

Polish homeless in Brussels

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Polish immigration to Belgium has a long tradition. Amongst different groups of Poles in Brussels there is an estimated twenty to thirty thousand of Polish migrants working on the black market. New means of communication and transportation enables some of them successful pendular/incomplete migration and keeping close ties with the families in Poland. Large group of homeless Poles in Brussels however shows also the vulnerability of migrant menial workers.

The paper presents preliminary conclusions from fieldwork conducted amongst the Polish people sleeping rough in Brussels in August 2008 and February 2009. Most of the homeless respondents originate from construction workers, who lost their living quarters due to seasonal unemployment, alcohol problem, illness or other incidents. It seems that in some cases the physical homelessness is temporary and that part of Polish homeless population is in a state of constant flux between living on the streets and renting precarious accommodation. Others are sleeping rough for months and even years. Loosening of family ties and their poor condition contradicts the ideal of a “successful migrant” and makes it impossible for them to go back to their home country.

National support networks among the homeless Poles are one of the most important element of their survival strategies. The welfare help they learn to obtain supplemented by money from begging allows them to perceive their situation as not much different then the lives of migrant workers or the poor in Poland. The study raises questions for welfare policy for different groups of homeless, considering their capabilities, “functionings”, subjective needs and migratory situation.

Keywords: homelessness, migration, Belgium, Poland

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1. Introduction

Polish immigration to Belgium has a long tradition. The major inflow of Polish workers especially from the rural north-eastern Poland took place in the 1990-ties. Amongst different groups of Poles in Brussels there is an estimated twenty thousand of Polish migrants working without a work permit. In the years 2000 and especially after Poland joined the European Union in 2004 the patterns of migrations have diversified. Still Belgium as a country of well-established migrant networks has a substantial migration based on family, local and regional ties to the secondary labor market.

Since a couple of years Polish and other media are alarming about a new phenomenon of the Polish homeless in large European cities: London, Dublin or Rome. I would estimate that in February 2009 the population of Polish rough sleepers in the center of the Belgian capital was about 50 to 100 persons at any given night. This phenomenon shows the vulnerability of the undocumented migrant menial workers. The research gives an opportunity of an inquiry of the Polish migrant community from another perspective, but also raises intriguing policy questions.

1.1 Polish incomplete migrations to Brussels

Poland has been recognized as a country of late and unfinished modernization and urbanization. The phenomenon of incomplete migrations has emerged in the post-war Poland in which housing construction did not follow industrialization (Okólski 2001). In the 1960s the industry employed even three million workers, who lived in the country-side and were commuting to the city on daily, weekly or seasonal basis. Those populations were hit the hardest by the unemployment after 1989. The survival strategies of many of such households involve transnational migration, often using the same pattern of pendular mobility but this time to the work in the secondary labor market in Western Europe.

Pendular migration to Brussels has been studied in a large ethnosurvey project conducted by Center for Migration Research in the years 1994-96 and 1999 (Iglićka-Okólska 1998, Okólski 2001, Kaczmarczyk 2005). It revealed some of the characteristics of migrant's households and the local communities of Podlaskie voivodship and its particular links to Brussels. It has been shown that many households from this sending region use incomplete migrations to Brussels as a survival strategy. This circulation replaced the long-term migrations to the US, and thanks to widening migrant networks became a common practice. The study had shown that in the 1990s the typical migrant to Brussels was a male, head of the household, rather poorly educated, often unemployed or having problems finding stable employment in Poland (Kaczmarczyk 2005).

Incomplete migrations were maximizing household's income and diversifying income sources, but other studies showed also that incomplete migrations lead usually to marginalization of migrants in both host and sending country (Osipowicz 2001). In the receiving country migrant consents to long hours of exhausting work, very bad housing conditions in order to accumulate as much money as possible. The migrant does not acquire social skills, barely learns a foreign language, his or her contacts are limited to the national groups. The provisional arrangements, undocumented work and absence at home leads also to marginalization in the home country.

The study of the Polish community in Brussels in 2000 revealed the growing competition for work and disorganization of the community due to diminishing resources. Lack of social and language skills of the newly arriving made them easy victims of exploitation by others. Support networks were shrinking to the members of closest family (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2001a). It is still prevalent in the years 2000s that there is very low mobility on the internal labor market in Poland (*Współczesne migracje...* 2008, p. 212), and however the capabilities to use profits from incomplete migrations to the West, diminished significantly, they are still common strategy amongst the poorest households in some regions.

Round the year 2000 the population of the Polish undocumented workers in Brussels was estimated at 15 000 – 25 000 (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2001s, p. 274). In 2006 there were 28 000 Polish citizens officially residing in Belgium (Kepińska 2007, p. 91). In 2007 it was anticipated that over 60% of Poles who work in Belgium, work without a permit (*Współczesne migracje...* 2008, p. 203). 45% of all Poles in Belgium work in construction (mostly men), while undocumented female migrants usually do housework. After Polish accession to the EU, and subsequent opening of the labor market in some member states, the migratory strategies have diversified. Still a large proportion of Poles in Brussels works off the books and circulates between the sending and receiving countries.

1.2 Concept of homelessness (rooflessness)

In this paper I use a concept of ‘homelessness’ as an exclusion from all three domains of ‘home’; physical, legal and social. It is a state which is “experienced by people referred to as ‘rough sleepers’ or living in ‘inhabitable spaces’ like railway stations, sewage systems, abandoned buildings”. This study was therefore interested in two operational categories (ETHOS): persons ‘sleeping rough’ or staying in short-term night shelters. Those persons, in FEANTSA’s terminology actually referred to as ‘roofless’, are deprived of both physical protection from weather conditions, privacy and intimacy, as well as legal title to spaces they inhabit (www.feantsa.org).

Migrants are especially vulnerable group on the housing market, not only because of their economic vulnerability, but also weakening ties with family members in the home country, limited language skills, social and cultural competences. Migrants who perform undocumented work may face unstable employment and dangerous working conditions. Strategies of obtaining accommodation are one of the crucial elements of using support networks for the success of migratory projects. Support networks however may also hinder integration with the wider community in the host country.

1.3 Research questions

Migration and homelessness intersect in a number of ways. Undocumented migrants may find it extremely difficult to find secure housing. Ethnic minorities may also find it more difficult on the housing market and may be more often than average at-risk-of homelessness. On the other hand however migrations are taking place thanks to migratory networks that support individual migrants. Although the members of the homeless populations vary to great extent, one of the most important factors leading to physical homelessness is isolation from family, friends and professional networks. Similar opposition was observed by Adriaenssens and Clé (2006) who studied beggars in Brussels. The white, single men were usually Belgian and homeless, the Roma women had families and a place to stay. According to the New Economics of Labor Migration concept the shared households investment and risk in sending one of its member abroad contradicts with the isolation that most street homeless people face (Stark 1991). In this perspective homeless Poles in the Western cities appear to be a surprising phenomenon. It seems that the Polish economic migrations after 1989 in case of failure, may just be terminated and a migrant would have come back to the home country.

This paper is based on limited research data that has been collected on a largely unexplored subject. It is therefore just an exploratory study main goals of which were to identify the scope of the problem, the population in question, its survival strategies, relationships between homeless migrants, groups they form, their relationships with a wider Polish community in Brussels.

1.4 Methodology

Fieldwork has been conducted amongst the Polish people sleeping rough in Brussels in August 2008 and February 2009. Apart from railway and metro stations, there is a large ‘skid row’ area in the south of Brussels city center, stretching from Bruxelles Midi railway station through Des Marolles district. There I identified at least three usual meeting places of the

Polish homeless. I have spend also a considerable amount of time on one of the boulevards of Brussels with one homeless Polish man who have been living in one spot on the sidewalk for more than a week, literally not leaving the spot, and who had been visiting by various other Poles during that time. Methodology included participant observation, informal conversations in groups and face to face, as well as in-depth recorded interviews with the homeless Poles.

First preliminary fieldwork had been conducted in August 2008, when I concentrated on a participant observation and informal interviews with a group of Polish homeless living in one of the metro stations. Next round of fieldwork has been done in February 2009. Respondents were selected by their outlook appearance and approached in the usual gathering places of the homeless. From amongst the people I got to know during informal talks, usually in groups of couple people and hanging out I asked who would like to have a recorded interview tête-à-tête with me. Consent was either from the ones whom I got to know best and spend a lot of time with, or from the ones who saw it as an opportunity to gain something from me. Finding a suitable place to conduct an interview was difficult, the respondents were reluctant to accept my invitation for coffee, the conversations were recorded on the street with an exception of a talk with two brothers with whom I talked in a hospital lobby, their usual spot to get warm during the day. In total I have collected detailed interviews and field notes about nine cases and additional seven cases I have described in less detail.

I focused on participant observation which enabled me to witness the functioning of the homeless in groups and their relations with the outside communities. My nationality let me be considered more of an insider, also because most of the Polish homeless I approached do not speak French and have a very limited contact with the world outside of their groups. I disclosed my identity to all people I met but my continuous presence generated some level of trust.

My presence in those groups was in another way difficult. Most of the homeless Poles, middle-aged males, were probably surprised with my interest in their lives. The sexual offers I was receiving from almost all of them, were difficult to respond to. There were men who wanted to take the role of my leading informants, care-givers, guides in the world of the homeless Brussels. It was no easy task to keep their advances at bay but at the same time not to reject them completely. Being a woman among mostly men however gives a researcher an opportunity to enter to such groups without being perceived as a threat or rival.

The other ethical-methodological problem working with persons that are often intoxicated, and in very poor physical state is doing favors. Giving out cigarettes to start a conversation seems innocent, but occasionally giving out change to buy a bottle of alcohol in exchange for an interview raises already serious doubts.

2. Ethnography

2.1 Temporary homeless and clochards

Most of respondents came to Belgium for the first time in the 1990-ties. They usually entered with a tourist visa and performed undocumented work. They often overstayed their visas, a couple said they had been deported to Poland in the 1990-ties. Up until a certain moment most

of the respondents circulated between Poland and Belgium on regular basis but at some point they limited their visits to the home country.

Most of the homeless respondents interviewed originate from construction workers, who lost their living quarters due to seasonal unemployment, alcohol problem, illness or other incidents. It seems that in some cases the physical homelessness is temporary and that part of Polish homeless population is in a state of constant flux between living on the streets and renting precarious accommodation. Others are sleeping rough for months and even years.

I distinguished two ideal types of the Polish rough sleepers in Brussels. The first one consists of temporarily homeless workers. Mostly due to seasonal unemployment, being cheated or robbed, they lose their accommodation. Their networks extend into the regular migrant workers' community and as soon as they find work, they can afford to rent a place. They might spend some nights at friends' houses, other nights at the shelter, still sometimes being too drunk to secure any place to sleep they stay on the street or in the railway station. To obtain some cash they unload trucks at the flea market and collect empties. Begging seems an unacceptable degradation to them. They use soup kitchens or shelters but consider themselves to be independent. Temporarily homeless may quickly find their way out off the streets but may also be coming back to sleeping rough many times.

The other group are clochards (it's a term they use to describe themselves). Their physical condition actually makes it impossible for them to hold a menial job. They are intoxicated most of the time and use not only soup kitchens and shelters but also emergency medical help. They stick to one place and have cash from panhandling. They are a more fixed, long-term homeless population. Due to an accident or sickness they lost their work and subsequently accommodation. They might have had episodes of physical homelessness in their earlier lives.

An owner of the legally operating construction company who due to an alcohol episode spends a week (including nights) with his comrades at the metro station is a typical member of the first group. The typical clochard has not been working already for years, has very few contacts with his family, and has not had a stable housing since a long time. Many of the homeless are in between those two ideal types. I would hypothesize that the clochards in most cases originate from the first group of the Polish homeless, the temporarily roofless workers.

On the very bottom of this hierarchical continuum of the Polish homeless, there are the least physically fit, sick, chronically intoxicated, which makes it impossible for them to work or even seek work. Temporarily homeless look down upon clochards. Begging, usually referred to as 'living from a cup', as begging means sitting in a public space with a paper cup, is considered as a complete degradation. Gare du Midi is considered as one of the last resorts, where drinking is coupled with violence between the Polish groups but also rivalry with other national groups for instance over access to public phones, that are essential to secure a place to sleep in one of the night shelters.

This hierarchy fits the verbal strategies named by Anderson and Snow (1987) that enable the homeless rationalize their situation and that differ according to the time spend on the streets. 'Distancing' characterizes temporary or short-time homeless Polish workers, who look down upon the chronic homeless. Clochards on the other hand accept their identities, are not ashamed of begging, or otherwise seeking help.

In both groups the individual story of losing accommodation is told as a series of unfortunate events leading to homelessness. Most often it happened already after years spent in Brussels and is coupled with being cheated by an employer, with being robbed, with an accident (usually at work), sickness or alcohol abuse. The instability of informal arrangements concerning often undocumented rent is also prevalent:

*And otherwise I always had my own place [...] They came [from Poland]. Said: we don't have a place to sleep. [...] I would not throw them out on the street. But you have to be quiet, so that the landlord doesn't see. [...] And the landlord came in [...] Sorry, give me the keys back. And that's how I lost my place.
(interview with N., a 32-year old woman, February 2009)*

Migration, being away from the family, may play a crucial part in those stories. Migrant may want to keep up the image of his successful migration. It may come to a point where he's sending home the money he needs himself for rent.

*They [his brothers] always needed something. So instead of paying the rent he would go to the van [it is common practice that bus drivers serve also as couriers of cash remittances] and send each of them two hundred [euro]. It's the first time he's in the situation of being on the street. In the wintertime there's no work. No work, rent's not paid, and that's it.
(fieldnote from conversation with A., February 2009)*

Already in case of homelessness if the family in Poland is unaware of the migrant's situation he or she may still be inclined to send the money home. Then these remittances come from begging.

2.2 Daily routine

It seems that the daily survival strategies of the Polish homeless in Brussels are not far from the usual routine of the homeless in Western cities. The basic daily tasks like obtaining food, shaving, taking a shower, washing clothes or getting new ones, securing a place to sleep may take up most of the time. Getting cash for tobacco and alcohol is the most important task however. The strategies include loading and unloading goods at the flea market, collecting empties and begging. Even if some men may engage in two or all of those activities, they are strictly hierarchical. Begging is considered the lowest, odd jobs at the market – the best. The temporarily homeless workers usually hang around the flea market and use their networks to search for other, more rewarding jobs. Clochards, sick or drunk, are rather immobile, usually stick to one place and have money only from the passers by.

“Going for bottles” demands some knowledge of the city. In larger quantities “bottles” are collected or stolen from the back of the stores and restaurants. Other strategy is to “fish them out” of the recycle containers. Only glass bottles (no cans or plastic bottles) are reclaimed in Brussels, which makes “going for bottles” a hard job and demands planning their transportation.

“Sitting on a cup” by some clochards is considered a “job”. It's often practiced in groups of couple people who take turns. The money is then common which leads to conflicts, if

someone is saving for a phone call, laundromat, or even to send the money home to the family. Usually no fight arises if cash is immediately exchanged for alcohol.

Most of the daily tasks (flea market, “going for bottles”, taking a shower, going to the doctor) take place in the morning. They may require a considerable effort and travelling around the city. In the winter finding a warm spot during the day also demands mobility. Some travel to better-off areas to beg there. Afternoon and evening is devoted rather to drinking and paying visits.

While obtaining food and cash demands few social capabilities, (information about times and spots travels quickly through informal channels) securing a place to sleep is more difficult. In the summer time the railway and metro stations but also parks and abandoned buildings are common places. In the wintertime more emergency night shelters operate in Brussels but the weather conditions make it acute to find a place for the night. Most of the Polish homeless I met in February 2009 were using night shelters. Still a group lived in one of the metro stations, some in railway stations, some people slept directly on the street, others in storage offered by one of the vendors from the flea market, others opened cash machines lobbies with stolen bank cards and slept there.

Most of respondents can barely speak French, or any other foreign language, even if they lived in Belgium for years. Some of the necessary tasks however like for instance obtaining a medical card (Carte Medical Urgence) requires better language skills. Groups of the Polish homeless have thus their spokesperson and interpreter, an individual who speaks the language best. Such a person, even if being a clochard puts him or her at the bottom of the hierarchy, has respect even amongst the wider Polish community. Even other, not homeless, workers may come to him or her for advice or ask for help with some formalities.

2.3 Image of Brussels and Poland

The image that the homeless Poles have of Brussels is contradictory. On the one hand they see it as a large, chaotic city inhabited by minorities, homeless, beggars, prostitutes, homosexuals, and criminals. Their perception is biased by their experiences and lack of language skills. It also stands in contrast with the environment that most of the respondents know and remember from their poor small towns and countryside in the north-east of Poland. On the other hand the respondents consider life in Brussels to be easier. Especially medical care is in the homeless’ view excellent and free of charge. I repeatedly heard that people like them are better off on the streets in Brussels than in Poland.

*M. has three brothers back in Poland. He paid his social security there for 25 years. In Brussels, for seventeen years, he had been working illegally. Got sick, nearly went blind. Back in Poland twice he received 150 zł [35 euro] welfare. He just couldn't support himself, had to come back to Brussels. Here, even if he never paid taxes, he can live. He's got medical care, hospital for free. Even this - he points at the tin can full of change. You have to write that people can have decent life and decent death here. He keeps asking me.
(fieldnote from the metro station, August 2008)*

The image of Poland, however also distorted, is twofold. It is a country that did not offer them anything, somehow discarded them, and pushed them out. Most of respondents see Poland as a country that has unfairly hurt them; a society that had rejected them. It also a common perception that the “poverty in Poland is so deep, that you can barely survive there”. It offers them nothing as it did not offer them anything before and caused them to leave. They would have difficulties finding a job, and even if they did, it wouldn't pay as much as they can earn in Belgium. In their view there is also barely any social help in Poland. They would get no benefits, no welfare, no support from the state. Here, in Brussels, they do. “Living from a cup” is considered better fate than welfare benefits in Poland. Usually this perception coupled with the difficult relations with the family.

*I would be very, very poor there [in Poland]. Cause I would only get the soup and... a couple, a couple, a couple centimes. Here I don't get any money, but I live here. And I know on what I live here. I steal or normally, legally, I just take. Here they give whole bags of food.
(interview with a 48-year-old man, February 2009)*

Some of the homeless I met have their families in Brussels. In a way their situation resembles more the “regular” homeless. Their social and language skills however are usually no better than those of migrant homeless with families in the home country.

For some of the homeless returning to Poland seems like a realistic possibility to exit homelessness. It is coupled with their wish to reconcile and reunite with their families. But some respondents had completely cut off the contact with their relatives. They haven't been in contact for years. They literally have no one that could help them in the home country. In the stories sense of guilt, shame, letting down the family, but also hurt, being unjustly harmed by the loved-ones intertwine.

For the temporarily homeless workers, Brussels gives an opportunity to quickly make money and find a place to live. Most of them have experienced this fast money themselves. “In Belgium once you have a job, you have everything”. In Poland having a job doesn't mean that you're not poor. It makes thus no sense to go back. Still others had been convicted in Poland or are in another way at threat there and cannot go back.

It seems though that the perceived obstacles of returning to Poland are much bigger then the real ones. Asked about last time they contacted a member of the family in Poland, some of the homeless were making excuses about lost phone numbers, locked mobile phones or lack of funds.

3. Main findings and hypothesis

3.1 Capabilities and migrant networks

I would argue that part of the Polish migrant population is in a state of constant flux between precarious housing conditions and rooflessness. And that actually the boundaries between the undocumented migrant workers who become disassociated from their families in the home country and the physically homeless are blurred. The housed and the homeless help each other. The exchange is mutual. Polish workers come to the homeless spots to have a (free)

drink, to spend the time, help out their friends, ask for advice, translate some documents by a homeless who's speaking French. The homeless on the other hand get some news about friends, receive clothes, food, sometimes medicine, or special gifts like books or reading glasses, they get some change to buy alcohol.

For the temporarily homeless those contacts are crucial to obtain information about available job opportunities. For the housed workers their homeless friends are their support networks in case they themselves "end up on the street". Some of the Polish migrants in Brussels acquire the skills and capabilities to receive support even before they lose roofs over their heads. They know where and when to go to the soup kitchens, cheap meals places, get a free shower, how to open ATM lounges, collect and claim cash for empty bottles.

3.2 Precarious housing conditions of the Polish migrants

According to self-reported data about lives of migrants, only 10% of Polish workers in Belgium rents accommodation with a proper contract with a landlord. 30% of Poles has living quarters arranged by employer (that concerns mainly live-in housework and work in agriculture, thus mostly outside of main cities). 35% admits that they sublet a place without a contract (*Współczesne migracje...* 2008, p. 197). That means that more than half of interviewees reported having precarious housing conditions and temporary arrangements.

3.3 Familiarized rooflessness

As mentioned before incomplete migrations to the cities in the communist Poland formed a large group of seasonal and temporary workers for whom it became natural to treat work "loosely", and who accepted very bad living conditions in workers' hostels, temporary structures etc (Okólski 2001). Along with their economic marginalization, very bad housing conditions became something common and accepted by them. Most of my respondents in Brussels had also experienced such housing situations in Poland. They were no strangers to living in institutions – hostels, orphanages, prisons, or in other precarious conditions such as sleeping in vehicles, abandoned buildings, doubling up with friends in overcrowded apartments, sharing a room with a stranger or renting out single beds. They have familiarized marginalization in their home country. Their migration to Brussels further lowered the threshold of acceptable housing conditions. Migration project had been aimed at saving money, and migration was intended as temporary. They have adapted to further marginalization abroad, accepted it and somehow became accustomed to it. Sleeping rough in Brussels had not been completely new experience to them.

3.4 Conclusion

This preliminary research suggests that some migrant homeless populations might be much more coherent and well-knit than the average "home" homeless groups. I would argue that the most important factor here is the lack of social capabilities, especially language skills of the migrants. Support networks that extend beyond the street homeless onto the larger group of Polish undocumented workers are one way for the Polish homeless to escape the dramatic isolation of homelessness. The other reason might be the lack of mentally impaired Polish

homeless in Brussels. In “regular” homeless population people with mental shortcomings comprise a large portion (Jencks 1994), may cause hindering cohesion of the groups and relationships. The extended networks of the Polish homeless in Brussels that reach beyond people literally living on the street, may cause easier recruitment of the new homeless in case of accident, sickness, family or alcohol problem.

Polish community in Brussels on one hand is so close-knit and with so many connections to the local communities in Poland that it is exercising control over its members. On the other hand studies show that for many migrants physical distance means loosening social control (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2001). Heavy drinking, Polish discos, women’s casual sexual relationships and men’s “Brussels wives” are notorious stories of the disorganization of the Polish community in Brussels.

Homelessness often means rejecting or being forced to reject certain values and goals. Homeless migrants do not fit in neither of the pictures – successful hardworking migrant investing in his/her family back home nor in the image of a “spending”, footloose migrant. Both the “investing” and the “spending” migrant’s priorities are economic. Homeless migrant is unable or unwilling to work. His or her migration project has failed, the primary reason and goal for migration has ended. Sense of guilt and shame but also the disorganization of the family may become too large an obstacle to return to Poland. The support networks and earlier experiences in Brussels however enable the Polish homeless to function (in their view) relatively well on the streets.

Some of the results of this study challenge the economic migration theories. Stark’s theory for instance treats the household as a unity and does not acknowledge the dynamics of the family lives, especially what the migration or the causes of migration may bring to the family. The study of homeless migrants undermines this presumption of family unity. The economically unsuccessful migrations cannot just be terminated, the risks and profits are not equally distributed across family members.

The problems that would need more attention in the future research of this population are the individual trajectories leading to homelessness. I would stress that the most important is a period immediately preceding losing accommodation. I would hypothesize that this is most likely the time when migrants ultimately escape social control of their households and families (either in Poland or in Belgium). Escaping social control might increase the odds of becoming homeless. The process of disassociation, may be very difficult to study as shown by cases of homeless migrants who send home remittances from begging in order to keep the image of a successful migration in front of their family back in the home country.

Social research is intertwined with social policies, which in order to design their support programs, may be tempted to measure to what extent migration plays a part in the trajectories of homelessness. In other words the question on the European level would be: how should the homeless migrants (and not only undocumented migrants, but the EU migrants) in Europe be helped? Should they be included in support programs in the country of their homelessness or should they be encouraged (why?, how?) to return to their home country. How should they be helped there? So far one of the Polish organizations helping the homeless has sent out its staff members to London, and focused on helping the homeless Poles there to return to Poland. Back in Poland they are included in the ‘regular’ programs for the homeless. Individual trajectories of both migrations and homelessness however are much more complex and

involve more than just economic calculations. New European migrations might be thus interpreted as yet another set of variables added to the homelessness equation.

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Short description of selected respondents

Time indications refer to February 2009.

initial	sex	age	home town	present situation	family situation
R	M	40	Town of 5 thousand inhabitants in Podlaskie voivodship	Has no work because of a seasonal break in construction work. It's the fourth time he landed on the street as a consequence. He's a heavy drinker, does odd jobs at the flea market, sleeps at friends' places, night shelter, storage places, railway station.	Travelled between Poland and Brussels since 1993. His ex-wife lives in Brussels, two teenage daughters in Poland.
A	M	59	Town of 10 thousand inhabitants in Podlaskie voivodship	Claims that he controls his drinking, that he hasn't reached the bottom yet, doesn't beg, unloads trucks at the flea market, sleeps at the night shelter or in storage.	Earlier worked in the US. In Brussels since 10 years. He's separated with his wife, has a three-year-old grand-daughter in Poland, whom he has not yet seen.
Z	M	about 40	Village near Białystok	His whole body is in a terrible state. Because of epilepsy almost every other night he spends in hospital.	Since the 1990s in Brussels. Doesn't want to say anything about his family.
N	F	32	Białystok	Because of drinking she lost Her Job, and then accommodation. Since a couple of months on the street. Earlier lived in an abandoned building.	In Brussels since 13 years. Her husband died in Poland while she was away. Her 16-year-old daughter is in custody of her mother. She hasn't seen her for 8 years now.
W	M	about 55	Siemiatycze	Stopped drinking. It's three months after detoxication. He received a flat in social housing. Became a Belgian citizen. Does not work, spends the time with the friends on the street.	
P	M	48	Village in the North-east of Mazowieckie voivodship	Older brother since 1991 in Brussels, lived for the first three years in his car. Younger brother joined him in 1997. Both in a very poor physical condition, heavy drinking. Older brother has a foot infection since three years and can barely walk.	They cut entirely from the family. Their brothers sold off their property, burnt the house down. Older brother left his pregnant wife. Younger served several sentences in prison in Poland.
G	M	43			
L	M	about 55	Białystok	Has a place to live and a job. Comes to soup kitchens and other spots for the homeless to save money and meet with friends.	In Brussels since 1997. His wife is dead. His daughter and grand daughter are in Poland.
J	M	58	Warsaw/France	When he found out he had cancer, decided to leave everything behind and live on the street. Speaks good French, is a charismatic leader of the Polish group at one of the metro stations.	Emigrated to France in the 1970s. There are his wife and two adult children.
Q	M	about 25	Town near Warsaw	On the street since a few weeks. Had an accident on a way to (undocumented) work. Got sick.	His sister is in Brussels. Parents are in Poland. Came to Belgium only couple months ago.
D	M	about	Warsaw/Greece	He rents a room without access to a	Emigrated as a child to

		30		bathroom. Works odd jobs. Uses soup kitchens and other institutions for the homeless. With a friend he's planning to go „further, to England or Spain”.	Greece with his mother. Returned to Poland but didn't feel at home there. Travels across Europe.
B	M	34	Town of 10 thousand inhabitants in Wielkopolskie voivodship	Lost his accommodation when he broke with his girlfriend. Since half a year on the streets. A homeless Belgian told him she's expecting his child. Since then he's not leaving one spot on the sidewalk.	Lived in punk squats in Poland and Berlin. Since 4 years in Brussels. His parents and grand mother who raised him in Poland. Cannot go back because he was convicted for possession of drugs.
T	M	52	Zielona Góra	Met friends at the metro station and drifted. Is drinking at the metro station for a week now.	Single. Since many years in Brussels. Owner of the legally operating construction firm in Brussels.
S	M	about 30	?	Hangs out in the drunkards group at the Midi station	In Brussels since teenager. His parents threw him out of the house, because he's drinking and doesn't want to work.
M	M	about 60	Village in Warmińsko-mazurskie voivodship	Got sick and stopped working. Heavy drinker. Died October 10, 2008 at the metro station in Brussels.	Worked for 17 years in Brussels. Came back to Poland but could not live from the welfare he received there, so returned to Brussels to „die with dignity”.