolved from seasonal worker housing into year-round accommodation with tailored support, helping migrants transition from precarious work to stable living. In Agrigento, Casa Rahab assists migrants leaving reception centres by offering housing, legal aid, language training, and active involvement in community life.

This article explores how both initiatives challenge fragmented services and short-term solutions, showing that migrant-centred, integrated approaches can foster autonomy, dignity, and real paths to inclusion.

Background

In recent years, the presence of people with difficult migration paths has been substantial in traditional services for the people facing homelessness (night shelters, food distribution services, street outreach, soup kitchens, but also housing programs). This population is characterised by social, economic and health needs, but also specific needs more closely linked to the protection of human and international rights or the regulation of documentation processes. In such cases, it is easy to slip into a situation of severe marginalisation, where poor work, physical and mental health are combined with precarious and unstable legal conditions.

Italy has a long tradition of migration flows. It has always been a port of arrival for migrants from the Mediterranean route. In the last ISTAT survey on *Homeless people*, published in 2015, it was noted that foreigners in Italy accounted for 58% of the estimated 50,724 people, with an increase of almost 10% between the 2011 and 2015 surveys. These were migrants from North African countries (Morocco and Tunisia) and Eastern Europe (Romania). The conflicts in Afghanistan, Ukraine, and between Israel and Palestine have led to an increase in the number of refugees and war victims, many of whom, fortunately, receive support services. Additionally, the Balkan route is commonly used by migrants from Eastern Europe to reach Italy.

> *"The problem is not being a migrant but the vulnerable conditions and trajectories they experience"*

A study carried out by fio.PSD (Federazione Italiana Organismi Persone Senza Dimora - Italian Federation of Organisations for the Homeless) among its members at the beginning of 2020 showed an increase in the homeless population of between 10% and 20%, linking this figure to the increase in migration flows. New comers often have personal histories shaped by difficult migration experiences. They frequently face challenges in securing stable employment and achieving independence, with their living conditions further worsened by poor health, addiction issues, or a lack of documentation and long-term residence permits.

What do migrants at risk of becoming homeless need?

Many third-sector organisations point out the attention to the fact that migrant people experiencing precarious and vulnerable living conditions are at risk of becoming homeless. The precarious residential status, the lack of affordable housing and discrimination in the housing market, and opportunities outside the reception system, and difficulty in finding employment can all represent barriers to gaining independence and improving migrants' living conditions.

The problem is not being a migrant but the vulnerable conditions and trajectories they experience. For example, some migrants establish economic and working ties in Italy (as in the case of the Cuneos' project) but are unable to build a dignified life for themselves due to poorly paid and seasonal work. They often turn to the reception circuit and home-less services to solve their basic needs. Newcomer citizens who lack immediate access to a regular residence permit in their host country risk becoming part of the phenomenon known in Anglo-Saxon countries as 'overstayers' - irregular immigrants who, despite losing their regular residence status, remain in the country and live in highly precarious and insecure conditions. Lastly, individuals who are excluded from, or have exited migrant reception systems, and are not yet prepared to manage life independently, often become vulnerable and turn to homeless services to meet their basic needs, including healthcare, shelter, psychological support, and legal assistance (as in the case of Agrigento's project).

Below are two examples of projects within the fio.PSD national network that focus on migrants at risk of becoming homeless.

Preventing homelessness for the migrant population: the case of "Accoglienza diffusa 2.0" project in the city of Cuneo

The territories of Cuneo and Saluzzo (Piedmont, Northern Italy) are areas with a strong agricultural vocation. During the summer period, harvesting work in the fields leads to an increased demand for season-al labour. Every year, hundreds of workers, often foreign citizens from low-threshold services and other Italian regions, move to this area to obtain employment opportunities in agriculture. Within this context, the 'Accoglienza Diffusa 2.0' project was born. It is a good practice created to respond to the housing and social needs of these workers, offering them not only a roof but also human and professional support.

Since 2018, the project has been developed thanks to a Memorandum of Understanding chaired by the Prefecture of Cuneo together with the Piedmont Region, business associations, and trade unions, and signed by 11 municipalities in the Province of Cuneo. The initial objective was to provide support (from June to November) for 225 seasonal workers in temporary accommodations and apartments. **The aim was to avoid informal settlements or situations of degradation, and to guarantee decent living and working conditions.**

Since 2020, the social cooperatives Momo, Fiordaliso and Emmanuele, together with the Caritas Diocesana of Cuneo-Fossano, have launched a second project called "Presidio" to provide 40 seasonal shelters in the regional provinces. The **multidisciplinary team** works side by side with the beneficiaries, offering concrete support during the collection period.

In 2021, the operators affirmed that the majority of seasonal workers live in the country on a permanent basis, have documents and residency in Italy, but are unable to access affordable housing. They are often housed in night shelters or low-threshold services during the winter period, and migrant workers find themselves living homeless. Social workers decided to listen to the workers to understand their needs and design a new solution.

In 2022, the "Accoglienza Diffusa 2.0" project was born. The promoting organisations decided to support two apartments throughout the year, providing accommodation and personalised care for 15 young men, mainly of sub-Saharan origin, aged between 20 and 35. Each of them will receive personalised support covering all aspects of their lives: from legal and health services to access to employment, from training to bureaucratic support.

Since 2023, the two shelters have had the solid support of the Common Ground project and have welcomed victims and potential victims of labour exploitation, giving continuity to the tried and tested path.

The innovative elements of the project were:

- Bottom-up design, listening to the needs of seasonal migrant workers experiencing homelessness
- Recognising that the temporary nature of services is not sufficient to meet people's ongoing needs
- The empowerment of the beneficiaries, who offered an economic contribution to the housing costs
- Community work involving public institutions, associations, social and health services.

Thanks to the "Accoglienza diffusa 2.0" project, it has also been possible to set up apprenticeships, vocational and language training courses and socialisation activities, opening up new prospects of integration for the beneficiaries.

"Accoglienza diffusa 2.0" represents an example of territorial integration and social inclusion, representing the evolution from a model of seasonal accommodation to a model of permanent housing for the most vulnerable workers.

A migrant-centred approach: that makes it possible. The case of the Casa Rahab in Agrigento

Casa Rahab is a place of welcome and support for people in situations of housing fragility, located in the city of Agrigento (Sicily, Southern Italy) and managed by the Diocesan Caritas of Agrigento and the Mondoaltro Foundation. It focuses on migrants who are leaving institutional care, often without having acquired the necessary skills to build an independent life project. In this transitional phase, when the risk of extreme marginalisation is very high, **Casa Rahab offers a space for rest, orientation, and new beginnings**. Thanks to its proximity to the island of Lampedusa (traditional landing point for people from North Africa), many of Casa Rahab's beneficiaries are migrants who need support to start an independent life.

"The active participation of the residents... creates a sense of belonging, strengthens relationship skills and promotes a gradual but solid path of empowerment."

The approach adopted is based on a **holistic vision of the person**. The welcome offered goes beyond simple access to accommodation: each beneficiary is included in a shared path that links the various services active within the Mondoaltro Foundation. Specialised social workers offer individual listening sessions, training courses, job placement, Italian language courses and volunteer opportunities. This method is useful in tackling two recurrent problems: the fragmentation of services and the lack of accessibility. The people welcomed often do not know how the local context works, they do not know the language and have difficulties understanding the opportunities available. The aim of Casa Rahab is to make social intervention as clear, coordinated and accessible as possible.

Casa Rahab is not a traditional care service. The active participation of the residents is encouraged. Beneficiaries take care of the common areas, contribute to the day-to-day management of the house and, where possible, volunteer for activities such as serving in the foundation's soup kitchen. This involvement creates a sense of belonging, strengthens relationship skills and promotes a gradual but solid path of empowerment.

In our territory, migrants who find themselves in a situation of homelessness face very specific difficulties. The resources available are few and poorly coordinated, while the needs are complex and often ignored. One of the most serious problems is the lack of access to information: from the first moments of their arrival, people are confronted with ineffective communication methods that prevent them from having a real understanding of their rights and obligations. Many do not know, for example, that leaving an institutional reception centre means losing the right to housing and that a declaration of hospitality is required in order to regularise their situation. This single bureaucratic step, multiplied by hundreds of people without stable housing, makes access to regularisation virtually impossible. This creates a cumbersome mechanism that feeds on itself and ends up blocking any path to autonomy. In this context, information is a fundamental pillar to overcome the difficulties in accessing rights and services. Casa Rahab offers literacy courses, cultural mediation, support in accessing social and health services, and legal advice to help people escape a sense of disorientation and invisibility.

Casa Rahab is also a promoter of dialogue and collaboration in the territory, organising events such as the *Festa del Vicinato* and the World Café, which foster a climate of trust and inclusion. This approach to social advocacy aims to build a shared future by strengthening the community's resources and responding to the real needs of the territory. **Casa Rahab is a laboratory of social innovation, where diversity meets and new life possibilities are built**.

Hospitality[1] and Migration: Housing First for those Excluded from Housing First

By **Benjamin Damasco**, Hospitality Project Manager, Métropole de Lyon

This article explores how the Métropole de Lyon in France is reimagining migrant reception policies by adapting the principles of Housing First to populations traditionally excluded from such programmes, in particular undocumented migrants. Faced with state inaction and legal barriers, local authorities and civil society have created alternative housing models, including tiny homes and squats. These solutions emphasise stability, dignity, and community, while the article acknowledges the limitations of temporary fixes and the ongoing need to embed hospitality within public policy frameworks.

Background

The first reception of migrants in France is under the jurisdiction of the State. Its strategy, set out in a national multi-annual plan, provides broad guidelines for the reception of asylum seekers and refugees. However, year after year, the quality of this reception has declined, as denounced by the associations working to support exiled individuals.[2]

In addition to further undermining the lives of displaced people, this deterioration has effectively shifted the burden of homelessness caused by a shortage of accommodation, onto local authorities and citizens, each of whom is compelled to act at their own level to help.

It is against this backdrop that reception policies have emerged in France since 2020, taking different forms and operating on various scales, and driven by collective actions of all kinds. The common denominator of these policies is the desire to act on behalf of the most vulnerable people living in the area, beyond the simple legal framework.

There are many motivations behind this commitment. Firstly, the public health crisis is partly overcoming silo approaches, enabling action that places people at the centre (particularly in the case of homelessness), while at the same time giving local authorities the opportunity to get involved outside the regulatory framework alone. Secondly, the highly mediatised displacement of populations (e.g., Afghanistan or Ukraine) which is mobilising civil society throughout Europe. And lastly, for some local authorities (including the Métropole de Lyon), the elections in spring 2020 saw the arrival of new leaders with a strong social commitment in several of France's major cities.

This renewal of the executive at the head of the Lyon Metropolitan Council led to two major changes: a commitment to meet its obligations to provide shelter for certain groups (e.g., single women with young children, or unaccompanied minors), and a commitment to do so in line with the principles of Housing First.

Reception sites: a community engagement in favour of migrant populations

In France, despite their vulnerability, migrants are largely excluded from mainstream housing provision. This

is due to one simple factor: the lack of a residence permit. In France, access to social housing requires a residence permit, which many migrant people do not have. As a result, Housing First programmes are largely inaccessible to this segment of the population. As for private rental housing, it is already a complex and challenging process for residents of the European Union, so there is little prospect of finding a large-scale solution to the housing exclusion of migrants within the private sector.

This is where the Métropole de Lyon intends to take action. Until 2020, the above-mentioned housing obligations were only partially met, and in a poor way. Only a few families were accommodated in hotels, with no regular social support and no long-term viability for this accommodation. The precariousness of this accommodation made it difficult for migrants to recover, rest and take steps that could eventually lead to regularisation and thus access to housing.

The change in the majority will allow the opening of lodgements, which are intended to move away from the traditional French emergency shelters. These solutions are based on the principles of Logement d'Abord (Housing First), offering increased social support, a stabilising length of stay and, above all, a space that we want to be considered as housing. Not just in its form, but in the way it is lived in.

The lodgement offered (tiny houses, small collective structures) allow people to find or rediscover a home. The aim is to finally resume a normal life: to have a key, to be able to invite someone to stay within the framework set by and for the inhabitants of these sites, to have a private kitchen or bathroom, etc. These considerations may seem elementary, but they are not part of the everyday life in accommodation facilities in France.

The end of care is also not a burden for people. The managers of these institutions are committed to ensuring continuity of care, and people leave these institutions for three reasons:

- administrative changes allowing access to social housing;

- to move to a housing solution more suited to the family situation if this has changed (new birth, arrival of a spouse, etc.);

- to leave the site if the person no longer complies with the rules established collectively.

The philosophy behind these projects is clear: to put an end to the permanent state of emergency by providing places where people can rest,

organise themselves, plan ahead, have territorial integration, create links and create or strengthen solidarity networks around them, with the aim of promoting social inclusion and facilitate their long-term cohesion into local life.

Furthermore, the transition from a collective housing system to an individual habitat system is a real plus. This is particularly true for people living in tiny houses and vacant apartments acquired by the Metropolitan Council, as they have a self-contained, independent space with technical characteristics similar to or equal to those of a home.

However, this 'shelter' policy does not solve everything. The lack of regularisation continues to block access to permanent housing. The high number of situations of this kind means that facilities have to be opened to more people, who have to share more private spaces (e.g., kitchens, bathrooms). The transition to other services takes a long time, especially when the Metropole Council's responsibility ends, and the accommodation often remains temporary.

Also, it is not just about housing. It is about recognising that everyone, migrant or not, needs a stable place to rebuild their lives. The attention paid to the quality of housing, the identification of sites that are not always on the outskirts of the city to enable them to become part of a dynamic neighbourhood life, the provision of comprehensive support (e.g., health, schooling, childcare, learning French) are all factors that enable the Métropole to affirm that recovery depends on the right to housing.

"The philosophy behind these projects is clear: to put an end to the permanent state of emergency by providing places where people can rest, organise themselves, plan ahead…"

The fact remains that people who do not fall within the Métropole's responsibility are still excluded, even if they live in the area by other means. That is why, in parallel with the development of these sites, the Lyon Métropole has chosen to embark on a more complex path: exploring the precarious housing sites known as squats.

Squats and self-managed sites: institutional support

While the issue of reception and its deployment as a public policy allows local authorities to position themselves alongside citizens, they can go further through the material resources at their disposal. The question

of mobilising their resources mainly concerns the public for whom they are responsible, but this mobilisation is being gradually extended to all rough sleepers at the request of collectives[3] and associations.

However, the pace at which these properties are made available seems very slow to collectives working with people who have no accommodation or housing solution. Occupation then begins without the landlord's permission, and with it the cycle of legal proceedings that weighs on the residents and their supporters.

In order to limit this phenomenon, the idea of formalising these occupations emerged at the start of the term of office of the municipal executive. The work is still in progress and the local authorities are gradually establishing forms of occupation, either by allowing precarious housing to be maintained for a certain period of time, or by making vacant buildings available to associations and entrusting them with the management and financing of the life of these places (e.g., water, insurance). To reduce the risks to these spaces, social and technical interventions are also carried out, while at the same time providing an insight into community organisation in order to combat the tendency to occupy these spaces.

Nevertheless, squatting should not be seen as a final solution, because it remains the result of the failure of several public policies (reception of precarious people, protection of vulnerable people, or even urban planning), to which the only response remains decent housing under the rule of law. As always, there are exceptions, with sites offering very decent living conditions. However, it is the methods of organising, receiving, and supporting the most vulnerable people that should inspire the institutions, and not the physical support (in short, vacant and deteriorated buildings).

The fact remains that this type of organisation brings migrants closer to the principles of Housing First. The denial of a number of their rights does not prevent migrants from imagining, organising and determining how they want to live in these places.

For these squats are first and foremost places where people live. The choice of the term 'inhabitant' by supporters and those involved when talking about the people who live there is not unimportant. Rules and regulations have been established that help to institutionalise these spaces. They include a series of rules that make these sites places of rest close to the home concept (for example: respect for individual spaces, secure locking of the front door to ensure separation between outside and inside, collective maintenance of common spaces to ensure decency, combating over-occupation to make life as peaceful as possible, etc.).

So yes, these places are much more precarious than the reception sites mentioned above. There is less social support, and it is up to the residents themselves to emphasise community dynamics. However, the commitment of local authorities to these issues, which they see as a first step, makes it possible to think more broadly about the ways in which an institution can participate in a dynamic of hospitality, even though hospitality is by its very nature a non-institutional gesture.

"By recognising that people have the capacity to transform the public arena, to participate in shaping the public policies we reserve for them, we enter into a relationship of exchange that does not exist in policies of control and exclusion."

Hospitality and public policy: translating HF principles into law

In the face of increasing exclusion and the erosion of the right to housing, some local authorities are adopting reception as a principle of public action. This is not an insignificant choice. It shakes up the usual frameworks of social policy, and creates space for hospitality.

Talking about hospitality in an institution means accepting a degree of uncertainty and trial and error, where the norm that the authorities are supposed to guarantee requires stability.

Sociologist Anne Gotman describes hospitality as a 'bricolage' of margins and overflows. It is in these margins, in these incomplete and shifting forms of reception, that tomorrow's rules are invented. By observing (how people live in the interstices), by allowing ourselves to be questioned, by being open to the solutions that people themselves propose. Tomorrow's rules emerge from this trial and error, when the expected effects are observed and people's rights are strengthened, because they are based on listening to the people affected by these rights.

This shift is essential: by recognising that people have the capacity to transform the public arena, to participate in shaping the public policies we reserve for them, we enter into a relationship of exchange that does not exist in policies of control and exclusion. As a result, the public policy of hospitality becomes a permanent search for ways to integrate the gestures of hospitality into the law, allowing for trial and error in order to continuously feed this public policy.

ENDNOTES - Hospitality and Migration: Housing First for those Excluded from Housing First

1   To be intended as reception capacity.

2   https://www.lacimade.org/vers-un-nouveau-sche-ma-national-daccueil-des-demandeurs-dasile2025/

https://www.forumrefugies.org/s-informer/publica-tions/articles-d-actualites/en-france/1516-asile-une-analyse-statistique-confirme-les-limites-du-systeme-d-accueil

3   Groups of citizens organised informally around a cause, in this case helping people in very vulnerable situations.

Permanent Temporariness: The Situation of Refugees and Migrants at Risk of Homelessness in Poland

By **Aneta Szarfenberg**, PhD candidate, The Maria Grzegorzewska University.

Aneta Szarfenberg explores the growing issue of homelessness and housing precarity among refugees and migrants in Poland, with a focus on Ukrainian refugees. Drawing from new research and lived experiences, the article highlights five interlinked mechanisms contributing to "permanent temporariness" for foreigners. Structural and legal barriers, psychosocial impact (inculding trauma), and fragmented support systems create long-term institutional dependency. The piece also underlines the essential, though under-resourced, role of NGOs and the informal cooperation networks propping up Poland's inadequate state response.

Context

Approximately 31,000 people living in institutions and non-residential spaces are considered homeless in Poland (single-night census, February 2024). Among them, foreigners constitute a relatively small but steadily growing group (around 1,800 people, an increase of 250% since 2019). Over 29,000 Ukrainian refugees live in collective accommodation centres—these individuals are not officially recognised as homeless.

A study is currently being conducted on homelessness and the risk of homelessness among foreigners in Poland (Szarfenberg et al., 2025[1]), with a special focus on the situation of Ukrainian refugees. The research includes (besides data analysis) 52 individual interviews: 15 with refugees, 5 with representatives of various levels of government, 8 with representatives of public support institutions, and the rest with representatives of NGO and managers of collective accommodation centres. Below, I present the preliminary findings from this study.

> *"Over 29,000 Ukrainian refugees live in collective accommodation centres—these individuals are not officially recognised as homeless"*

No strategy, no choice – mechanisms of homelessness risk for vulnerable groups

The analysis of migrants' situations was based on a theoretical model adapted from Pleace's typology, which identifies two key drivers of homelessness among foreigners: (1) legal conditions regulating residence and associated entitlements, and (2) access to the social support system (welfare regime). This concept was further developed by Ryszard Szarfenberg and served as the main theoretical framework for the present research. The final model identifies five mechanisms leading to homelessness among migrants:

1. **Structural-economic mechanisms**: Availability of housing, barriers in the housing market, income inequalities, and their impact on the residential stability of migrants and refugees. The research found that systemic solutions focus mainly on short-term assistance,

with limited pathways to protected or social housing. Foreigners usually seek housing in large cities, where jobs are easier to find but housing is more expensive. At the same time, loss of employment or health leads to the immediate loss of residential stability. Particularly vulnerable groups (people with disabilities, seniors, and large families) who cannot support themselves through work tend to use collective facilities, where temporary and emergency stays often turn into permanent residence.

2. **Psychosocial mechanisms**: Trauma, migration-related stress, social isolation, and the emotional consequences of lacking stable accommodation. Respondents highlighted the lack of systemic psychological and integration support—such services are mostly provided by NGOs or only occasionally available. Long-term residence in institutions fosters passive compliance, stagnation, and deepening social isolation, further exacerbating psychological difficulties and unprocessed traumas. The challenge is the feeling of permanent temporariness, lack of agency, dependency on the support system, very limited choices (e.g., of companions), and the daily reality of institutional regimes (including rules and sometimes restricted access to basic amenities).

3. **Socio-economic mechanisms**: Limited access to employment, non-recognition of professional qualifications, low income, and restricted opportunities for economic development, all affecting the ability to maintain stable housing conditions. The study confirms that the main risks for those threatened with homelessness are the lack of stable employment and low income, as well as the non-recognition of qualifications. Those who could achieve independence in the open labour and housing market have left collective facilities. Those who remain are people who, due to age, health, or life circumstances, cannot become independent, that is, afford rent and function without support.

4. **Discriminatory and exclusionary mechanisms**: Discriminatory practices in the housing market and support institutions hinder access to assistance and lead to social exclusion. Participants point to racism and discrimination from landlords, who often refuse to rent to foreigners, especially those from outside Europe. Migrants face additional requirements, such as higher deposits or proof of income. For those without regularised status, exclusion is even deeper—they have no right to most social (and housing) services and avoid formal contact with institutions for fear of deportation.

5. **Legal and institutional mechanisms**: Administrative procedures, legal regulations, uncertainty regarding legal status, and their impact on access to housing support. The research shows that the Polish refugee support system is split into two main tracks: for Ukrainian refugees (UKR) and for other refugees (with three subgroups: those with regularised residence, those in legalisation procedures, and those without the right to legal residence). Thus, rights and obligations vary for people in different groups. In this diversity, there is a lack of coordinated cooperation between institutions; siloed public sectors (e.g., crisis management and social welfare), information gaps, and limited competencies make effective support challenging.

Between law and daily reality – support from public institutions and NGOs

Foreigners represent an increasingly large segment of Poland's homeless—and an even larger number are at risk of homelessness. Both concepts are difficult to define clearly (and thus, the scale of the phenomenon is hard to estimate). In the first case, this is due to collective accommodation sites, which were initially intended to be temporary but have now, for the fourth year, served as "home" for particularly vulnerable groups: people with disabilities, seniors, and single parents with children (mostly mothers). At the same time, practically all foreigners without resources and/or stable income enabling them to rent (or buy) housing are at risk of homelessness—especially those with irregular status (including those in legalisation procedures, who are unable to work for the first six months).

> *"Foreigners represent an increasingly large segment of Poland's homeless—and an even larger number are at risk of homelessness."*

The study of Polish support practices revealed several specific features of the support system:

1. Siloed systems (crisis management, social welfare, education, etc.) and individual institutions operate in parallel within their competencies, with little information flow and no joint planning of actions for the same individuals.

2. The actions of public institutions are strictly limited by legal frameworks. In practice, situations arise that are not addressed by law—for example, people with UKR status "illegally"[2] (rarely) staying in shelters for the homeless, or the existence of (few) private collective accommodation centres for Ukrainian refugees not subject to state oversight.

3. NGOs were the first entities to respond actively to emerging needs. To the extent their financial resources allow (and these resources are decreasing), they provide integration, psychological, activation, child-care, and advisory support. Two aspects are characteristic: first, that informal cooperation between local government and NGOs—funded mainly from external grants or the organisations' own resources—was perceived by most study participants as a sign of an effective support system; second, that NGOs provide specialist, expert support, including training for public institution staff.

4. Intervention support—for example, referral to another facility or provision of specialist assistance (both intersectoral and within sectors)—is based on personal relationships among committed individuals. This means that the most effective cooperation occurs when staff members know each other personally and can directly connect to seek appropriate help for their clients, making it possible to solve any problem.

5. Permanent temporariness shapes a passive life attitude. Residents of collective accommodation centres have "learned" to live in such institutions. Everything they need is provided for them. They feel that the period of waiting for change may last for many years and that, for them, the situation may never change. These people also often have nowhere (and nothing) to return to after the war.

Polish practice – specific features of the support system: siloed structures, NGOs, and informal cooperation

At the macro level (from the country's perspective), these difficult situations affect a clear minority. Of around 900,000 Ukrainian refugees, about 29,000 live "permanently" in temporary accommodation centres—people who, due to their condition, will likely never achieve independence on the housing market. A comparison with the number of "Polish homeless people" (about 31,000 according to the 2024 census) highlights one dimension of Polish reality.

At the micro level (from the perspective of individuals and families), these are overlapping traumas, sometimes helplessness, and sometimes old age and/or disability, which cause people to get stuck in a system that perpetuates powerlessness. In the most difficult, dead-end situations are people and/or families with complicated legal statuses.

"The most effective cooperation occurs when staff members know each other personally and can directly connect to seek appropriate help for their clients"

At the other end of the spectrum are staff and volunteers of support institutions and organisations, who experience (or are at risk of) burnout, mainly due to their powerlessness in the face of legal provisions and limited resources. Refugee centres were created as short-term accommodation and were not equipped with tools for social work, motivation, or integration (as is the case for migrants supported through individual integration programs). There is no such offer for Ukrainian refugees; collective accommodation centres only provide (by law) lodging and meals. Thanks to NGO support, "soft" services (psychological, educational, integration) were available, but their accessibility is diminishing as American government funding is cut.

The findings above illustrate the complexity of systemic solutions in Poland. Challenges related to housing for the homeless (or those living in precarious housing conditions) are nothing new—they have long been the subject of debate. However, one could argue that foreigners, especially refugees at risk of homelessness, lay bare the weaknesses of the housing system. They also highlight the importance of cultural contexts in defining who is "us" and who is "other"—which becomes particularly significant in a context of housing scarcity.

Stories from the margins – voices of refugees and migrants

"Nine years of temporary residence in a centre."

Reza[3], a citizen of Iran, left his homeland out of fear of persecution. After several years in Bulgaria, he emigrated again with his family (his wife is a Bulgarian citizen), also due to fears of repression. He reached Poland via Norway and Austria. He describes himself as entrepreneurial: he holds a PhD, has experience advising governments on economic matters, and ran his own restaurant. He is looking for a safe home, but due to the Dublin Regulation, he cannot find one anywhere. For nine years, Reza

has lived with his wife and five daughters in a single room in a reception centre. Two of his daughters have no citizenship at all, as they were born in countries where their parents were denied legal residence.

"A post-soviet family."

Nino is a Georgian woman with Ukrainian citizenship, the daughter of an Armenian father and a Ukrainian mother, lived with her parents in Georgia until age 15, then the family moved to Ukraine. Her husband is from Chechnya and has Russian citizenship. Nino, holding Ukrainian citizenship, and her children, who hold Russian citizenship, applied for and were granted international protection in Poland, as their differing citizenships made it impossible for the family to apply together under the same legal basis. Now the woman and her children have legal residency in Poland, but her husband remains without a regularised status. This is the result of their migration history—he received a negative decision and, due to the current regulations, cannot reapply for status, meaning he resides in Poland illegally. For a year, his application for humanitarian stay has been pending; during this time, he has no right to health insurance, cannot work, and cannot legally live with his family in supported housing. He also has no documents, as all were taken during the legalisation procedure, and his temporary certificate has expired. Nino works and is awaiting social housing with her children.

1   Szarfenberg A., Szarfenberg R., Mostowska M., Bińczycka E., Teliuk O.: Analysis of the risk of homelessness among foreigners in Poland in the period 15.01.2025-31.05.2025. Research report., National Federation for Solving the Problem of Homelessness, Habitat for Humanity Foundation, Warsaw, 2025

2   The fact that some foreigners are not allowed to stay in shelters for people experiencing homelessness does not result from a single legal provision explicitly prohibiting it. Rather, it stems from a combination of legal regulations, administrative interpretations, and institutional limitations. Below is a step-by-step explanation of the situation:

i. No explicit ban – but also no legal basis: Polish law does not contain any provision that directly prohibits foreigners from staying in shelters. However, the Social Assistance Act (Journal of Laws 2004 No. 64, item 593, as amended) defines who is entitled to institutional support, including shelter. One of the eligibility criteria is having a place of residence on the territory of Poland and meeting certain income and social conditions. Foreigners without legal residence status or those without a PESEL number may not meet these requirements, which leads social assistance centers (OPS) to deny them services.

ii. Article 5 of the Social Assistance Act: This article outlines which categories of foreigners are eligible for social assistance. It includes only the following groups: (a) foreigners with a permanent residence permit or long-term EU resident status, (b) foreigners with international protection (refugee status or subsidiary protection), (c) citizens of Ukraine covered by temporary protection (under the so-called special act).

Foreigners outside these categories — such as those with pending applications, without documentation, with negative decisions, or victims of trafficking awaiting status — are not entitled to services such as access to shelters.

iii. Shelters as a form of social assistance: According to the 2019 regulation of the Ministry of Family and Social Policy on shelters for homeless persons (Journal of Laws 2019, item 2007), a shelter is considered an institutional service delivered by social assistance centers. To access a shelter, a person must receive an administrative decision issued by the OPS. However, such a decision can only be granted to an eligible person. If a foreigner lacks legal residence status or a PESEL number, the OPS cannot issue this decision, which makes a formal referral to a shelter impossible.

iv. Institutional practices – a "soft ban": In practice, many shelters do assist foreigners, operating under the belief that if someone is experiencing homelessness, they should be provided with safe accommodation and support — regardless of their nationality. However, shelters are not formally able to account for the costs of hosting individuals without legal residence status. Fortunately, many local governments do not strictly enforce reimbursement procedures for shelter stays. As a result, overnight support for foreigners without regulated status (as well as those under UKR status) often takes place outside the formal legal framework. Yet, due to the humanitarian circumstances, this is generally tolerated, and no negative consequences follow.

3   For both example cases, names have been changed.

Aspects of Trauma-Informed Care in the Organisation of a Refugee Shelter

By **Levente Rész**, Former deputy head of accommodation service for Ukrainian refugees, BMSZKI

Levente Rész outlines how BMSZKI's (Budapest) homeless shelter was urgently adapted into a refugee facility after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. With no prior training or infrastructure, staff responded to layered traumas (flight, family separation, and long-term uncertainty) especially affecting Roma families. The article details how trauma-informed care was gradually built into the space through family rooms, communal kitchens, child-focused programming, and NGO partnerships. What began as an emergency shelter evolved into a space balancing basic care with dignity, routine, and improvised community.

On 24 February, 2022, Russia launched a military operation against Ukraine, which triggered a massive wave of refugees toward the country's borders—and thus toward Hungary—from practically the first day of the war. According to UNHCR data, approximately two million individual border crossings into Hungary occurred during the first year. Since the Hungarian government had pursued an intentionally anti-refugee policy and public communication strategy after the 2015 refugee crisis, the previously functioning refugee support system had been significantly dismantled, leaving Hungary unprepared for the 2022 crisis.

From the very first days of the war, the Municipality of Budapest immediately began to provide care for refugees arriving in the capital. On 26 February, 2022—just three days after the start of the war—BMSZKI established a 100-person refugee shelter at its transitional accommodation on Gyáli Road, which was originally designed as a hostel for homeless people, with a total capacity of 300 beds, including a so-called "workers' hostel" accommodation as well. The shelter was set up in a separately accessible wing of the building that had previously served a different function.

> *"It is important to emphasise that in this case, it was not a refugee aid organisation but a homeless service that had to create and operate a refugee facility overnight"*

The initial duty staff of the rapidly established new service was made up primarily of employees from BMSZKI's other homeless services. From this group, by around the second month, a core team of about 30 people emerged, all of whom took on regular shifts on a part-time basis. From the end of April, we were able to recruit a team of social workers to handle the numerous tasks beyond basic operations. Until then, the staff of the homeless hostel tried—mostly in an ad-hoc, crisis-response manner— to handle refugee-related issues.

The professional team was formed with the support of two international organisations: Terre des Hommes Hungary

and the Hungarian branch of SOS Children's Villages. Thanks to their support, during the first year, five social workers, two children's program animators, two part-time psychologists, and one personal assistant were employed.

Between the opening in February and the end of the first year, a total of 535 people passed through the institution. In the first two months, most of them stayed for just a few days, in transit. From May onward, the shelter's long-term residents were mainly Transcarpathian Roma families who lacked a Western European network to move on to.

It is important to emphasise that in this case, it was not a refugee aid organisation but a homeless service that had to create and operate a refugee facility overnight—without special training, relevant experience, or targeted funding. In the first days, all we had were the building, 100 beds, and a few dozen lockers. Turning this into a program that offered not only shelter but also social, legal, and psychological support required not only the backing of the two large international organisations but also the contributions of dozens of domestic and international NGOs and countless volunteers, who thankfully were ready to help from the very beginning.

> *"From the outset, trauma-informed care was both our goal and our need."*

From the outset, trauma-informed care was both our goal and our need. However, due to the lack of targeted tools, it could primarily be reflected in our approach and the tone of our professional work. Still, it was not difficult to grasp the dimensions and content of the trauma. Even though we, as professionals in homeless services, were used to helping people with complex trauma, we knew we would be facing different challenges here.

The core traumas experienced by the refugees were as follows:

- **Trauma from flight** – This was nearly universal among our clients. Their stories almost always involved a physically exhausting, hurried journey—long trips by car or train, many hours of waiting at the border, and sometimes even crossing through unofficial green borders. During the first month, most arrivals—especially children—were ill, exhausted, and often had fevers when they reached the shelter.

- **Leaving behind home and physical safety** – A common experience. The loss of familiar physical surroundings—homes, belongings—left for an indefinite or even permanent period was a major crisis in itself. Families arriving at the municipally operated shelter were typically those with no savings or assets, meaning the goods they left behind often represented a lifetime of work. Reports soon emerged from semi-abandoned Transcarpathian villages that many empty homes had been broken into and looted, down to the plumbing fixtures.

- **Disintegration of social networks** – Leaving home also meant leaving behind extended family, relatives, and friends. Often, loved ones who stayed behind were stuck in war zones or forced to flee separately, placing them in danger as well. There were notable differences among Ukrainian, Hungarian-speaking Transcarpathian, and Roma families: while most Ukrainian and Hungarian-speaking families fled as nuclear units, Roma families often fled in large, multi-generational groups—6, 8, even 12–15 people together, and in one case, 25. Even so, the elderly often stayed behind, and almost every evening, families would anxiously video-call those left in Ukraine.

- **Uncertainty about the future and livelihood** – Another common factor. Even for transit families with someone waiting for them in Western Europe, reorganising life and finances from scratch was a daunting and scary task. Roma families had some advantage, as men had often worked seasonally in Hungary before and had some contacts, particularly in Budapest's construction industry. Still, this did not always translate to current employment opportunities.

- **Special vulnerability: children** – Perhaps the most important trauma aspect: children, the most vulnerable group, were subjected to the same hardships as adults. From the beginning, a key goal was to relieve children's burdens and provide diverse, targeted programs for them.

Due to space limitations, below is a summary of the organisational responses we developed to address these traumas:

- **Private family rooms** – Initially, the shelter operated in a transit format, sometimes at 120–130% capacity. From May 2022, it hosted long-term residents — mostly Roma families from Transcarpathia without onward options. It became clear that their only remaining resource was the safety and closeness of family, and that healing could only occur in community settings. Thus, we restructured the mass shelter into family units as much as possible. We arranged for each family to have its own room or, in large rooms, used mobile

dividers to create separate areas for two related families.

- **Kitchen installation** – In the first year, meals were provided three times daily by the Municipality of Budapest. While this was a great help, as families settled in, the goal shifted to medium-term integration: children attending school or kindergarten, adults joining the local workforce. This reintegration itself was a trauma-healing step. With help from SOS International and Habitat for Humanity Hungary, by December 2022, we established a spacious, fully equipped kitchen. Cooking became a symbolic act of self-sufficiency, cultural continuity, and family cohesion—especially important for the children.

- **On-site psychologist** – With support from TDH, two psychologists from the Trauma Centre worked three days a week, offering sessions to both adults and children.

"Cooking became a symbolic act of self-sufficiency, cultural continuity, and family cohesion— especially important for the children."

- **Children's and family programs –** With help from TDH and UNICEF, by the third month we had created a well-equipped playroom and hired two full-time children's program coordinators who ran daily sessions. With the help of the Partners Hungary Foundation, we ran weekly play therapy sessions. Numerous institutions and civil organisations (including the Hungarian Scout Association, WarChild UK, EMMA Association, FESZGYI, Ferencváros Community Foundation, Volunteer Center Foundation, Budapest Zoo & Botanical Garden) organised dozens of programs. These shared the characteristics of connecting civil society with our residents and involving whole child groups or families. Our resource limitations pushed us to seek these external partnerships, and the community-based approach to trauma recovery led to meaningful social connections and organisational collaborations.

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