



## Case Study

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# Sztab Pomocy Belgia : Citizens supporting homeless people during the Covid lockdown

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## 1 The Research project

This paper is part of a research project on informal social work practices for hidden homeless people in Brussels that is running since October 2019 within the Brussels Social Work department of the Odisee University of Applied Sciences. A grant by Odisee is financing the project, with Kenniscentrum Wonen Welzijn Zorg as co-financer.

The main research questions are:

- What are the experiences, needs and strategies of hidden homeless people (or people at risk)?
- How do informal social work practices reach out to hidden homeless people? How do they inform and support them?
- How to further improve the support that (in)formal social work practices offer to hidden homeless people?

The project consists of five main packages, including 1) a literature study on hidden homelessness, 2) a survey among Brussels based organisations to detect (in)formal support for hidden homeless people, 3) context analysis, 4) case studies, 5) action research. This paper is part of the forth package.

## 2 Introduction to the case

The homeless crisis in Brussels is well known and illustrated in various ways. The last census for example counted 5313 people who are homeless or inadequately housed in the Brussels-Capital Region. Beside people on the streets, the public space and in various official accommodation and reception structures, the census also includes some people residing in squats, non-recognised structures and occupations (Horvat & Striano, 2021). This is one of the signs that beside the official services there are also numerous forms of informal sheltering and support that play an important role in the lives of homeless and inadequately housed people (Deleu et al., Under review).

Brussels-based non-profit organisations (NPOs) performing in various fields of activity such as sports, culture, religion, social support ... are providing support to people with housing problems. In this report we explore one of these initiatives, namely Help Centre Belgium or Sztab Pomocy Belgia. This organisation is rooted in a community of Brussels and Belgian citizens with Polish origins. The reality they encountered during their activities gradually led them to take up activities aimed at homeless people. An elaborated study of the case might help to uncover some of the opportunities and obstacles of NPO initiative for homeless and inadequately housed people.

We conducted fieldwork to get to know some of the activities of the organisation, as explained in the first part on methodology. We then briefly describe the Polish presence in Brussels from a historic point of view, including the presence of Polish persons among the homeless population. In the fourth part, we discuss the history of the organisation, the shifts in degree of formality and the relations with other organisations. The development and the nature of the activities for homeless people is the focus of the next part of the paper. We end with some preliminary conclusions and with the list of references.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 A typology of NPOs

Between March and October 2020 we conducted a survey within the Brussels non-profit sector engaged in public issues at the local level. We analysed the responses of 160 nonprofit organisations (NPOs) that gave an insight in the many ways that different types of NPOs support homeless people (Deleu et al., Under review). For analytical purposes, a typology of NPOs consisting of six ideal types was developed. This typology is inspired by three dimensions, namely homeless sector (yes or no), legal personality (yes or no) and the presence of employees (yes or no). Every NPO can change between different types over time.

	De facto NPO	Registered NPO with only volunteers	Registered NPO with employees
Non-homeless sector NPO	1	3	5
Homeless sector NPO	2	4	6

#### *A Typology of NPOs That Reach People in Situations of Homelessness and Inadequate Housing*

Types 1 to 5 are considered to be working rather informally with homeless and inadequately housed people, since they are not part of the homeless sector (1, 3 and 5) or they are, but function purely voluntary based (2 and 4). By contrast, type 6 organisations are professionally developed NPOs within the Brussels homeless sector, including day centers, shelters and accommodation structures.

To get a deeper understanding how NPOs are getting involved in the support of homeless people, we applied a case study approach. The case study is looking at more informal NPOs through a description of the broader social context in which they operate, the origins of the organisations, their positioning in relation to other organisations and their activities for people affected by homelessness and/or poverty.

#### 3.2 Research question and hypothesis

The following question is central in the case study:

How do informal NPOs reach out to hidden homeless people? How do they inform and support them?

Ideally, the case study helps in checking the following hypotheses:

- Because informal NPOs have to deal with fewer regulations, they are more flexible than formal organisations.
- Informal initiatives work together with formal organisations.

- Due to the lack of recognition and control, informal initiatives can be subject to (power) abuse, exploitation, arbitrary access criteria, social isolation, predatory practices and the violation of professional secrecy.
- Their low threshold and informal character make them accessible to people who do not count on formal social work.
- Informal initiatives often have to make do with few resources while being overwhelmed with questions. The load and the capacity to carry are often not in balance.

### 3.3 Data collection

Help Centre Belgium is one of the surveyed organisations that belongs to more informal types of NPOs that reach out to homeless and inadequately housed people.

The data of the case study was collected in three ways. First, through participant observation. On four Sundays mornings between 29 November 2020 and January 10 2021 the researcher joined the team of volunteers that distributes food and clothes from around 10 a.m. until around 11:30 a.m. or noon. These participative observations were an opportunity to get to know the organisation from inside. It also gave the possibility to interact and talk with volunteers and with users of the offered services.

Second, a co-founder of the organisation central in this case was interviewed for two hours in January 2021, following the participant observation. This allowed a structured view on the organisations origin and some of its dynamics and dilemmas. During the interview some of the observations were discussed. The interviewed was transcribed and analysed.

Third, some sources were reviewed through desk research. This was rather limited, as it concerned a new organisation that started from the initiative of a few citizens, and only got statutes on a later point of time. A few other sources were examined in order to outline the broader context in which the organisation operates.



## 4 The context of Polish presence in Brussels

### 4.1 Polish migration to Brussels

The Brussels-Capital Region has about 1.2 million inhabitants and is home to an international population. With a population with a foreign background of about 75%, Brussels is one of the most diverse cities in the world harboring numerous minority groups (International Organization for Migration, 2015; Statbel, 2021). The gradual influx of migrants led to the region's majority-minority composition and to a wide variety of languages spoken at home (Crul, 2016). The needs and desires of migrants were not always met by state and market actors, which led to numerous nonprofit initiatives from the 1960s on (Small & McDermott, 2006; Swerts & Oosterlynck, 2019; Thys, 2017).

The language barometers, that report on the spoken languages in Brussels, show how Polish moved up in the ranking of languages spoken at home over the years (Janssens, 2018). When looking at the current nationality of Brussels residents, Poland takes the 6<sup>th</sup> place in the ranking of foreign nationalities, after France, Romania, Morocco, Italy and Spain. About 25,000 Polish nationals are registered in the region, which counts for over 2% of the total population and 5,1% of the non-national population (Romain, 2021). The language barometers, just like other reports on the matter, refer to the free movement of persons with the EU as one of the explanations for the Polish presence. Since 2004, when Poland entered the European Union, Turkish and Berber gradually dropped from the top place, while Romanian, Bulgarian and Polish moved higher up in the ranking (Janssens, 2018).

Yet, Polish migration to Belgium dates from long before Poland's access to the EU. Already in the early twentieth century, Poles were coming to work in the mines in Wallonia (Rozanska, 2021; Solidarité, 2011). After the Second World War Belgium received refugees escaping the Polish regime, especially in the 1970s, when the Polish government loosened short-term visa conditions (Solidarité, 2011, p. 2). In 1991, Polish people were allowed to stay for three months in Belgium with a tourist visa, but were no longer eligible for the refugee status (Solidarité, 2011, p. 2). This also meant that there were no legal ways to work in Belgium, which led to a coming and going of pendular (economic) migrants with illegal status. Polish people often proposed relatives and friends to replace them in the job when spending time in their home-country. An important proportion of the migrants were women and Podlaskie was a main region of origin (Rozanska, 2021).

Since 2004, when Poland accessed the EU, illegal stay was less of a problem. But as the Belgian labor market did not fully open for new member states until May 2009, there was still illegal work. After 2004, Brussels became for the first time a main destination for Polish people migrating to Belgium. The people coming to Brussels are very diverse, and due to this differences, subgroups of Polish migrants do not necessarily interact (Rozanska, 2021).

A part of the Polish migrants come to work in EU or related institutions. They stay for their life, or for an important part of their life. Their motivation is to work in the EU, and they do not come for Brussels or Belgium as such. Rozanska (2021) states that 2352 Poles work in the different EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, EU agencies).

Poles are active in various sectors of the Brussels labour market, performing short, medium and high skilled jobs. Although they often did not come to Belgium with the intention of staying for a long time, a fair proportion of them decides to stay and is building a sustainable life. Recent reports indicate a decrease of Polish migration to Belgium since 2011 and especially since 2019, partly due to the economic growth in Poland (Decock, 2021).

#### 4.2 Polish homeless people in Brussels

The presence of Poles on the labour market, as well as open borders within the EU, also ensures the presence of less fortunate people in Belgium and especially in its capital. The last Brussels' homeless count included 5.313 people, of which 719 were sleeping on the street during a night in November. There is no official number on the presence of people of Polish origin among this homeless population. Yet, it is clear that they count for a considerable group. The presence of, especially, Polish and Romanian people in the streets of Brussels, was a main motivation for the street outreach service Diogenes to centralise the information on this groups in the PRODEC project (Protecting the Right of Destitute EU mobile Citizens) that was running throughout 2019-2020 (Striano & Diogenes team, 2020).

In 2019, Diogenes collected data on 851 people receiving their support, 319 of them are from EU countries other than Belgium, including 118 Poles. An obstacle for this group is obtaining a residence permit, as EU citizens must register with the local authority of residence within three months of their arrival in Belgium. Yet, 170 of the 319 European citizens has no address, and by consequence no residence permit (Striano & Diogenes team, 2020, p. 8). The residence status combined with a lack of income are two main factors that force irregularly residing European citizens into homelessness, mainly in the form of rough sleeping, followed by sofa surfing and staying in a squat or in a hostel (Striano & Diogenes team, 2020, p. 9).

The lack of residence status means limited access to health care which adds to medical problems, for example caused by the live on the streets. During their interventions, Diogenes (2018) noticed some other recurrent themes among homeless people with Polish origins, such as illegal work, alcohol abuse, service avoidance and a complex administrative situation. Many of them reside illegally in Brussels, and have 'de facto' no documents (because they lost their Polish ID card). Yet, for many of them it is still possible to get access to social rights in Belgium (Diogenes, 2018).



## 5 Help Centre Belgium: a presentation of the organisation

### 5.1 Brief history

The functioning of the first months of the organisation is closely connected with the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated government measures in Brussels and Belgium. Help Centre Belgium, initially called Sztab Pomocy Belgia, took off in March 2020 when Belgium entered the first lockdown due to COVID-19. News reports, sometimes contradicting each other, appeared constantly in the press and on social media. The founders of the organisation realised that it would not be easy for everyone to access the right information and to understand the official communication of the Belgian government. They were afraid that the official information would not reach certain communities, *in casu* the Polish community. Rumours that COVID-19 was no worse than a flu, or altogether a complot, were circulating. Many people did not seem aware of the exact rules. The founders of the organisation shared their worries on this matter, and decided to do something, mainly to ensure access to information. They started translating the communications from the federal and the regional policy level to Polish, and also translated some articles. These translations were spread through the organisations Facebook page (M. Pytel, personal communication, January 22, 2021).

As they soon received many questions from people, a group of nine volunteers started a phone group with an infoline that was reachable every weekday during three months (March – June 2020). They got quite some calls from Polish people in Belgium. The subjects were not strictly limited to COVID-19 related issues, as they soon understood that some people felt isolated, or were dealing with other difficulties. The phone group was extended with Polish volunteers with certain abilities, such as psychologists or people knowing the Belgian health system.

As the group of volunteers was growing, the activities diversified, with e.g. a dietician sharing recipes and a personal trainer organising online courses on physical exercises. These activities increased the popularity of the organisation. When the measures were loosened in June 2020, the organisation initially seemed to have finished its work.

Nevertheless, gradually, the idea of creating a sustainable association through formalisation had come up. Many of the volunteers indicated that they wanted to continue. Also the leading volunteers realised that there was obviously a need of social help that they were fulfilling, and that it made sense to formalise the activities. In June 2020, the founding act of the non-profit organisation was published in the national monitor as *a.s.b.l.* Help Centre Belgium.

Already before the registration, the leading volunteers were in close contact with a Polish institution, as one of them was working for a regional representation at the European institutions. The governor of this particular voivodeship sympathised with the group of volunteers and could also provide some limited working budgets. After being officially registered, the organisation was looking for budgets and a working space. This was not a big success, according to the volunteers, due to a lack of appropriate contacts and network in Brussels and Belgium.

Yet, after the summer of 2020 there was a new wave of COVID-19. New government measures were announced and applied, with different rules in the Brussels-Capital Region and the other

regions, adding to the complexity. The position of people in precarious situations often worsened or was prolonged because of the situation, with for example fewer people on the streets, less (informal) work and limited availability of facilities. The continuation of the organisation proved to have been the right choice as Help Centre Belgium could provide various services.

## 5.2 From informal to formal ?

Help Centre Belgium started in March 2020 as a de facto organisation initiated by four friends individuals, with the communication of Corona measures as a main goal. The organisation thus started as what has been specified as a type 1 NPO according to a previously developed typology of non-profit organisation that reach people in situations of homelessness and inadequate housing (see methodology).

Although the organisation gradually took on more tasks related to homelessness, it does not identify itself as an organisation belonging to the homeless sector. The organisation registered statutes in June 2020 and functions purely volunteer-based. According to the typology the organisation moved from a type 1 organisation (de facto, non-homeless sector NPO ) to a type 3 (registered volunteer-based, non-homeless sector NPO).

The objective of the organisation is described broadly in its statutes as offering assistance in the preventive preparation and organisation of society during crisis situations (*l'aide dans la préparation préventive et l'organisation de la société en cas de situations de crise*) (Statuts de l'a.s.b.l. Help Centre Belgium, 2020). The motivation to register came from the realisation that the needs met by the organisation transcended the acute crisis of the initial period. In order to have access to funding, spaces, collaborations ... it seemed legit to proceed with registration (M. Pytel, personal communication, January 22, 2021). The co-founder also refers to forms of legal coverage as opposed to acting purely as a private person.

Yet, the co-founder of the organisation does not consider the organisation as totally informal before registration of the statutes, notably since there was a link between one of the starting volunteers and a Regional office of a Polish voivodeship, that provided (limited) moral and financial support at the start of the initiative (M. Pytel, personal communication, January 22, 2021). These initial contacts within the Polish community could not prevent the lack of smooth access to resources and space at the local level in Brussels.

## 5.3 Relations with other organisations

The volunteers view on other organisations and of the more institutionalised social work seems to contain some ambiguity. On the one hand Help Centre Belgium has started its work for homeless people because they had the idea that the needs were not met by the government or other service providers, especially as some organisations closed their doors at the start of the COVID-19 lockdown. On the other hand, there was never any straightforward criticism, and the

people of the NPO seemed to be looking for cooperation rather than confrontation (Field notes, 2021).

The volunteers and the co-founders of the organisation themselves indicate that their knowledge of institutions and other organisations is limited. They often referred to the idea that they can offer direct help, such as food and clothes, but that they are not always aware of what they called 'institutional solutions'.

At one point, a co-founder of Help Centre Belgium was contacted by a Polish-speaking social worker, from a team of a professionalised, homelessness sector organisation (of type 6) in Brussels. There was a hope or expectation that this contact could streamline the work with homeless and inadequate housed people. The co-founder of the organisation expressed the expectation that the social worker could offer more institutional solutions, while the organisation could mobilise solidarity when needed (M. Pytel, personal communication, January 22, 2021). In reality, this contacts did not (yet) lead to a structural cooperation by the beginning of 2022 and the discussions remained rather exploratory. However, this connection between Help Centre Belgium and a formal social work organisation does provide a sense of security, as the professional can be contacted with questions.

There seemed to be no obvious links with other organisations of Polish diaspora, although there were some loose connections. It happens sporadically that the Polish embassy contacts Help Centre Belgium. This happened for example in order to find shelter in the network for a Polish homeless man who could not access any official emergency shelter.

During their activities, Help Centre Belgium established some connections with other NPOs. Collected clothing was for example handed over to l'a.s.b.l. Grand Froid (M. Pytel, personal communication, January 22, 2021). There were also some more conflicting contacts. For example on one Sunday in December, someone associated with the Red Cross called the police to check whether Help Centre Belgium had a permit to distribute food and clothing in the public space. Initially, there was also a lack of coordination with another NPO that was organising a similar distribution during the winter months a few hundred metres away starting two hours later. After some conversations during the distributions, Help Centre Belgium referred the people to the other organisation, as they were about to end their activities on Sunday morning.

## 6 Activities of Help Centre Belgium for people in a precarious situation and homeless people

### 6.1 Spring 2020

As mentioned above, homelessness was initially not part of the organisation's goal and mission. The activities aimed at homeless people started from a call to the infoline by a person of Polish origin who himself had the experience of being homeless in Brussels. His idea was to reach out to homeless people, especially by providing food.

This idea was new to the volunteers, and was initially received with some skepticism. There was especially a fear that reaching out would lead to virologic contaminations (M. Pytel, personal communication, January 22, 2021). Yet, also other volunteers had noticed the presence of Polish people among the homeless population, and there were (partly true) rumors that some services were temporarily closed due to the ongoing pandemic. This led to the decision to effectively start an action aimed at homeless people.

Help Centre Belgium started food collections and made about 40 food packages per week to distribute to people in the streets all over Brussels and notably in and around Brussels-South railway station, Madou metro station and the Centre of Brussels. Gradually, about 20 volunteers got engaged in this activity, as people contacted Help Centre Belgium by phone and Facebook with the proposition to enforce the activities for homeless people. Through the food distribution, the volunteers also noticed other needs, such as clothes, sleeping bags and, especially, hygiene products (e.g. soap, disinfectant, napkins, wet wipes). The composition of the packages changed and the distribution of packages increased from once to twice a week, throughout the spring of 2020 (M. Pytel, personal communication, January 22, 2021).

### 6.2 Winter 2020 - 2021

After the summer, during a second wave of COVID-19 in Belgium, the actions aimed at homeless people scaled up, by the involvement of about 20 Polish supermarkets all around Belgium. Supermarket customers could donate food, and the supermarkets themselves offered their products reaching the expiry date. This activity required a considerable logistical effort, since the food had to be picked up, collected, checked and prepared. Help Centre Belgium could count on many volunteers, including some cooks, as one of the co-founders of the organisations is married with a professional cook. Besides, there was also an increased collection of clothes, which also had to be checked and sorted. The combination of activities asked for daily efforts and coordination of volunteers.

Both the food and clothes were handed out in the public space during eight Sundays in the months November 2020 to January 2021, between 10 and 11:30 a.m. around the Brussels central train station.

Later in 2021 the activities aimed at homeless people somewhat decreased. Help Centre Belgium had the impression that the regular organisations were present in the field again. Their scope somehow changed, as they organised some actions to support the flood victims in July 2021.

There was a lot of enthusiasm to set up more cultural and media activities. They occasionally continued to seek solutions for homeless people.

### 6.3 Target groups

Help Centre Belgium makes no clear distinction between supporting homeless people and people living instable or precarious. The decisive criterion is whether the person accepts the offer or not. In the starting phase, the users of initial food distribution were often people who had lost their (promised) jobs overnight because of the COVID-19 situation and the restrictions, but who were not necessarily roofless or homeless. Later during the spring of 2020, food packages were handed out to people present in the public space and the public transport stations. These people were also reached during the winters Sunday distributions.

Although the actions were initially started by and for people from the Polish community, no distinction was made in the distribution of food and clothes in the public space. A diverse part of the targeted population passed by, with a large representation of, but certainly not limited to people of Polish origin. In addition to Polish, French and English were widely spoken. In the line there were also Romanian, Hungarian, Russian and Arabic speakers a.o. (Field notes, 2020-2021). It is possible that people who grew up in Central and Eastern Europe were more familiar with and seduced by the available food products.

The present people and their personal situations were also perceived as diverse by the volunteers. They were people with or without a roof, mental problems, families, addictions... The organisations co-founder explained how it struck her that a common characteristic of homeless people is the lack of connection to a community (M. Pytel, personal communication, January 22, 2021).

## 7 Conclusion

This report is a rather descriptive picture of the activities of Help Centre Belgium, and we should be careful to generalize findings to other Brussels based NPOs.

Yet, it is clear that the Help Centre Belgium is a testament of the authentic commitment of citizens to their environment. The case confirms that people of various origins, also those who arrived more recently in Brussels, are joining hands to take nonprofit initiative, or better said social profit initiative. In a first phase these initiatives seem to rely more on bonding social capital. But at the same time, the case of Help Centre Belgium suggests that bridges are quickly built to other citizens and communities.

The activities of the Help Centre Belgium again raises the question about the sufficiency and effectivity of the official policies to tackle homelessness and support homeless people in Brussels. What is sure is that there was a feeling among the volunteers that this was insufficient at some point in time. At the same time, we could also question the effectiveness of individual initiatives. If there would have been more helicopter vision and regional coordination, the human resources and material resources mobilised by the organisation could possibly be used more efficiently. We see how the organisation gradually got in touch with other organisations, but this is mainly a process that depends on the efforts of a few individuals and almost accidental encounters. We must also keep a critical look to the mixing of charitable practices with elements of social work. Formal organisation from the homelessness sector may be able to help monitor this mix, if they get the means to do so. This could contribute to the sustainability of NPO initiative.

The case of Help Centre Belgium shows that people care about their fellow citizens. The civil society is alive, also under the radar of formal institutions.



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