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***From “united in exploitation”  
to “united in diversity”:  
postcolonial perspectives regarding  
Europe’s economic migration fluxes***

***Abstract***

The current paper engages with the topic and patterns of migration flows to Europe from a historically driven critical perspective. The research is focused primarily on examining the intentions of European States and their immigration policies, either liberal or restrictive, throughout the ages across the pan-European area. The scope of the research is limited to historical migration in Europe, and we employ a retrospective approach to analyse it critically. It is done through the lens of the postcolonial school of thought, as it proves to be the most efficient when explaining fluctuations and

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modulations recorded. These scholars underlined varying push and pull factors that led to migration toward Europe, especially during modern times. Furthermore, we interpret and overlook how the “united in diversity” desiderates are reflected across the EU’s current undertakings, as we employ a critical approach to interpret recent evolutions and draw up prospective avenues holistically. In conclusion, we observe repeating patterns of exploitative systems in the European view of migration, especially toward worker migrants. Hence, we assert that colonial reminiscences remain across some sectorial levels. We advocate that collective intervention is required to eradicate these postcolonial approaches.

**Keywords:** labour market, European affairs, Economic migration, Third World development, human mobility

## Introduction

Nowadays, most of us consider that exploitation, from local communities all the way to global networks, represents elements no longer present in our societal assemblage. Nevertheless, suppose we observe contemporary migratory and diasporic movements, especially across the pan-European territories. In such a case, we can note several indicators that would fit exploitation’s theoretical description, particularly, amongst those considered economically driven immigrants. Furthermore, a glance into current narratives, from the academic or political realms to social media, showcases a tendency to put the latter group into a discourse-driven shadowing by framing such movements as voluntary and, therefore, not exploitative (Sa’di, 2021; Paré, 2022). Whereas we can admit that such movements have cyclically occurred throughout history and represent a rather natural economic phenomenon, we must also note how current-day migration towards Europe, often occurring from lesser-developed countries towards their more advanced peers, or more explicitly, from the Third World periphery to the First World leading powers, is nuanced in the neo-colonialist literature as the coming of *Others* in the group imagery (Junuzi, 2019). The aspect which, if left unhindered and at present rates, can contextualise a suite of challenges both for the host entities and the participants in this dynamic. Hence, this paper seeks to explore, through the postcolonial prism, whether new formats of exploitation might still be present in the guise of what is called voluntary economic immigration, especially, by looking at current frameworks and tendencies found across the Old Continent. Furthermore, we can assume that a relatively limited number of dedicated global policies, norms, or institutions specialised in eradicating root factors can contribute to these immigration flows from the Third to First World countries (Zolberg, 2019; Segal, 2019; Michael, 2021). As such, since it should not be impossible to conceptualise, develop, and implement collectively driven initiatives to solve the commonality of systemic challenges found across socio-economically unstable and politically vulnerable areas, numerous authors argue the developed world’s eagerness to fuel labour flows (Achiume, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2020).

Some authors argue that the Europe of Empires, the one that set the globe’s *modus operandi*, represents one of the first historically well-recorded migrant exploitation



phases. This period represents a turnover moment, one in which several game-changing alignments (from industrialisation and scientific advancements to economic and military might) enabled the major European players to portray themselves as hegemonic Centres and absorb or, more often than not, exploit territories across all corners of the world, through the rapid conquest and subjugation of less-advanced regions (Curtin, 2002). The stories that depict this primacy are numerous, whereas the palette of reasons which would reflect such an expansion includes even more fundamental reasons, ranging from domination desires, trade routes, resource security, and private commercial interests to personal desiderata of leaders. Thereafter, we can mention the Balkans' colonisation, Mongolian immigration into European Russia, slavery in Northern African routes, or the second mass movement from West Africa (Curtin, 2002). In contrast with other refugee flows, while accounting for the Balkan colonisation project, we can note how it displaced millions of people, especially in Russian, Habsburg, and Ottoman Empires or across Prussia. The primary objective of these movements was resettling of immigrants across continental Europe (Bade, 2003; Lucassen & Lucassen, 2009). These labour migration trends and colonial immigration were accompanied by the transatlantic immigration of indentured servants, who served their masters in return for minimal capital (Bade, 2003, p. 1).

Hence, we follow the trail and investigate Europe's historical migratory patterns to showcase if the continent still inherits an exploitative approach to immigration or takes steps to improve global conditions, especially across states with limited developments. Also, we understand exploitation as representing a complex and nuanced process, going beyond the traditional boundaries of slavery and moving more towards contextualised societal restraints to one's capacity, actorness, and agency. Thus, in this perspective also, an overarching abusive market insertion of immigrant workers from unsafe areas, of course, in systems that provide limited rights, preferential income sources, or restricted access to integratory and quality services, can be considered a new expression of exploitative mechanisms or neo-colonialist processes. The policies of welcoming immigrants to European countries of the 1950s and 1960s to boost economic development and fuel growth started to halt during the 1970s due to the protectionist understanding of macroeconomic perspectives (Mueller, 1999). To compensate for the need for an unskilled workforce, especially after World War II (WWII), European countries implemented considerably liberal immigration policies. Through this promotion, they explicitly attempt to gain economic leverage to enhance their growth and financial leadership. Nevertheless, from a critical perspective, it hints at an exploitative mindset. To clarify, we would like to capture readers' attention to this point. The exploitation, apart from its traditional meaning, tools, and implementation, refers to creating economic and opportunity imbalances and uneven development between the First and Third World from a historical perspective of colonisation and resource transfers, including natural resources and a cheap labour force. Although the concrete meaning of colonial exploitation points out a forced and involuntary servitude for one's needs, the postcolonial exploitation crystalises that the exploitative mindset is still valid as the power groups would like to gain more and cheap benefits through the people who are in need for the First World countries' currencies to provide a better life to their communities in their home countries. The

invitation and promotion of immigration to European countries have never been an inclination of pure wish for equality in opportunity. Hence, exploitation, in terms of this research, defines a legacy from colonisation as a mindset to use one's welfare dependency to utilise one's own profitable goals through contemporary and regulated ways, such as branding liberal immigration policies and guest worker programmes.

Otherwise, the study attempts to propose a modelling of these processes based on clear differentiation and classification of immigration inflows into Europe. As such, an analysis of international migration per se underlines its relevance by highlighting historical ties that forged human history and pushed progress, despite the fact that only the last few centuries are regarded as ages of migration (de Haas et al., 2020). In line, the specialty literature further notes that governmental-backed policies on international migration only surfaced throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially after the sedimentation of nation-states initiated by several European nations. On the same note, some of the very first studies regarding this subject were published by Ravenstein (1885; 1889) around the same period. Interestingly enough, we attempt to determine motivational nodes for international migration by channelling economic reasons into the spotlight (de Haas, 2011, p. 8).

Based on this perspective, we have focused on the economic push and pull factors that set in motion and drive immigration. The economic origins led us to investigate whether immigration patterns have varied across the centuries, especially in terms of governmental intentions toward it. Furthermore, since the colonial past of Western Powers has not been for a long period of time a subject of debate, as most historians admit that such expansionist tendencies and global conquests have left a strong mark on Third World countries, we must note how the global migration flows brought prosperity mostly to the centre. At the same time, it victimised the other subjugated players (Düvell, 2006; Van Mol & de Valk, 2016). Hence, slavery, colonisation, human trafficking, and other human rights violations are not a rarity in most of the developed world's historical background, as they sought to internally optimise themselves by accumulating wealth from regions that did not possess military, societal, or political capacities developed enough to resist invasion (Hansen, 2002). We can only note how some of the EU's external behaviours across the Global South can make practitioners believe there is an attempt to constitute what is called *Fortress Europe*, which term is attributed to Johan Galtung to indicate the internal consolidation of Europe without isolation (Albrecht, 2002; Koff, 2008; Onar & Nicolaidis, 2013; Celata & Coletti, 2016; Junemann et al., 2017).

Bearing all of these in mind, the first part of the study follows an analysis of migration from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward, following the works conducted by Lucassen and Lucassen (2009). While admitting that there have been numerous other migratory movements across the ages towards Europe and other developed spheres, we focus on this particular starting point as a way to understand the imperial roots of these movements, only accelerated by exploration or industrialisation ages. Furthermore, the second chapter is aimed at elaborating on the general idea of recent exploitative immigration systems, as the guest worker lies. Also, the third chapter is devoted to interpreting globalised modern exploitation practices (e.g., the skilled labour and welfare narratives) from a postcolonial approach juxtaposed with current modulations

across the realm of international relations, macroeconomic developments, cross-border cooperation, and international organisation studies. In the last part, we include an overview of the topic alongside several incursions into prospective avenues.

### ***1. Reading the migratory movements critically: Postcolonial approach to international migration***

The colonial history of the Global North, such as the European powers, is full of exploitation of labour, natural resources, culture, identity, and religion. The postcolonial approach, in this regard, links its foundation to the continuity of the colonial mindset after the reorganised world order, and it has been well-summarised by Samaddar (2020) to say “the migrant is [still] invisible as it works in the dark mines...”.

Postcolonial theory of migration research focuses on the repetitive, or to put it clearly, heritable formation of migration regulations such as migration control, guest workers programmes, point-based selection criteria, and migrants’ rights in host countries. Furthermore, it also implies the geographical links between postcolonial and formerly colonised countries through contemporary migration routes. The exploitative working conditions of migrants and ignored violations of regulations that may protect the worker immigrants’ rights are perceived as intentions to boost economic development and growth in favour of capital owners and the greater society of the West from the postcolonial framework. The link of these exploitative processes to colonialism refers to the colonial history of Western countries towards the Global South, which has been the main source of labour immigration to the West. As in the case of the post-WWII period, the migratory movements mainly occurred from the postcolonial non-Western countries to the European continent. The descendants of formerly colonised societies who had involuntarily given their labour to the development of West were assigned to the same position for a similar goal by European countries (Nair, 2013).

Remarkably, gaining popularity after the 1970s, postcolonial studies and theory became very disputable approaches, both getting attention and criticism (Rukundwa & Van Aarde, 2007; Gandhi, 2019). The postcolonial writings in the 1980s aimed to “shift the dominant ways in which the relations between Western and non-Western people and their worlds are viewed” (Young, 1998, pp. 8–9; 2003, p. 1) and became widely spread with the end of Marxism. The problem of uneven development and inequalities between the West and the rest have their roots in European expansionism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Young, 2003). The spatial segregation of immigrants in host countries and the tightening trajectory of immigration controls are considered postcolonial experiences. From this perspective, the postcolonial understanding of migration concludes “the persistence of economic empowerment in the West” (Mains et al., 2013, p. 132) through labour exploitation from formerly colonised societies. To put it clearly in a broader context, the actions taken by imperial powers to create or sustain the disrupted economic, social, and political structures in the formerly colonised countries fuelled the migratory movements and displacements while they were



concomitantly imposing the borders, immigration control, and sanctions to only provide this migration as a privilege for the selected ones, who are truly believed to boost the economic development and enhance the growth of the Western countries. The postcolonial lens to migration provides insight into the continuity of the contemporary ways of forced, coercive, and exploitative practices towards immigrant labour (Sadiq & Tsourapas, 2023). Hence, the postcolonial perspective on migration crystalises through the explicit continuation of colonial formations in today's population movements and what is called migration governance by imperialist powers (Çağlar, 2021).

Hence, postcolonial migration as a theoretical framework allows us to employ a critical reading of the migration history of Europe. As the main pillar idea of the postcolonial framework, we approached the migratory flows, their root causes, and the intentions of receiving countries from a critical perspective. Apart from reading the migration history through the lens of the Western ideas that generally implies the benefits of immigration to developed countries via remittances and cultural or educational skill-based exchange, we attempt to scrutinise the imperialist and colonial mindset for promoting and initiating immigration to the West by European powers, especially the labour migration.

## *2. Europe as the axis mundi: historical roots of imperialist exploitation and postcolonial theory*

We can approach imperial processes through different lenses, understanding that they occurred in two main forms: colonisation and mass migration across unsettled (or minimally settled) European soils, a form of inter-regional expansion, and the colonisation of underdeveloped regions, which is set on a global scale. While both greatly impacted Europe's extensive evolution, we seek to expose exploitative systems left behind by colonialist constructs by highlighting the latter. However, as Tofiño-Quesada (2003, p. 143) put it, only when the coin is flipped can we notice the realities of those days and the concrete intentions behind human displacement: economic growth. Similarly, Easterly and Levine (2016) investigated European conquest and colonisation preferences, revealing their historical impact on Europe's economic, political, and societal evolution. Thus, the authors documented a positive and concrete relationship between these endeavours and the present-day primacy of the continent (by rationalising that the colonialist advantages allowed, in some respect, several nations to reach the status of Great Powers and hegemonically dominate the global arena). Furthermore, they indicate that European settlers and settlements, on their whole, were more motivated by economic reasons during the colonisation period than nowadays. Additionally, as noted by Antwi-Boateng (2017), imperial Europe's agenda was implemented to exploit the social, economic, and political spheres across several global pivotal points.

Therefore, as Sherwood (2007) or Pella Jr. (2015) points out, European powers' eagerness to engage in colonialist activities, including the slave trade, as early as the

15<sup>th</sup> century was a reflection of their current geoeconomic, geopolitical, and geostrategic concerns, during a period marked by concerted power competition and inter-continental linkages formation. Hence, the drainage of European resources from relentless conflicts was a determinant factor in their will to transfer resources from other tertiary actors. Therefore, European settlers and settlements, in tandem with local communities, redirected migratory and enslaved person routes toward the main centers, a process which was *longue durée* (Drescher, 1990, p. 416). Indeed, Europe’s colonial approach and increasing commercial activities triggered the demand for migration, namely, the slave trade (Van Den Boogaart & Emmer, 1986). A depleted resource pool was accompanied by a lack of unskilled labour, already either lost as human capital in ongoing battles, dislocated because of them, or exploited to the maximum by the nobles, meaning that a *quasi-omnipresent* need for human capital was felt across the continent. In this regard, entire economic branches were marked by such an approach; for instance, sugar production is often perceived to be synonymous with the history of slavery; as Solow (1987, p. 714) puts it, “European colonization was associated with sugar; sugar was associated with slavery, and slavery was associated with blacks.” Accordingly, Klein (2010, p. 75) notes that “the Atlantic slave trade was one of the most complex economic enterprises known to the preindustrial world. It was the largest transoceanic migration in history up to that time”. Since then, he showcased how vast routes were organised by private traders from coastal regions across the world to provide exploitable individuals, notably between 1440 and 1500 (Klein, 2010, p. 76). Additionally, as competition grew even for the already established colonies, other spheres were drawn on the global map, exploring Asian or American routes; for instance, the Portuguese Empire was the first to draw human resources from the Indian basin (Allen, 2010, p. 53; 2015). As such, an array of locations and people, within or without European borders, have systematically been oppressed by global powers and were marked by this type of practice. In some places, these behavioural patterns were gradually ingrained into the social fabric through propaganda, as is the case of West Africa, which is deeply depicted, including in its shared consciousness, as a satellite of Europe. This dehumanisation of entire regions or nations, branded as a *Barbaric Other*, enabled a deconstruction of their identity and commodification of human lives, which were seen as an abundant resource of cheap or even free labour, aspects that engrained such practices into their prospective developmental pathways and bore repercussions for centuries (Buchowski, 2006; Said, 2013).

Postcolonial migration refers to the following patterns of colonial migration intentions by colonising states toward ex-colonised societies. European countries’ colonial rule and labour demand stimulated the slave trade first, then the economic or labour migration from non-European spaces. The reality, indeed, sheds light on the economic growth and labour migration programmes implemented by developed countries (Lenard & Straehle, 2010; Gallagher, 2015). At this juncture, the postcolonial theory offers a novel understanding of development. The novelty derives from the critical aspect of the postcolonial view on development. Postcolonial theory explicitly refutes the idea of the predominant Western lens to analyse, interpret, and explain political, economic, and social issues (Ziai, 2012). Otherwise, this theoretical

framework allows us to critically evaluate and deconstruct the imposed facts from the Western perspective.

Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, European powers have depended on imperialist and colonialist applications toward *underdeveloped* or *developing* countries regarding Europeans' welfare enhancement and expansion of capitalism (McEwan, 2018, pp. 104–105). Indeed, colonialism has been not only an economic process of exploitation but also a cultural hierarchy (Kothari, 2006, p. 237). The European powers' arrogance against the other places around the world reflected as follows: "Non-European space was imagined as empty and uninhabited and thus available for exploration, exploitation and, ultimately, colonization. It was imagined as morally and culturally empty, but with the prospects of becoming 'civilized' through the processes of colonization" (McEwan, 2018, p. 113). Colonialism is reflected in migration through domination, exploitation, and conquest (Mayblin & Turner, 2022). Hence, migration and colonialism are linked to each other in critical perspectives (Mains et al., 2013). Yet, especially after WWII, Europeans have regarded international migration and refugees as crises. At the heart of this perception is the postcolonial perspective. Once the migration began to be the mobility of non-Europeans or non-white people rather than the invitation of Europeans to compensate for their need for low-skilled and 3D (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) jobs through their labour force, it was considered a problem. As the colonialism era marked racially different people from *Others*, the former coloniser states have had this heritage in their practice regarding refugees and immigrants (Banerjee & Samaddar, 2018). In this sense, postcolonial migrants in coloniser states still have this collective memory of colonial migration (Mains et al., 2013, p. 132).

### ***3. Industrialists' growth and the idealist workers' exploitation***

In the aftermath of the second global conflagration, as Europe was reconstructed from the ground up, so were some exploitative tendencies, making the 1960s become the beginning of continental unification but also that of industrial exploitation in the name of democratic-capitalist progress or socialist-communist revolution (Lieberman, 1998). Around the same time, the Customs Union (1948) was established, followed by the structure that would give birth to the EU, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) (1952). These aspects are worth noting since the varied forms the unifying frameworks took (between 1952 and 1992) were also reflected in the plenitude of approaches toward internal and external immigration. With its subsequent interdependences, evolving globalisation meant that forced migration was transcended by voluntary movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, initially implemented by the Nazis during WWII through European labour migration, mostly consisting of Eastern Europeans (Castles & Kosack, 1973). However, after WWII, the guest worker programmes extended from implementers to participators. For instance, the number of labour workers in France by 1970 was around 600,000 Algerians, 140,000 Moroccans, and 90,000 Tunisians as former colonies of the country, including West Africans. The application of guest worker systems varied from one country to another. Yet, the basic characteristics of these systems were limiting the entry of dependents of guest workers

and strictly employing deportation rules to discipline the *foreign labour force* (Castles, 1986, pp. 764, 769). These inter-state arrangements were promoted as universalised training systems, which were directed to fuel economic and industrial renewal in the post-war period, enabling and enhancing practical knowledge transfer towards the origin countries. Indeed, this overall phenomenon, alongside the workers' remittances, fostered the origin countries' economic development. In this context, the problem arose from the fact that temporariness was mostly an idealistic notion, especially when accounting for the fact that most of the guest workers settled into the more developed countries, many of them bringing their families or entire communities with them (Castles, 1986, p. 770). Until the 1973 Petrol Crisis, such initiatives fostered Western economic reconstruction and reindustrialisation. They became “a structural necessity for the economies of the receiving countries” (Castles & Kosack, 1973, p. 25), especially as, in most cases, it involved utilising a carrot-and-stick system to exploit unskilled labour from developing countries (Lieberman, 1998). The carrot often took the form of a widespread idea that guest workers would vastly contribute to their origin countries through remittances and know-how spillovers. By contrast, as there was a surplus of persons who sought refuge in Europe, the stick sometimes represented deportation if they did not perform as expected or if their societal contribution was considered insufficient anymore.

By the end of 1976, the Trevi Group was formed *de jure* as a multi-level, multi-actor cross-border mechanism to manage migration control policies (Bunyan, 1993; Guiraudon, 2000). The initial goals to prevent terrorism and provide internal security of Trevi Group were extended in 1985 to cover illegal immigration (Karyotis, 2007, p. 4). The tendency to establish Fortress Europe, asylum, and refugees also put into the agenda to aim the externalisation of migration control. In line with this perspective, the Dublin Agreements introduced the first *de facto* migration management norms in 1990 (Hurwitz, 1999). The historical tool of European countries, readmission agreements, concomitantly started to get criticisms from scholars as instruments to control migratory flows deriving from the mindset of externalisation of migration control (Boutillet-Paquet, 2003; Panizzon, 2012). In addition, several experts consider that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) played a pivotal role when it comes to the evolution of migration after the 1960s across the European continent.

By examining the specialty literature, especially the works related to migration theories relevant to the period, we can note that push-pull factors (Lee, 1966), neoclassical migration theory (Lewis, 1954), mobility gravity (Stouffer, 1940) or dual labour market theory (Piore, 1979) are the predominant frameworks for the 1960–2000 period. As such, pushing factors within the origin country and pulling factors from the origin one become intertwined and result in a migratory movement (Lee, 1966). Similarly, we can note how economic slowdown and overall underdevelopment represent even today pushing factors across Third World countries (Bradshaw & Huang, 1991). Furthermore, higher standards of life, fairer and accessible systems, ample welfare mechanisms, and better economic growth or wealth distribution across Europe formed an entire palette of new pull vectors from unstable regions towards the continent. Furthermore, as current global tendencies indicate, instead of solving and

preventing insecurity or instability, both within its boundaries and abroad, Europe's relatively limited action-taking, especially by its continental powers, is regarded by some authors as an exploitation of vulnerabilities, a window of opportunity through which a flux of cheap labour force is constantly attracted (Peers, 1998; Kabeer, 2004; Lodder, 2019). In this scenario of artificially maintained chaotic systems, neoclassical migration theories proved to be the most widely used framework to approach modern-day migration practices. In this sense, workers are prone to migrate if their overall benefits, welfare, or wages are lower than those of the countries seeking to fill employment gaps (Wickramasinghe & Wimalaratana, 2016).

Moreover, the dual labour market paradigms seem to be better fitted as an explanatory prism for Europe's immigration history after the 1960s, especially in the aftermath of the communist collapse. Through this prism of understanding, a core motivation behind immigration is an increased labour demand across the entire developed countries' spectrum. In other words, migration fluctuations directly result from attraction factors rather than negative modulations in one's country of origin (Massey et al., 1993, p. 440). Therefore, we can note how Europe's demand for unskilled labour skyrocketed after the second global conflagration, as in any postwar reconstruction, representing one of the main enablers of economic development and regrowth. As the postwar data suggests, the instrumentalisation of large-scale guest workers models has resulted in a segmentation of European labour markets, particularly in the main continental actors, between native and immigrant forces. In general, across these countries, the 3D jobs were mostly undertaken by immigrants, as they were often treated through discriminatory lenses. In contrast, native workers were reprofiled towards more skilled positions (Buchowski, 2006). Thus, one can deduce that a negative initial context, coupled with the attraction of a more advanced continent in need of a workforce, led to an exponential influx of migrants through all channels available, an aspect that, in turn, contributed to both an unwelcoming context which systematically propagated unfavourable positions for these individuals and a governmental incapacity to adequately and rapidly adjust to such a large-scale event (due to an entire array of factors). All of this meant the perfect environment for exploitative mechanisms to resurface, as well as the establishment of reward (accessibility to a better market and country) or punishment (deportation to lesser-developed regions) mechanisms.

#### ***4. Globalised assemblages and postmodern exploitations: from skilled labour to welfare***

The post-Berlin-wall fall period represents an extremely relevant momentum in European integration as collective willingness for unity transcended the realm of ideas and became a reality in the 1992's EU. Establishing the communist bloc resulted in the adoption of EU-wide harmonised migration management and control policies, alongside a stronger involvement in development aid across tertiary actors, marking the beginning of a skilled labour demand whilst also providing welfare guarantees for migrants. Albeit numerous improvements registered across the years, both at the

group’s level and across its member states, several schools of thought regard this period as the beginning of a new phase of exploitative systems. However, even they admit a more nuanced and refined process is taking place when it comes to the constraints felt by migrants (Koettl, 2009; Andrees & Belser, 2009).

Even though a universalisation of norms can be observed across EU policies, especially regarding migration, a diversity of legal practices still forms the basis of immigration control and management, especially as more precise matters are left under the national legislators’ will. As such, we can also note that the West-East Cold War divide accelerated human migratory and diasporic movements in the post-war environment, in particular from former communist states towards their democratic counterparts. This dynamic created the first migratory divergence between the East-West spheres, as the general lines of demarcation, even though they no longer were reflected in the geostrategic realities, remained felt across a diversity of immigration policies. For instance, even Northwest European countries, generally regarded as rather grand immigration hotspots, did not present a suite of consistent policies, norms, or practices. However, their discursive attitudes were rooted in the doctrinal and ideological basis of liberal democracy and global capitalism, which would have explained a more proactive approach to the matter of integration, adoption, and adaptation toward migratory trends (Wiesbrock, 2016, p. 160; Freeman, 1995, p. 882). Therefore, authors like Joppke (1998) or Sassen (1996), when witnessing the initial oppression felt by ex-communist migrants, noted that neoliberal actors might have admitted migratory flows either through global political pressure or economic globalisation intertwining, not necessarily based on openness towards the “rest”. Thereafter, these visions can also be confirmed by increased recourse, especially in present-day inter-state relations, to isolationist or autarchic behaviours and dogmatically fuelled nationalist or extremist positions, aspects often closely tied with migratory challenges (e.g., poor integration, radicalisation, and terrorist risks, labour exploitation, organised criminality, societal dissensions, etc.).

Otherwise, the EU’s evolution is tied to the introduction of several immigration and asylum regulations, ranging from the Dublin Agreements, Maastricht Treaty (1992), Amsterdam Treaty (1997), Tampere European Council (1999), Hague Programme (2004) or Stockholm Programme (2010), all of which include extended provisions in relation to migration management and control. As such, we can observe how these aspects were developed through each document, granting new rights to migrants, as the 1992 Maastricht Treaty put the EU-wide common migration and asylum policy on the agenda. Later on, the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty, in this regard, created the legal framework for common migration and asylum policies (Balleix, 2014, p. 2; Lavenex, 2001, p. 25). Thereafter, the European Commission’s intervention in the implementation and conceptualisation of newly adapted migration policies via the Amsterdam Treaty caused expectations for a more liberal immigration policy as it indicated the free movement of people (Karyotis, 2007, p. 2; Stetter, 2000, p. 93). Furthermore, after the Amsterdam momentum, five-year collective plans were developed for common migration and asylum policies as a way to allow for increased integration throughout the community’s bloc. In addition, the Tampere European Council was held in 1999, promoting migrant rights and introducing several ideals



which remain in place to this day, especially regarding their equal inclusion and accessibility to the market. In 2005, the Hague Programme and in 2010, the Stockholm Programme were implemented, both of which further enhanced previous provisions and enabled a more coagulated system of rights granting and fair treatment to be put into motion (Balch & Geddes, 2011, p. 29). These aspects are relevant, as prior to the Tampere European Council, migration was an issue of *ad hoc* committees, creating a void of leadership and high legislative volatility. However, the Council highlighted the willingness of Presidents to establish the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which was aimed at safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable people (Hampshire, 2016, p. 543). The Hague Programme in 2004 included strengthening freedom, justice, and security and provisioned the establishment of CEAS by 2010, alongside sedimentation of sociocultural and integratory initiatives, including funding mechanisms for the development of tertiary actors (Bigo, 2006, p. 35; Collett, 2008). The Stockholm Programme in 2010 focused on the third countries' role in the CEAS and sought to integrate local entities better and empower grassroots movements as a way to limit or prevent societal risks that lead to mass migration (Cardwell, 2013, p. 57). However, there is a body of works that approach such developments through the lens of modern exploitation, as Zapata Berrera's research (2012, p. 1187) points out that the overarching goal of these initiatives was to "build the citizen's Europe". The latter means that in some member states, interest groups use the EU's umbrella to prioritise actions taken to favor their citizens over migrants in the labour market.

A typical explanation for such a phenomenon lies in the intrinsic nature and features embedded into EU-backed migration policies since the 1990s. Brussels institutions had intentions to better regulate these processes, especially in light of the migration crisis, which shook several member states and even risked their functioning. Apart from these documents and connex initiatives, the EU also introduced the Schengen Information System, Visa Information System, and FRONTEX by the end of 2004 to curb uncontrolled or illegal migration (Meszaros, 2017; Neal, 2009). Additionally, these measures promoting more skilled a higher quality labour immigration, particularly in terms of voluntary economic movements, allowed Brussels to securitise international flows relatively (Demirkol, 2022; Štefančík et al., 2022; Štefančík et al., 2021). Coupled with several member states adopting harsher regulations over the years, backed by a populist rise, this environment created a paradoxical situation where, on the one hand, there is the adoption of an entire suite of initiatives aimed at promoting and sustaining international migration or enabling development in origin countries. In contrast, on the other, there are a series of limits imposed on the same flows. Secondly, by tailoring to the needs of an ever-growing highly skilled private sector, immigration policies tend to favour a brain drain process in which skilled labourers are attracted, sometimes over the acceptance of less versatile and unprepared unskilled labourers or refugees, especially as they necessitate higher intervention and expenditures to be integrated as functioning societal members. Therefore, some continental players have approached this systemic process through cost-benefit calculation lenses, once again creating a barrier and reducing entire populations to a simple statistic.

## 5. Discussion: diversity or exploitation? *The intention of the European powers*

The *unity in diversity* concept of the European Union consecrates liberal immigration policies and the positive and bilateral contribution of migrants to Europe and their home countries. This optimistic view of immigration is naïve, yet we should interrogate the real intention as social scientists. As reflected in the well-known *Great Debates* in International Relations theory, it would not be unfair to claim that the promotion of liberal immigration policies in European countries is *utopian*. By asserting so, we elaborate on our views through the postcolonial perspective of international migration.

The pushing factors, which mean a lesser developed Global South, can be traced back to the actions taken by 16<sup>th</sup>-century global powers, which colonised and conquered underdeveloped regions worldwide, fuelled by a desire to maximise their economic growth and industrialisation. Therefore, the depletion of resources through constant warmongering meant that there had to be extracted from all corners of the globe and brought to the commercial hubs, creating an entire network of systemic exploitation and transferring the necessary workforce needed to sustain such developmental pathways through the uprooting of entire communities from Third World countries. This meant that a servitude relationship was built, at times even inside the continent, from emitters to receivers, driven by a dehumanisation of nations as they were collectively grouped together and portrayed as merely contingent living tools. Their contribution to local and regional economic development is hard to quantify, especially the return on investment for the origin countries.

Taking another step and diving into industrialised exploitative systems and, later on, the more refined and nuanced modern models, we can elaborate on the fact that a large part of the literature oversees exploitation as a contextualised oppression or segmentation of groups. The postcolonial approach to exploitation defines this process in reference to historical practices of exploitation with newer, modern, and contemporary instruments such as what is referred to legal regulations to promote workers' immigration via guest worker programmes and liberal immigration policies. In this sense, a dual labour market, split preferentially between native and immigrant workers, can be regarded as representing an exploitative mechanism as the latter usually encounters 3D jobs to penetrate the labour market as a cheap labour force. Moreover, as most regulations often prompted voluntary economic migration, especially in terms of highly skilled workers in specialised industries, including in the East-West post-communist trajectories, a tendency to oversee refugee or asylum migratory movements can be noted. As the final refinement and implementation of migration norms rest on the shoulders of national bodies or regional agencies, we can also oversee how, even if there is a genuinely positive progression registered at the EU level, the final result might be politically motivated, bringing forth instances of discriminatory practices which limited or even completely restricted access to certain types of migrants to the national markets.

From the securitisation of migration as a trending phenomenon in European far-right parties' programmes, campaigns, and policy recommendations, we could observe

the power relations between the First and Third World countries. The latter, as it has always been, plays the most disadvantageous role due to the hegemonic rule of international law, which was created and imposed by First World countries again (Mutua, 2000). The postcolonial pattern we attempt to unveil is connected to colonialism, the need for economic development, exploitation, and legal justification to do so.

Centuries back today, the European powers had the opportunity to violate human dignity through the slave trade, not to provide free rides to less developed societies to enhance their worldview, education, or skills. The wild capitalism that can be traced back to the colonial era allowed Europeans to fuel their economic, political, and social progress. After achieving greater power in their region after WWII, most European countries encountered demographic and economic stagnation. Employing the colonial mindset in the postcolonial period, they sought the solution in formerly colonised societies to have them back in their countries and utilise them as *tools for economic development through cheaper and politically and legally weaker labour force*. Indeed, Marxism emphasises that labour migration creates an industrial reserve army against the local labour force as they represent politically and economically disadvantaged groups who would be able to work for lesser wages and would not be able to demand political rights such as unionisation. Accordingly, “the exploitation of *worse paid* labor from backward countries is particularly characteristic of imperialism” (Lenin, 1964, p. 168). Pröbsting (2015, p. 335) puts it, “[w]hen in the 1950s and 1960s there was near full employment in the imperialist metropolises, the capitalists desperately needed migrants to form an industrial reserve army”. To boost the economic gains and their divine profits, capital owners demanded what is called liberal immigration policies to promote labour migration, as Rey indicated that capitalism is the root cause of migration (Gerold-Scheepers & Van Binsbergen, 1978, p. 28). The uneven development, which was initiated by the First World countries as a consequence of colonial rule (Yin, 2021; Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan, 2003, p. 188; Hollifield, 1992, p. 571), has resulted in today’s migratory flows.

Apart from the root cause of migratory flows today, the postcolonial perspective of European powers led to strict immigration controls toward whom they decided were not beneficial for their economic and social production. The limits and obstacles of immigrants to penetrate formal labour markets, created by regulations of host countries, have pushed immigrants to integrate into the economy through informal ways, which means they would be implicitly pushed into insecure, low-wage, and dirty or dangerous jobs rather than native workers.

Hence, we approach the migratory flows to Europe from the view of retrospective understanding that reveals the postcolonial mindset of European powers to exploit immigrant labour through contemporary forms such as discriminatory practices, disciplinary immigration regulations, and obstacles. As a result, they, again, achieve a cheaper labour force to fuel their growth, which is a copied intention from the colonial legacy they have had in their backpacks.

## Conclusions

The present paper attempts to underline European immigration patterns through a critical perspective on labour exploitation derived from postcolonial understandings of the concept. As such, we can observe how, from a historical perspective, European immigration flows were initially triggered by imperialist and global expansionist tendencies, showcased throughout the centuries by the continental hegemons. These processes changed throughout the years with a *de jure* introduction of numerous norms and regulations. Nevertheless, we can underline how there is still a necessity further to enhance the protection and integratory mechanisms for modern-day migration, especially economically driven ones, to reach the EU’s “united in diversity” desiderata in a *de facto* manner. The emphasis in this research attempts to state that postcolonial practice has been reflected in the migratory practices in European states after WWII as a legacy of their history of colonisation. The postcolonial perspective on migratory flows in this regard underlines that migration has always been utilised as the economic need for European powers to let foreigners enter their territories. Furthermore, the push factors in the Third World countries have also resulted in exploitative practices of the First World countries causing uneven development in favour of their divine welfare.

As such, we can note how certain players continue to operate cost-effectively, trying to maximise capital gains and seeking economic development through channelling and altering migratory fluxes into certain key sectorial areas. As these persons represent a cheaper and less politically involved group, they are often segmented based on the interests of private entities rather than through a universal logic of human development, not to mention the redistribution of their productivity towards the origin countries. This historical heritage, alongside current tendencies, makes us assert that, even though some changes were recorded at the collective level, especially through EU-driven interventions, there are still some optimisations left when it comes to particular cases, as some actors still are prone to perpetuate a systemic model of united in exploitation from the colonial era and revamp it through their interpretation of what united in diversity means.

The image of European actors becoming more involved on the international stage when it comes to commonly eradicating and preventing negative pushing effects from emerging is a widespread political discourse. Even the shift from humanitarian intervention to The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) has encouraged scholars to hope that the Europeans may intend to eradicate the root causes of migration instead of managing and controlling it, the implementation of this new principle is disappointing as limits on humanitarianism in more liberal European states are still persistent (Newman, 2017). In this paper, we move beyond this common approach by revealing the colonial legacy of European migration. Our critical perspective, along with the postcolonial framework, allows us to underline the root causes of migration, as well. The postcolonial reading of migration requires a quest for the uneven development and restraints to economic growth on lesser developed countries by developed ones, as advocated by Favell (2022, p. 533) that “mainstream paradigms of international migration and immigration politics are irrevocably rooted in the ideas and practices of European colonialism imposed on the rest of the world since 1500”.

This research has revealed the cyclical or repetitive process of postcolonial migration, as claimed by some scholars that it exists (Lesińska, 2014, p. 47) in Europe as a hint of their intentions for immigration. First, over the course of the colonial era, the colonising European powers exploited the natural resources and human capital of underdeveloped and disadvantaged societies. Secondly, the colonisation process resulted in uneven development in favour of European powers in the end. Thirdly, the relatively less developed countries needed remittances and capital to reorganise their economies and gain independence; therefore, they tended to migrate to developed countries. Concomitantly, after WWII, the European countries faced economic collapse, sought a cheap and manageable labour force, and found the solution again in formerly colonised societies through a postcolonial mindset. Fourthly, they implemented liberal immigration policies to attract guest workers to boost their economies. During this, the violations of workers' rights from the view of contemporary human rights perspectives allowed for economic development. Then, reaching what is called limits of immigrant stocks, they discovered *legal regulations* to control and restrict unwanted immigrants in their countries. Fifthly, the deepening imbalance of wealth and growth between European and Third World countries triggered the push and pull factors to stimulate migratory flows. As presented in this scheme, uneven development has been the root cause of both the push factors of lesser developed countries and the pulling factors of developed ones. The link between migration and uneven development is, therefore, the process of exploitation of labour migrants to boost European powers' economic growth.

In the end, we would like to assert that only an inclusive reorganisation of powers can lead to the elimination of discrepancies between member states when it comes to how they approach migration. Although the current tendencies showcase that the overarching umbrella of EU developmental pathways can expand towards this sectorial matter as a way to reduce systemic risks and threats felt across the community from mismanagement of these flows, we are still sceptical about resetting the beneficial mindset of the EU while approaching immigrants. We recommend that not only *international* or *intergovernmental* organisations regulate the immigrants' rights, working conditions, and immigration policies, but global public opinion should be aware of the postcolonial approach to international migration to ask for real humanitarian implementations toward immigrants. Only this after the EU can claim that they are *united in diversity* rather than they are *united in exploitation*. In addition, while neo-orientalist perspectives are still persistent, an increased emphasis should be put on the understanding that migration can represent a double-edged sword (be it good or bad for a society per se) only through the way it is handled. In light of these ideas, future research is encouraged to focus on policy recommendations to eradicate the exploitative postcolonial approaches of Europe to international migration.

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***Accessibility implementation  
in public cultural institutions:  
an opportunity or a legally  
imposed necessity?***

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## ***Abstract***

This article is the result of research on the accessibility of cultural institutions in the Małopolska Region in Poland. The article aims to determine how the legal system solutions introduced in Poland translate into practical management activities within cultural institutions. The researchers have carried out an analysis of the existing data, focus group interviews, and questionnaires among cultural institutions in Małopolska. Although the analysed case is Polish, its purpose is to present the examples of implementing accessibility that may inspire other cultural institutions, including those based abroad.

The text addresses the impact of legislation on the implementation of accessibility, the role of organisers and coordinators of accessibility, and the issue of managing the entire process. It analyses the barriers that organisations face and the factors that influence accessibility. One of the most important conclusions of the research is that – besides financial aspects – sensitivity, openness, and networking are crucial. The article concludes with concrete recommendations aimed at improving the effectiveness of actions taken in this area.

**Keywords:** accessibility policy, public cultural institutions, Małopolska Region

## ***Introduction***

In Poland, over the past few years, authorities introduced legal, organisational, and financial changes to support the implementation of accessibility. These changes have affected the functioning of many public entities, including state, and local government cultural institutions. The institutions' task was to diagnose the level of architectural, digital, but also communication and information accessibility, and then implement the statutory requirements. However, there was no knowledge regarding the difficulties the institutions were facing when they wanted to implement the demanding provisions of the Act in a short period of time.

The implementation of accessibility is related to actions aimed at persons with special needs, which are understood very broadly, e.g., persons with various types of disabilities, of which – according to statistics – there are between four and seven million in Poland (i.e., 10–20%) but also, e.g., pregnant women, caregivers of small children (up to four years of age), persons with unusual growth, difficulties in communication, and limited mobility, or elderly people whose percentage is constantly growing (in 2020, 9.8 million Poles were 60 years or older, which constitutes 25% of society). Taking all these examples and statistics into account, it turns out that nearly half of Poles can be considered people with special needs. Therefore, not without reason, there is an urgent need to improve the quality of life of various target groups who – due to various motives – have limited access to public space. In recent years, we have observed changes aimed at adapting this space to the specific needs of the recipients by facilitating their access to, e.g., public services, public buildings, education, transport, health care, and culture. These changes have gained momentum with the

implementation of laws regulating accessibility in Poland. The direction of legal changes introduced in the country was undoubtedly influenced by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ratified by Poland on September 6, 2012 (UN, 2006)<sup>2</sup>. This contributed to the creation of the first government programme *Dostępność Plus* (“Accessibility Plus”) (*Dostępność Plus*, 2018). The Polish government announced this programme in 2018 and adopted it by a resolution of the Council of Ministers. It was prepared for the period 2018–2025, and among its assumptions were the preparation of currently applicable laws.

In 2019, the government introduced two accessibility laws:

- the Act of April 4, 2019, on the digital accessibility of websites and mobile applications of public entities (*Ustawa o Dostępności Cyfrowej*, 2019), which sets out all the requirements in this regard. According to the law, digital accessibility consists in ensuring the functionality, compatibility, perceivability, and understandability of websites and mobile applications of public entities;
- and
- the Act of July 19, 2019 on ensuring accessibility for persons with special needs (*Ustawa o Dostępności*, 2019), which is the first systemic solution under Polish law that obliges public entities to take a number of measures to improve the accessibility of their buildings, services or products. The indicated law came into force on September 20, 2019. During the almost two-year transition period, public entities were required to comply with the new regulations. Among other things, they had to appoint an accessibility coordinator by September 30, 2020, and prepare the first accessibility report by March 31, 2021 (Article 11 of the Act). The key date, however, was September 6, 2021, after which alternative access must be treated as an emergency situation, i.e., public entities must comply with the requirements of the Act and provide basic architectural, digital, and ICT accessibility. Furthermore, since September 6, persons with special needs have the possibility to file a complaint about the lack of accessibility.

In addition to legal solutions aimed at improving accessibility, authorities have also introduced financial support instruments to support implementation of the solutions. Government established the Accessibility Fund based on Article 35 of the Act on Ensuring Accessibility to Persons with Special Needs. It is a state purpose fund, at the disposal of the minister responsible for regional development. In practice, the funds are earmarked for tasks aimed at supporting activities to provide or improve accessibility for people with special needs, mainly in public buildings and multi-family housing. Simplified, the Accessibility Fund is money earmarked for preferential loans, with the possibility of redemption of up to 40% of its value – if certain conditions are met. The Fund’s resources come, among others, from EU funds, grants from the state budget and from the Solidarity Fund for the Support of Persons with Disabilities (Sobolewska & Wilk, 2021). By the end of 2020, authorities granted 30 loans for a total of PLN 10.8 million. In 2021, 30 million PLN is planned for this purpose. Along with the implementation of accessibility legislation in Poland, on February 16, 2021, Council

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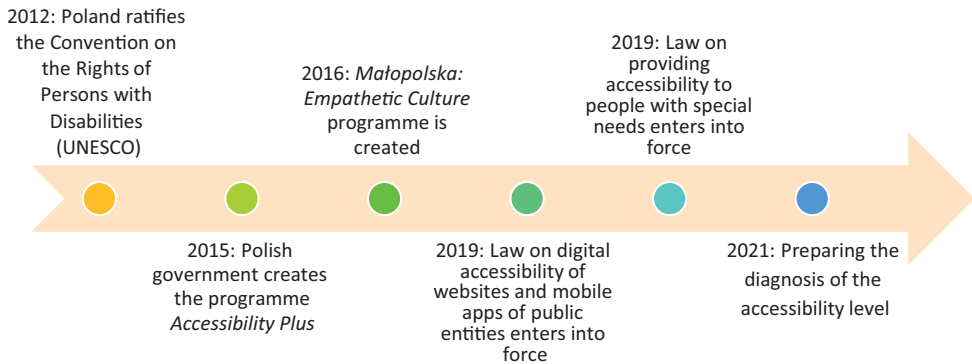
<sup>2</sup> The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities came into force on May 3, 2008.

of Ministers adopted the resolution on the “Strategy for Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030” (*Strategia*, 2021). This strategy contains directions for the development of social policy towards people with disabilities. Various areas are included in the strategy, including participation in cultural life and increasing accessibility of public cultural institutions. As Monika Dubiel writes (2020, p. 142): “The progress made in legislation is not yet on a par with the academic debate on accessibility. Given the fact that cultural accessibility in Poland is a relatively recent phenomenon, it still lacks profound investigation”. Therefore, the ambition of the research was to fill this research gap.

Before the law on ensuring accessibility for people with special needs came into force in the region that is the area of our research, already in 2016, there was the project “Małopolska: Empathetic Culture” (*Małopolska. Kultura Wrażliwa*, n.d.). It is the result of cooperation between the Culture Institution of the Małopolska Region and the Marshal’s Office of the Małopolska Region. This is the first systemic project in Poland implemented on a voivodeship scale, the main goal of which is to adapt the offer and space of cultural institutions to the needs of every person, including those with special needs, interested in active participation in cultural life. The project includes a number of activities aimed at increasing the accessibility of cultural institutions organised by the Małopolska Region. One of them was to create accessibility guidelines: specific instructions necessary to make an institution accessible. Organisations that meet the conditions and certain recommendations can obtain an accessibility certificate, which communicates to the recipient that the institution is prepared for their presence. Moreover, “Małopolska: Empathetic Culture” provides support and consultation, thanks to which people with disabilities and specialists in the field can check and evaluate newly introduced solutions and institutions can exchange their experiences (*Małopolska. Kultura Wrażliwa*, n.d.).

Moreover, the project offers educational activities. Workshops, webinars, staff training, articles discussing topics ranging from the technical aspects of ordering audio description and captioning to introductory information on Deaf culture. Through regular meetings of the project’s accessibility coordinators, institutions establish meaningful support networks. Employees gain a field to exchange information and experience, which is extremely helpful in building open organisations. Furthermore, the ideological aspect of the project is key as by emphasising the importance of human subjectivity, sensitivity to human needs, and education, it builds social awareness and shows the process of making cultural institutions accessible. Following the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, Magdalena Szpunar emphasises the importance of sensitivity in management. Szpunar points to the “chronic need to shape compassionate imagination, which makes it possible to understand the other person’s perspective” (Szpunar, 2018, p. 21).

All the activities of the project are addressed to the organisations which the voivodship organises. This is an interesting example of how accessibility can be effectively ensured at the regional level. In this case, decentralisation allows for the better identification of needs, faster contact between organisations, and regular meetings but also for increasing the sense of responsibility and empowerment.



**Figure 1.** Accessibility implementation process in Poland

### *Literature review*

The first step toward accessibility is the development of public policies and legislation that are consistent with international guidelines. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006 (UN, 2006) takes precedence over existing legislation in Poland. Although mainly concerning people with disabilities (and not a broadly understood group of people with special needs referred to in the Polish Act), the Convention is the basis for building a balanced accessibility policy. The Convention refers to the social model of disability that results from environmental conditions and services (transport, education, culture, etc.) that are inadequately adjusted to the needs of persons with disabilities. The social model emphasises the importance of environmental barriers (i.e., disability is the result of interaction with the environment) rather than on the impairment itself, which may cause incapacity or dependence. In the social model, the focus is on the potential of the person despite the barriers and the disability is understood as a social problem rather than an individual problem (of the person or the family). Therefore, in the social model, it is crucial to focus on the adaptation of the environment and on the removal of architectural, communication, and digital barriers (Goering, 2015; Retief & Letšosa, n.d.; Shakespeare, 2010). This understanding of accessibility undoubtedly influences the development of public policies designed to ensure that a person with special needs has access to independent living on an equal basis with others in the first place.

Legislation is the first step toward accessibility and equality. In Poland, public institutions are required to consider the special needs of their audiences in the planning and operation of their activities, and to remove and prevent barriers to their use. A special type of public sector organisation are cultural institutions, whose organiser (founding unit) may be entities of national (e.g., the minister of culture or the head of the central office), regional (voivodeships), and local levels (powiats or municipalities). Cultural institutions as public entities have statutory and, earlier, constitutional obligation to conduct cultural activity. Moreover, cultural activities at the level of local government (voivodeships, powiats, municipalities) are tasks in the field of culture,

which belong to what is called own tasks (according to Article 9 paragraph 2 of the Act of October 25, 1991, on organising and conducting cultural activity). This means that specific entities are obliged to carry out such activities for their residents. They may not resign from such activity and must provide it with appropriate conditions for functioning, including financial conditions (Article 12 of the Act of October 25, 1991). Moreover, a feature of cultural institutions stemming from the essence of cultural activity is the realisation of public objectives set by law and specified by the organiser in the statute. Particularly in the sphere of culture, the constitutional principle of ensuring equal access to cultural goods is of significance (Mituś, 2019). This principle is closely related to the constitutional guarantee of non-discrimination regulated in Article 32 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, which states that we are all equal before the law and no one can be discriminated against in social, cultural, political, and economic life for any reason (Pluszyńska, 2015).

“Access is almost always a precursor to participation” (Laaksonen, 2010, p. 7). Moreover, access is a fundamental condition for participation in the cultural life of societies whose members have full rights and responsibilities. “Access to cultural services and expressions has slowly converted into the rationale of most cultural policies” (Laaksonen, 2010, p. 17). Scholars understand cultural policy as

*a purposeful, systematic interference in the sphere of culture [...] conducted in order to achieve four basic objectives: maintaining the cultural identity of the nation; ensuring equal access to culture; promoting creativity and high quality of cultural goods and services; diversifying the cultural offer in such a way that each social group can find something worthwhile (Ilczuk, 2002, p. 12).*

“In today’s cultural policy planning it is easy to establish the objective of making culture as accessible as possible” (Laaksonen, 2010, p. 18). As evidenced by the attempt to develop in Poland a model for ensuring accessibility of the offer and resources of cultural institutions for people with special needs, including ones with disabilities (*Model of ensuring accessibility of cultural institutions*, 2021). “However, it is harder to pin down exactly what that access entails” (Laaksonen, 2010, p. 18).

The introduction of legal regulations in Poland guaranteeing accessibility in terms of: architectural (buildings), digital (websites and applications), as well as information and communication accessibility (related to obtaining information about the activities of the institution and the possibility of taking part in them) by public entities, including cultural institutions, was certainly necessary. However, allow us to emphasise that while the conceptual and legal foundations put in place at the national level to promote and protect certain values are important, the real test comes in the real actions, when people must face several difficulties. Far from the framework of international guidelines and national policies, the legislator shifted responsibility for implementing accessibility to the local and regional environment. This is a result of the process of decentralisation, which has been taking place in Poland since 1989. Decentralisation which, especially in cultural activities, is now heavily criticised. As Katarzyna Kopeć argues, in Poland, a new process of recentralisation of cultural policy has taken place since 2015:

*The system of cultural policy management decentralized after 1989 has still remained centralized in its nature. The reason for ‘more formal than substantial’ decentralization lies (at least partly) in the way administrative reforms shifted the responsibility for culture to regional and local governments (without adequate redistribution of financial resources) (Kopeć, 2020, p. 37).*

Meanwhile, the experience of other countries such as Finland and Sweden (Renko et al., 2021) or France and Italy (Santagati et al., 2020) indicate that decentralisation contributes to more effective implementation of cultural policies that are more responsive to the audience’s needs. Thus, we should ask how local and regional institutions have coped with the responsibility of implementing accessibility.

### ***Material and methods***

The subject of the study was digital, architectural, information, and communication accessibility in public cultural institutions in Poland, located in the territory of Małopolska. Polish institutions are an interesting subject of analysis because they are currently in the process of adapting to the recently introduced legal regulations on accessibility for people with special needs. The Małopolska Region has been chosen as a research area because it is characterised by a high density and diversity of cultural institutions on its territory, and it also stands out in terms of its activities for accessibility among others. In 2016, the Małopolska Regional Government initiated the project “Małopolska: Empathetic Culture”. It was the first systemic project implemented across the region with main objective to adapt the offer and space of cultural institutions to the needs of each person, including those with special needs, interested in active participation in cultural life (*Małopolska. Kultura Wrażliwa*, n.d.).

The surveyed organisations are institutions of national, regional, and local level, co-developed by several organisers. They also differ in organisational form, including exhibition institutions, libraries, cultural centres, theaters, opera houses, concert halls, orchestras, and other institutions.

The aim of the article is to determine how the legal system solutions introduced in Poland translate into practical management activities within cultural institutions. We formulated the following research questions:

- Do the introduced legal regulations have a positive impact on the implementation of accessibility in public cultural institutions and why so?
- What practical measures are implemented in response to the legal regulations introduced? What are the implementation difficulties involved?

The research project was divided into the following phases:

- 1) Analysis of the data conducted to find information about the person who is the accessibility coordinator, the published self-assessment in the form of an accessibility declaration, and the report on the status of accessibility provided by the institution. By accessibility coordinator, we mean both individuals formally appointed to the position in accordance with the provisions of the Act and employees who informally serve in this capacity. Moreover, we also analysed 190



accessibility status reports on the websites of the institutions. The analysis allowed us to reach data created directly by the cultural institutions.

- 2) Focus group interviews in three groups, which included representatives of:
  - organisations assisting in the implementation of accessibility,
  - cultural institutions from Małopolska organised by municipalities or counties (powiats, local-level institutions)
  - Małopolska's cultural institutions organised by the Małopolska Region or the Ministry of Culture, National Heritage, and Sport (national and regional cultural institutions).

The purpose of the focus groups was to learn about issues and barriers related to the implementation of the Accessibility Act. By using this method, it was possible to delve deeper into particular issues. The conclusions from the focus groups formed the basis for the development of the survey questionnaire.

- 3) Conducting surveys, which aimed to identify problems and barriers related to the implementation of the Accessibility Act among cultural institutions in Małopolska. We sent questionnaires to 367 institutions, which were included in a database created previously by the researchers. We made efforts to include all public cultural institutions from the studied region. We received 83 correctly completed questionnaires (22% of the institutions surveyed). Among the questions in the survey were those regarding coordinators or persons responsible for implementing accessibility in cultural institutions, implementation of specific accessibility solutions, and external perspective and systemic solutions.

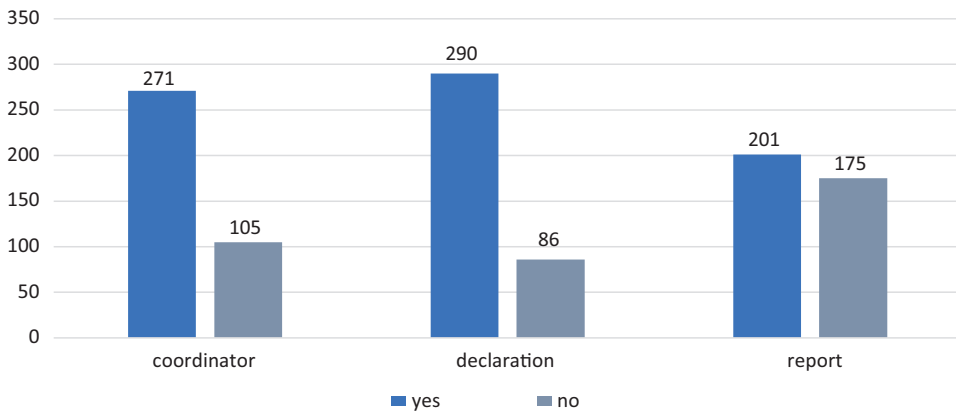
## ***Results and discussion***

### **The act's influence on accessibility implementation**

The year 2021 in Poland was a time when public entities, including cultural institutions, faced the problem of accessibility in real life and applied the provisions of two key laws from the point of view of implementing accessibility. One of the statutory requirements was to carry out an internal evaluation of actions taken so far, including drawing up and providing accessibility declarations but also completing (in accordance with a uniform form developed by the minister responsible for regional development) and publishing on the institution's website a report on the state of accessibility assurance. In the first stage of our research, we attempted to analyse the data available on the websites of the cultural institutions of Małopolska and their Public Information Bulletins (PIB). Among other things, we were interested in whether cultural institutions published a declaration and a report on the state of accessibility. We were also concerned with whether institutions designated an accessibility coordinator, i.e., a specific person to contact. Although this is not a statutory requirement, from a management perspective the appointment of at least one person responsible for coordinating accessibility activities is essential.

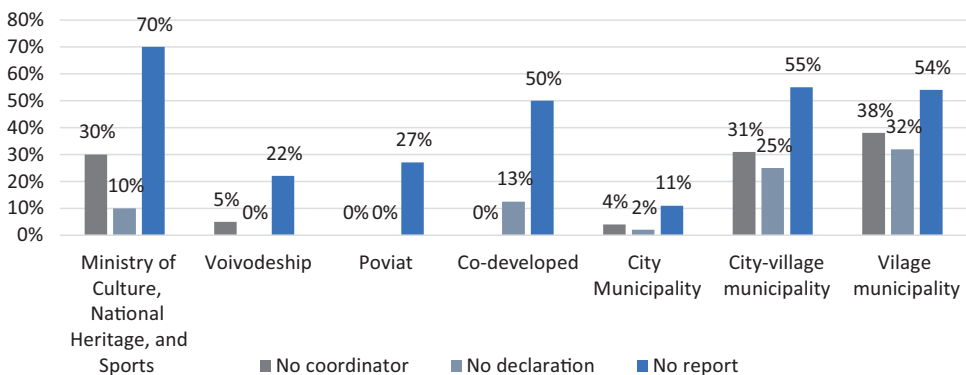
In total, we surveyed 376 cultural institutions. Our analysis (as of mid-April 2021) shows that 28% of entities did not provide the name of an accessibility coordinator on their website or in PIB, 23% of institutions did not publish an accessibility declaration,

and 46% of institutions did not publish an accessibility status report (Figure 2). Importantly, 17% of the institutions did not do any of these things, i.e., did not appoint any coordinator or publish a declaration or a report. Notably, the cultural institutions that did not appoint a coordinator (105 out of 376 such institutions) also did not publish an accessibility declaration (71%) or a report on the state of accessibility (71%). Therefore, it seems that the appointment of a specific person to support the process of implementing accessibility in cultural institutions has a positive effect on the implementation of the statutory requirements.

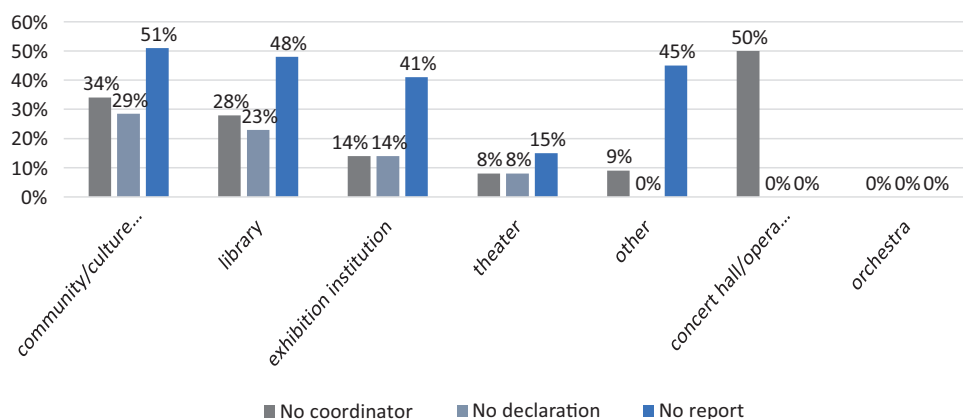


**Figure 2.** Have cultural institutions made available the personal data of accessibility coordinators, published accessibility declarations and reports? (n=376)

When we analyse the data in detail, the conclusion is that we may find the greatest number of deficiencies regarding the identification of persons who support the implementation of accessibility or the publication of declarations and reports among rural, urban-rural, and national institutions (Figure 3) as well as in cultural centres and libraries (Figure 4).



**Figure 3.** Deficiencies on the institution's website – according to the organisers (n=376)



**Figure 4.** Deficiencies on institution websites by organisational form (n=376)

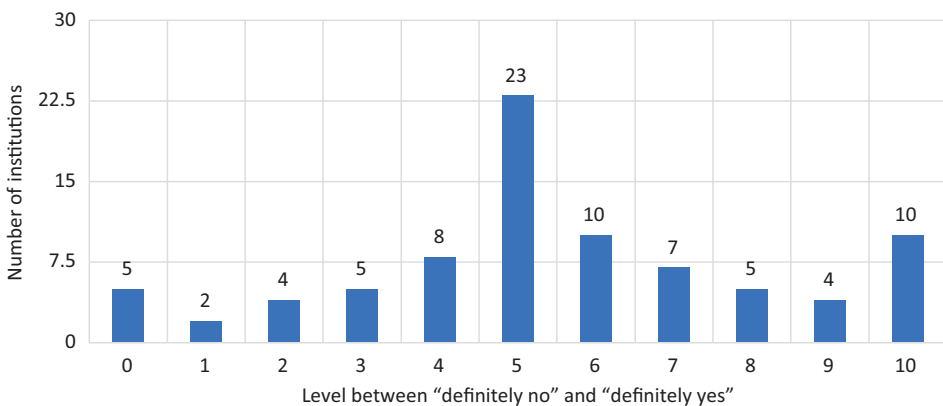
Our preliminary analysis shows that among the 376 cultural institutions surveyed, 17 had no websites at all, and 42 institutions did not maintain a Public Information Bulletin. This is important, as the lack of an institution's website or PIB not only makes it difficult but even impossible to contact the public and meet some of the statutory requirements related to accessibility.

Not much time has passed since the implementation of the Act, so we cannot analyse the actions taken by cultural institutions and assess the actual impact of the legal regulations on the process of accessibility implementation. Nevertheless, based on the declarative statements of employees in the cultural sector, we obtained knowledge on how the content and scope of the introduced regulations are evaluated by the environment and whether the legal regulations, according to the respondents, have a positive impact on the implementation of accessibility.

Participants of the focus group research noted both advantages and disadvantages of the regulations introduced. The interviewees emphasised that, on the one hand, the act was badly constructed but on the other hand, it was extremely necessary because it forced institutions to take certain actions. Thanks to the Act, the difficulties of people with special needs were recognised, which the interviewees often stressed as an added value of the introduced regulations. The focus group research shows that the introduction of the Act also forced the implementation of positive organisational and management changes. The interviewees highlighted that the Act is an indisputable document which is often a formal argument facilitating the implementation of accessibility. In the interview, focus research participants also accentuated the large role of the programme "Małopolska: Empathetic Culture", indicating that making changes in accessibility is a process that has been ongoing in some institutions for several years. As a result, regional cultural institutions in particular have not shown such great difficulties in implementing the provisions of the Act. For these institutions, the introduced regulations proved beneficial, as they indicated areas that could be further improved, which had not been thought of before. Moreover, in a way, the Act plays a control role of previous activities and motivation for further work.

On the other hand, the introduction of regulations raises major concerns. First, in the focus research interviewees underlined that the law is very demanding and difficult to implement in a short period of time and comes without support, which paradoxically may cause a slowdown of activities as institutions are limited to minimal effort. Interviewees further emphasised that the law is vague, inconsistent but also difficult to analyse and, therefore, prone to misinterpretation. Moreover, according to interviewees, the introduction of regulation has resulted in more bureaucracy and an emphasis on quantity rather than quality, which in the longer term may be “counterproductive” as public entities focus on implementing the law rather than accessibility. There is concern especially about the provisions on complaints and penalties for lack of accessibility, which according to interviewees are too radical. Sometimes, this leads to a lack of understanding of the subject among directors of cultural institutions responsible for the implementation of accessibility, who focus only on ensuring that there are no negative consequences of the actions taken.

Respondents who were asked to rate their attitude towards the Act on a scale from 0 to 10 (where 0 meant “negative assessment” and 10 meant “positive”) and to justify their assessment expressed similar opinions. Most institutions (49%) note both positive and negative effects of the Act (i.e., respondents marked answers on a scale between 4 and 6; see Figure 5). Respondents stressed that, on the one hand, the Act imposed organisational changes but on the other hand, it did not increase the awareness of employees, recipients, and the institutional environment about the real goals of supporting people with special needs.



**Figure 5.** Has the introduction of the Act had a positive impact on the implementation of accessibility? (n=83)

Among the respondents who indicated the positive effects of the introduced laws (31%) as many as 90% emphasised that the legal regulations first of all call for action. The respondents also claimed that thanks the law introduced clear guidelines and procedures (18%) and that the regulation itself caused people to pay attention to the issue of accessibility (13%).

Respondents cited the lack of support and increased frustration due to the lack of resources for the Act and the imposition of requirements with no concrete examples of solutions (7%) as the main negative effects of implementing the Act. According to respondents, the regulations are unclear, and the multitude of expected outcomes makes the Act “unimplementable”, especially for small institutions.

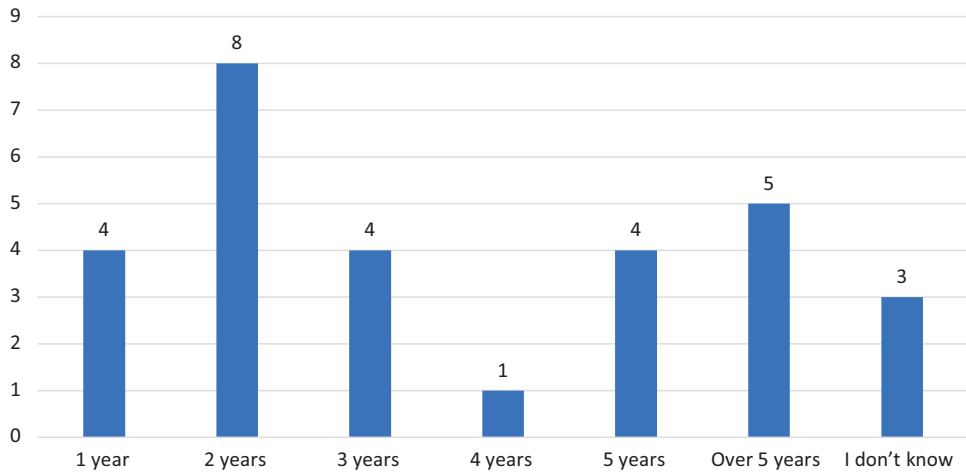
When looking for an answer to the question of whether the introduction of legal regulations has had a positive impact on the implementation of accessibility, we should note another aspect particularly often emphasised by the focus group participants. Although the law sets high requirements on which public entities focus, the sense of sensitivity to the needs of others is simultaneously lost in the entire process of implementing accessibility. According to some people, the introduction of any legal regulations will not lead to positive changes in accessibility if the implementation process omits the aspect of education, building sensitivity from an early age. At the same time, interviewees stressed that the introduction of regulation has unfortunately exposed the flaws in our legal culture, which implies that we need sanctions to implement accessibility. To a certain extent, the opinion of the interviewees was confirmed by the surveys we conducted. As one of the positive aspects of the implementation of the law, the respondents mentioned precisely the “top-down enforcement”, namely, the need to treat accessibility as an ongoing process that develops the potential of the facility (23%). Therefore, it seems that, at least for some public cultural institutions, imposing requirements and punishments is the only motivation to act. However, the question remains unanswered as to what quality of action we can talk about in this case and whether it goes hand in hand with sensitivity to the needs of others.

### ***Managing the accessibility implementation process***

Managing the implementation of accessibility requires planned and coordinated actions. Especially, when we consider that it was only the introduction of current legislation that initiated actions in this area. According to the act on ensuring accessibility for persons with special needs, the accessibility coordinator is responsible for developing an action plan to improve the provision of accessibility. However, the Act does not regulate the deadline by which the plan should be developed. Nor does the Act specify a time horizon for such a document. Our research showed that only 35% of the institutions surveyed have developed an action plan to improve accessibility for people with special needs. In the case of regional institutions, this was 45% of the surveyed organisations. Therefore, it seems that the implementation of accessibility in cultural institutions is rarely of a strategic nature with a set direction of actions, spread over time, and consistently implemented.

The planning process requires rationality and analytical skills. It is necessary to find a balance between the desired state of accessibility of a cultural institution and the resources currently possessed or possible to obtain in a changing environment. The implementation of the strategic plan is mainly aimed at achieving results in a certain time perspective. Therefore, we asked the respondents – who confirmed in an earlier

question that the cultural institution where they work has an action plan for improving accessibility (29 people) – what the projected time horizon for this plan is. The survey shows that cultural institutions that decided to target their accessibility activities most often formulated a plan for the next year or up to three years (55%) (Figure 6). A two- to three-year action plan is optimal, as it is relatively controllable from a management perspective and allows for implementation in a constantly changing external environment.

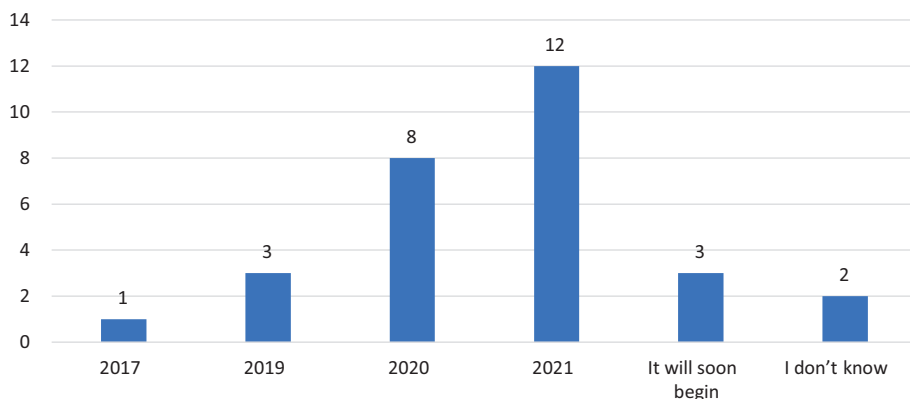


**Figure 6.** How long does the action plan to improve accessibility for people with special needs last? (n=29)

We also sought to clarify when the process of implementing the action plan created to improve accessibility provision began. Also, 29 respondents answered this question confirming that the institution actually has such a plan. Most cultural institutions (69%) began implementing the created plan in 2020 or 2021 (Figure 7). The indicated year does not seem to be insignificant, as it coincides with the deadline for the introduction of current regulations regarding the provision of accessibility for persons with special needs by public entities. Thus, we may conclude that the introduction of the current laws in this case became an impetus for change. However, we should clearly emphasise that we made no attempt to make a qualitative assessment of the changes introduced or planned. Therefore, it is difficult to assess whether the definition of legal requirements influences a real increase in the accessibility of public cultural institutions.

Respondents indicated that one of the most important resources needed to implement accessibility in an institution are financial resources. Noteworthy, accessibility activities are not a mandatory item included in the budgets of public cultural institutions. And because of this voluntariness, we were interested in whether implementing accessibility is part of the overall financial strategy of public cultural institutions? Therefore, we asked respondents whether the organisation has a dedicated budget for implementing accessibility, and if so, what are the amounts involved?

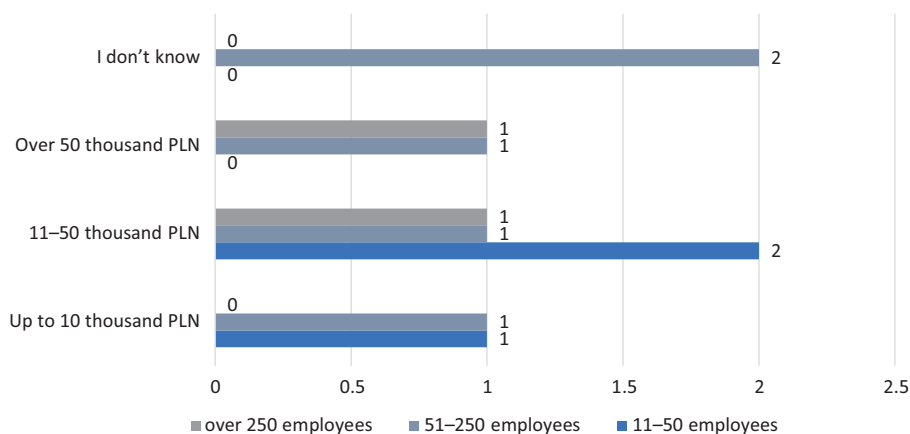




**Figure 7.** When did the process of implementing an action plan to improve accessibility for people with special needs begin? (n=29)

The survey showed that only 10% of the surveyed cultural institutions had a specific budget for implementing accessibility, half of which were regional institutions. However, this budget usually oscillated around 11–50 thousand PLN (40%), i.e., 2.5–11 thousand EUR. Noteworthy, the amount of the budget designated for the implementation of accessibility does not depend on the size of the institution and the number of employees (Figure 8). However, it seems that taking into account the needs of the institutions, especially those related to eliminating architectural barriers (which, as indicated in the summary of the accessibility reports, are numerous), the level of budgets allocated for accessibility is low.

We are puzzled that although financial resources are considered by the respondents to be crucial in achieving accessibility goals, this area of activity was not included in the budget plans of the entire institution of culture. Future research should ask about the reasons for this state of affairs.

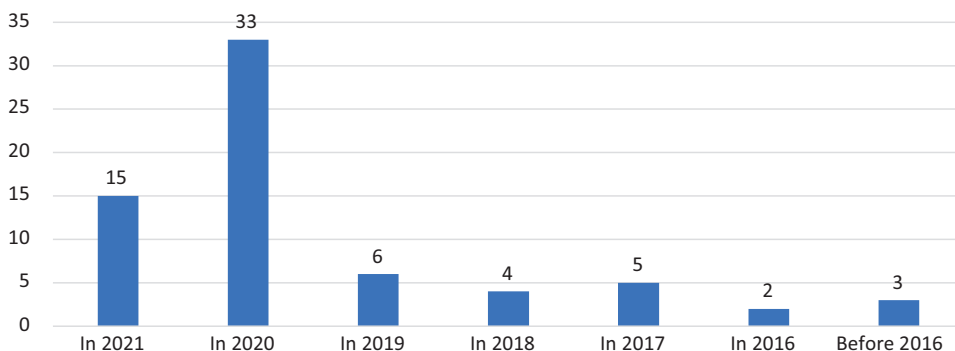


**Figure 8.** What is the amount of money that the cultural institution allocates to accessibility implementation on annual basis? (n=10)

Implementing accessibility is always about people, so it is important to involve cultural staff and people with special needs in the whole process. Formally, the director of a cultural institution is responsible for implementing the Act's provisions related to accessibility. However, especially in larger institutions with several dozen employees, it is necessary to delegate tasks in order to implement them efficiently and effectively. As the results of the survey indicate, 70 of the 83 surveyed institutions (84%) named a person responsible for implementing accessibility. Only six respondents became full-time accessibility coordinators; the rest had to share these tasks with other ongoing responsibilities. Among these, respondents most often cited activities related to managing the institution or working in the education department. In the case of regional institutions, on the other hand, this was the case for all surveyed organisations but only one of them employed a full-time coordinator.

In turn, as indicated by focus group participants, the addition of accessibility-related duties to the existing scope of responsibilities in some cases negatively affected the quality of work. Respondents emphasised that they lack the time to perform all their duties, so they work overtime. Above all, there is no time to plan activities and reflect on what is worth implementing in terms of accessibility. This results in duties being carried out without any reflection on their meaning, which in the long run may even contribute to professional burnout.

If we take a closer look at accessibility coordinators, we see that it is a relatively new position in the surveyed institutions (Figure 9). The vast majority of surveyed institutions (71%) appointed a person responsible for implementing accessibility in 2020 or 2021, so this was a direct result of the law coming into force. The remaining institutions created the coordinator position in 2019 or earlier. Two respondents did not answer this question. The point of reference was 2016, the beginning of the project "Małopolska: Empathetic Culture". The research shows that only three institutions created the position of accessibility coordinator before 2016. In summary, before the law came into force, the person responsible for implementing accessibility was appointed in 21% of all cultural institutions, while in the case of regional institutions this percentage was as high as 82%.



**Figure 9.** The year when the entity appointed the person responsible for implementing accessibility (n=68)

In our research, we wanted to find out whether the implementation of accessibility in public cultural institutions is participatory in nature. First of all, we checked whether the implementation of accessibility involves a team of employees or whether this task rests in the hands of one person. The experience of other organisations shows that it is good when the implementation of accessibility is a team effort:

*It is also vital to establish a team responsible for the inclusion of disabled individuals, and to appoint an ambassador responsible for coordination. [...] experience shows that such a team works best if they have been appropriately trained and if the team's regular meetings are attended by an external expert who provides advice and inspiration (Dąbrowski, 2019, p. 78).*

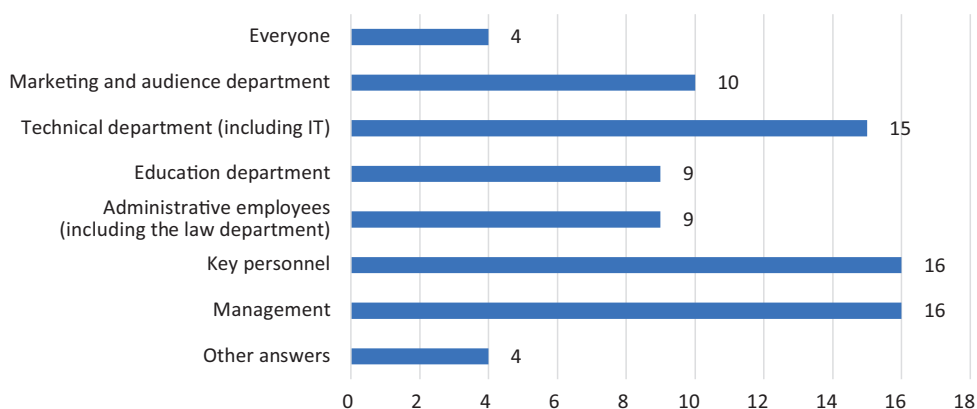
The survey found that only 7% of institutions had made the decision to establish a dedicated accessibility team.

Aware that it is not possible or very difficult to form a team, especially in smaller institutions, we wanted to ascertain whether other staff members are involved in implementing accessibility besides the accessibility coordinator himself or one person designated to do so. As many as 77 respondents answered this question, of which 44 (57%) said that more than one person was involved in implementing accessibility.

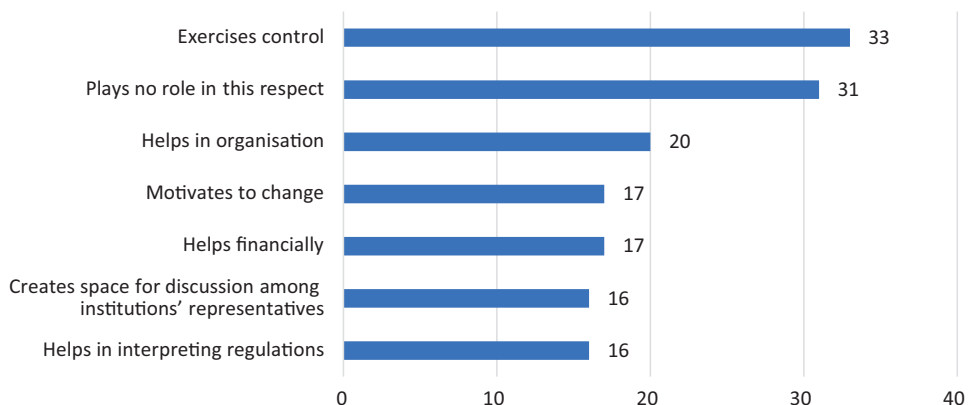
Thus, the research shows that 60% of the cultural institutions surveyed treat the implementation of accessibility as a team effort and requiring the involvement of multiple staff members. In the next question, we tried to clarify who exactly is involved in implementing accessibility. This question was open-ended and received answers from 50 respondents. All the answers confirmed that the institution had an accessibility team or involved more than one person in the entire process. The survey showed that people involved in the process – in addition to the coordinator himself – most often are substantive staff, management, and the technical department, including people responsible for maintaining the website of the cultural institution (Figure 10). It is interesting to note that the respondents emphasised the significant role of cultural institutions' directors, who were largely responsible for implementing accessibility. Their openness to and understanding of the subject was an additional support but also a motivator for the activities.

We should note that four respondents admitted all employees are involved in implementing accessibility. These institutions included two libraries with up to 10 employees, a culture centre with 11–50 employees, and an exhibition institution with over 250 employees. It is worth mentioning that while cultural institutions are willing to involve many employees in the accessibility implementation process, they are reluctant to work with volunteers in this regard. Only 16% of institutions admitted that they undertake such joint activities.

Continuing the theme of participatory approach in the implementation of accessibility, we also tried to find out whether cultural institutions cooperate with the external environment in this area. The survey found that 42% of the surveyed organisations are constantly collaborating with some group of people and/or an NGO for people with special needs. This result is not very optimistic because it means that a large part of cultural institutions (58%) implement accessibility without preparation for or survey of the local environment needs.



**Figure 10.** Who else is involved in implementing accessibility besides the coordinator? (n=50)



**Figure 11.** What role does the cultural institution organiser currently play in implementing accessibility? (n=83)

The above statement was reinforced by further results of our analysis. In the next question, we asked the respondents whether the cultural institutions in which they work conduct research on the specific needs of their audiences and/or employees. Only 8% of the respondents answered this question in the affirmative (seven institutions, of which three were organised by the Małopolska Region). The respondents indicated that they mainly researched audience satisfaction, offer attractiveness, and architectural or programme accessibility. The respondents conducted mainly surveys (four cultural institutions) but also interviews and focus group studies. The analysis showed that conducting consultations and surveys by cultural institutions was neither practiced nor within the responsibilities of those responsible for implementing accessibility. We should consider this fact worrying, as it may mean that public cultural institutions are focused solely on implementing the provisions of the Act without

additional reflection. Therefore, the organisation's actions may not meet the expectations of people with special needs, and thus may be ineffective.

Under the current law, state and local government cultural institutions are required to provide accessibility. We were interested in whether the organisers of these institutions have any special role in the process of implementing accessibility. This question allowed multiple choice and received answers from all respondents (Figure 11). The survey shows that according to the respondents, the organiser mainly exercises control (40%) or has no role in this regard (37%). Moreover, some of the respondents said that the organiser helps organisationally (24%) and financially (20%), but also motivates to change (20%), helps in the interpretation of regulations (19%), and creates space for discussion among different institutions' representatives (19%). Notably, 11% of the respondents claim that the organiser only exercises control. We emphasise this because such an approach is not conducive to the implementation of accessibility in the long run and creates fear of negative consequences.

## *Conclusion*

The Lesser Poland Voivodeship, where we conducted the study, stands out from other Polish regions in terms of its accessibility activities. The project "Małopolska: Empathetic Culture" aimed at regional cultural institutions meant that some institutions in the Lesser Poland region have, in a sense, become familiar with the topic of accessibility and have been acquiring knowledge and experience in this area for several years. The activities undertaken by the region's cultural institutions were often voluntary in nature and were not bound by formal requirements. In implementing accessibility, cultural institutions could count on the support of the Małopolska Institute of Culture, which undertook advisory and training activities. Moreover, the project involved building a network of cooperation and creating a database of good practices. Our study revealed that in many aspects, the region's cultural institutions were at a much more advanced stage of accessibility implementation than institutions run by other organisers.

In the case of municipal, county but also ministerial institutions, only the introduction of legal regulations at the national level gave the impetus for the implementation of accessibility. Our research shows that institutions face various difficulties in setting down legal requirements. One of the biggest obstacles is the lack of finances, both for the introduction of solutions such as architectural or technological but also for training. Moreover, insufficient funds cause staffing difficulties, hence tasks related to the implementation of accessibility are delegated to existing employees as extra work. Sometimes, these employees do not have the experience and sufficient qualifications to perform these tasks. They also do not have sufficient knowledge about the specific needs of the recipients. Both the interviewees and the respondents indicated that although the law defines the actions that should be taken, there is no information on how the actions should be performed. Furthermore, there is no specialised body to which people with special needs can turn for help if they have doubts about accessibility. All this makes the staff responsible for implementing accessibility feel overly stressed with their new

responsibilities. The lack of time proved another barrier, especially the too short a period of time between the Act's entry into force and its implementation.

The legal regulations that have been introduced have undoubtedly had a positive effect on the implementation of accessibility in that this area has been noticed and organisational and management actions have been taken by the institutions to ensure that at least the minimum statutory requirements are implemented. However, the consequence of the imposed requirements is that accessibility is sometimes treated as just another task to be performed and management and organisational actions are limited to "ticking off" the requirements of the Act to avoid penalties. The launched actions often lack sensitivity to the specific needs of their recipients. Therefore, the implementation of accessibility should not be limited to the introduction of legal regulations. According to the respondents, education should be particularly important in this area. This includes both systemic education on the subject: from preschool and early school education to the training of specialists at universities and on supplementary courses. Moreover, the matter requires raising awareness regarding the presence of people with special needs in cultural institutions with the same – equal – rights to other recipients.

## *Discussion*

Legislation is the first step toward justice and equality but it is still not enough (Isaac et al., 2010). As Yeo indicates, most policies targeting people with special needs revolve around disability prevention, rehabilitation, and individual support, less often do these actions concern anti-discrimination and rights-based legislation (Yeo, 2001). "The real issue behind exclusion is the insensitive attitude of society. Even a stringent law can do very little unless there is a change in the mindset of people and a willingness to accept and respect (disabled) people" (Isaac et al., 2010, pp. 629–630). The research we conducted provides evidence that accessibility in the cultural sector requires a legal framework that provides a foundation, along with an environment and a sense of social responsibility for the society as a whole.

Disability-related cultural public policy currently emphasises reducing the number of people experiencing exclusion in accessing culture. "In disability-related social policy 'access' and 'participation' have become synonyms for inclusion" (Wilson, 2006, p. 24). Bringing down the barriers of accessibility to culture can only be done by a joint and integrated effort of government, local governments, NGOs, public institutions, and all those who work on behalf of people with special needs. We should not treat these actions as philanthropy but as social responsibility. Moreover, the process of implementation of accessibility requires time and support (Dąbrowski, 2019, p. 78). Although the respondents indicated that financial support was particularly important, the experience of the project "Małopolska: Empathetic Culture" shows that what is of particular importance is substantive support, which helps to understand and gain awareness regarding the needs of people with disabilities.

The decentralisation policy of the state makes local and regional institutions responsible for the implementation of accessibility. Legal instruments introduced at the national level play a leading role but the real problem is how to transform these



instruments into effective actions. Cultural institutions must react quickly to the various challenges of implementing accessibility. Considering the legal guidelines, they must take care of physical access and enable cultural participation. Cultural policy on the local/regional level must have a strong ethical dimension. This dimension plays a key role in strengthening social cohesion, participation, democracy, equality, and a sense of belonging to the community (Laaksonen, 2010).

In the process of implementing accessibility, the institutions that play a special role are culture and, indirectly, public cultural institutions responsible for running cultural activities. "Culture has a strong impact on the construction of social cohesion and how people relate to each other in a society or in a community" (Laaksonen, 2010, p. 20). Participation in cultural life is closely linked to the ability of citizens to develop a sense of responsibility in areas such as respect for others, non-discrimination, equality, social justice, protection of diversity and heritage, and curiosity about other cultures.

### ***Recommendations***

Implementation of accessibility at the national, regional, or local level is a process that requires control in order to adapt to changes in the environment and correct errors. Our research allowed us to formulate several recommendations aimed at improving the effectiveness of actions taken so far in this area. Although the recommendations result directly from the research conducted in Poland, they may become an inspiration for those who develop cultural policy in the field of accessibility in other countries:

- Financial accessibility support system.

Creation of special grant systems aimed at ensuring accessibility (especially in the architectural dimension). Increasing targeted subsidies for institutions for activities related to accessibility. Introducing the requirement to allocate part of the institution's budget exclusively to activities related to accessibility (this also applies to grant programmes).

- Creating a support system – especially at the regional level – for the interpretation of current legislation.

Cultural institutions, especially those based in rural municipalities, have insufficient resources for legal support. The introduced provisions of the law have proved difficult to interpret and, consequently, problematic to implement.

- Evaluating actions taken by institutions, while considering qualitative changes and more.

Monitoring the accessibility measures taken by cultural institutions is limited to a quantitative check of the measures taken or facilities implemented. There is no assessment as to whether the introduced changes contribute to increased accessibility and meet the needs of the audience.

- Building a network of those responsible for implementing accessibility in cultural institutions, experts, and NGOs working for people with special needs.

The implementation of accessibility should be participatory. A full understanding of the specific needs of audiences is not possible without being reflected in the quality of the relationships built with the environment of public cultural institutions.

- Organising training sessions on accessibility addressed to employees of cultural institutions.

Implementing accessibility requires cultural institutions to adapt to changing conditions and cultural staff to continually improve themselves, thus acquiring new skills. This requires ongoing staff training, teamwork, and encouragement to find new ways to increase the level of accessibility.

- Developing a catalogue of good practices (database) on accessibility.

Implementing accessibility requires clear goals and objectives. Creating a catalogue of good practices to build on generates enthusiasm and motivation.

- Conducting educational activities (already in early childhood) to raise awareness of the needs of others.

Building sensitivity to the needs of others are the pillars of implementing accessibility. These activities should, therefore, take place at an early stage of education, because only an empathetic society can create an environment without exclusion.

- Developing volunteerism – both among and for people with special needs.

Volunteering develops empathy and sensitivity, helps establish valuable relationships, and facilitates the acquisition or development of skills. The development of volunteering corresponds to the development of social competencies, which are crucial for the implementation of accessibility.

In conclusion, we wish to add one more recommendation of a research nature. The aim of this article was to determine how the legal solutions introduced in Poland translate into practical management activities within cultural institutions, both at the regional and local levels. In order to answer the question whether the implemented measures were effective, we should analyse another group of stakeholders in this process, namely, the recipients of the institutions' activities, i.e., people with special needs. For only by responding to the real needs of the public of cultural institutions will we be able to prove the effectiveness of these institutions' accessibility.

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**Legal acts**

- Uchwała nr 27 Rady Ministrów z dnia 16 lutego 2021 r. w sprawie przyjęcia dokumentu Strategia na rzecz Osób z Niepełnosprawnościami 2021–2030. (Monitor Polski Dziennik Urzędowy Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej). <http://www.niepelnosprawni.gov.pl/download/Uchwała-Nr-27-Rady-Ministrow-w-sprawie-przyjecia-Strategii-1614284683.pdf>
- Ustawa z dnia 4 kwietnia 2019 r. o dostępności cyfrowej stron internetowych i aplikacji mobilnych podmiotów publicznych (Dz.U. 2019 poz. 848).
- Ustawa z dnia 19 lipca 2019 r. o zapewnianiu dostępności osobom ze szczególnymi potrzebami (Dz.U. 2019 poz. 1696).
- Ustawa z dnia 25 października 1991 roku o organizowaniu i prowadzeniu działalności kulturalnej (Dz. U. 1991 Nr 13, poz. 123, z późn. zm.).

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## ***The everyday lives of street homeless people in the context of welfare initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic***

### ***Abstract***

The article discusses the objectives and results of research seeking a better understanding of the everyday lives of street homeless people during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the context of welfare initiatives to support such individuals. The research, featuring interviews, took place in Kraków (Poland) between December 2020 and March 2021. Street homeless people were asked about changes in their everyday lives and whether they used any forms of support. To determine the response of institutions and state authorities to the situation of homeless people during the pandemic, interviews were held with experts and an analysis of the contents of official documents and press publications online was carried out. The analysis of materials was based on the reduction, representation and formatting of data. The results of the research provided an insight into participants' everyday lives and shed light on selected aspects of the operation of the welfare system during the pandemic. It was determined that, while welfare initiatives at a local level were innovative and actively reached those in need, the effectiveness of the system was limited. During the pandemic, problems evident beforehand – street homeless people's lack of trust in the institutional welfare system, objectification and pretence of state action, inadequacies in intersectoral and interministerial cooperation – became particularly visible and acute.

**Keywords:** homelessness, everyday life, COVID-19, social service and policy

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## *Introduction*

The rapid spread of the infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus led to a global epidemiological crisis at the beginning of 2020, the widespread effects of which were felt by everybody to some extent. Communities experiencing exclusion are particularly susceptible to crises (cf. Banerjee & Bhattacharya, 2021), lacking the essential resources, influence, and social support to protect themselves. One such community is people in homelessness, those living in temporary housing (shelter homeless) and those occupying para-accommodation spaces (street homeless) (Jencks, 1994). During the nationwide quarantine, homeless people on deserted city streets began to attract the attention of the infrequent passers-by, media, politicians, and researchers. This last group took the opportunity to launch various studies and an in-depth analysis. Areas that were explored were the susceptibility of homeless people to infection (e.g., Lewer et al., 2020), the threats associated with spreading of the virus in night shelters (e.g., Baggett et al., 2020), homeless people's own experiences of the introduction of sanitary restrictions (e.g., Adams, 2021), as well as the forms and effects of assistance, intervention, and control initiatives (e.g., Wasilewska-Ostrowska, 2020), whose objective was not necessarily to improve the situation of homeless people (e.g., Wang et al., 2020).

The objective of the article is to discuss the results of research seeking to provide a better understanding of the everyday lives of street homeless people during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the context of welfare initiatives to support these individuals. The research was exploratory in nature, conducted in Kraków (Poland) between December 2020 and March 2021 using qualitative methods. It sought to answer the following questions: had the everyday lives of street homeless people changed, and how? Had these individuals benefited from support and in what forms? What was the response of the welfare system to the situation of homeless people during the pandemic? On the one hand, the perspective of everyday life adopted for the study demonstrated the research participants' situation and personal experiences in the pandemic in the context of the welfare initiatives taking place at the time. It was assumed that this kind of dynamic approach to human actions constitutes the foundation of monitoring the solutions implemented and evaluation of their effects (e.g., Lades et al., 2018). On the other hand, the findings from the research, therefore, contributed to critical analysis and consideration of selected regulations and initiatives of the state authorities introduced at this time. They directly impact the functioning and effectiveness of the welfare system for homeless people, and consequently also its beneficiaries' lives.

The first part of the article discusses statutory measures for homeless people in Poland and cites the results of an audit on their implementation. It also highlights the situation of homeless people in the social welfare system in the context of their everyday lives. The second part presents the objectives and results of my own research. Firstly, based on the research results, it describes the (in)variability of homeless people's daily routines during the pandemic. An important context for these reflections was provided by solutions and good practices in support for homeless people in the city where the research was conducted. Emphasis was placed on changes in the activity



of welfare institutions as a result of specially introduced laws, government guidelines, and recommendations. Secondly, the analysis examines deficiencies in the actions of state authorities and their consequences from the perspective of the welfare system and its beneficiaries. The stability and changes of practices of everyday life revealed the connections between the worsening situation of homeless people – as shown by media reports and statements of aid organisation representatives – and the support initiatives taken by the government. Taking the specific nature of these actions into account, the mechanisms that can lead to reproduction of homeless people's marginal position were determined and described (e.g., creating new, negative stereotypes and sustaining old ones, feigning support actions, omitting in distribution of help, weakening genuine support networks, objectifying the aid process, and removing the voice and agency of welfare services and recipients of assistance). I decided that their identification needed further comment, as they reveal the complex problem of marginalisation of homeless people's issues. This became especially visible during the epidemiological crisis, possibly because pre-pandemic government initiatives to support homeless people were often only apparent. Based on these findings, the conclusion emphasises principles promoted for years but not implemented in practice, which could lead to genuine improvements in the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the welfare system for homeless people.

### ***Pre-pandemic initiatives for homeless people and self-organisation of the everyday lives of street homeless people***

Homelessness is a particularly acute and complex social problem. I begin with this observation as, while it may seem obvious, only by defining homelessness can we estimate its scale as well as determine and evaluate appropriate measures for dealing with the issue. On the one hand, homelessness in a broad sense can affect a considerable section of the population, adults facing housing exclusion (including families with children), who cannot afford to rent or buy their own home and are forced to live with their relatives or friends (Eurostat, 2017, pp. 34–35; Robinson & Coward, 2003). The society does not perceive these people as homeless and they usually do not receive benefits for homeless people. This hidden homelessness (see: Baptista & Marlier, 2019) is not covered by government statistics in Poland. On the other hand, in societies concentrated on homes, losing one's abode and living without a roof over one's head is degrading and stigmatising (Nózka, 2020). These are the people included in nationwide research on the numbers of homeless people coordinated by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (now the Ministry of Family and Social Policy)<sup>2</sup>. These studies showed that almost 30,000 people in Poland were homeless; 80% of them were staying in shelters and 20% were living in the public space and places regarded as uninhabitable (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> The research was conducted for the fifth time on the night of February 13–14, 2019. Although the research has been carried out regularly every two years since 2009, in 2021 it did not take place.

The latter are street homeless people, whose numbers – statistically speaking – increase in the spring/summer period when they leave the low-threshold shelters they visit in winter.

Having a place to live is not a privilege but a fundamental, protected human right. According to article 75 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland from April 2, 1997, public authorities are obliged to combat homelessness. In theory, fulfilling this obligation entails pursuing preventative measures, offering help to homeless people to meet their basic needs and support initiatives to enable them to leave homelessness. The type and scale of aid provided to homeless people in Poland is regulated by the Social Welfare Act of March 12, 2004. Fundamental needs regarding accommodation, food, clothing, health and hygiene are statutorily regulated, with support provided in the form of individual programmes for leaving homelessness and social work conducted, among others, by streetworkers. Homeless people are also entitled to various forms of benefits allocated on the basis of an administrative decision, e.g., allowances, welfare services, and travel tickets.

According to Article 48a of the amendment to the Social Welfare Law of August 5, 2015, temporary accommodation can be provided by shelters, warming centres, and refuges. Homeless people can also benefit from help in the form of a meal served by cafeterias and soup kitchens, usually open five days a week and serving one hot meal a day. Clinics run by NGOs offer medical and pre-medical aid to uninsured people, providing specialist consultations with doctors and support from nurses as well as dispensing medication. The welfare system includes psychological and specialist counselling centres for homeless people geared towards damage reduction and leaving homelessness. These offer preventative schemes and provide information on entitlements and available forms of support. In big cities, bathhouses and laundries also operate where people can go to bathe and to wash and dry their clothes and which provide cleaning products and offer clothes swaps (see: Cendrowicz, 2017).

Statutory measures for homeless people are organised by government and local authority administration bodies, including social welfare centres operating in every municipality. These entities should work together in partnership with NGOs, religious associations, and individuals as well as legal entities. According to a Supreme Audit Office report, however, these entities do not constitute a cohesive and effective system ensuring support and activation in the process of leaving homelessness. They usually operate independently, and with a few exceptions, lack complete information about the effectiveness of their own activities. In violation of the social welfare act, the minister responsible for social security did not oversee their activity, failing to conduct analyses of the effectiveness of the aid given to homeless people or to monitor the level at which shelters, refuges, and warming centres were meeting service quality standards (NIK, 2020). The audit showed that, in keeping with Article 23, section 1 of the Social Welfare Act, the minister outlined the concept and directions of development of activities concerning homelessness issues. The ministry also promoted new forms of activity, including providing financial support to non-governmental organisations. However, there was no ongoing monitoring of the implementation of government programmes. The audit encompassed two of the 117 agreements formed in 2016–2017. The minister, therefore, did not have reliable information on whether funds were

spent appropriately. The audit revealed an inappropriate approach of the state administration to the solution of the problem of homelessness. It is seen as obvious that welfare scheme projects, apart from dispensing money, should also take effectiveness indicators into account and plan to measure them. Otherwise, their implementation is unprofessional and superficial and leads to wasting of money (cf. Cendrowicz, 2017). Failure to monitor the effectiveness of measures implemented within the welfare system for homeless people also prevents checks on whether the needs of its diverse beneficiaries are being met and what the impact on their living situation is.

Some homeless people satisfy various needs outside of the institutional support system. The street homeless people avoid temporary stay centres and exclude themselves from some of the benefits they are entitled to. They occupy uninhabited buildings and heating ducts, adopt covered spaces such as areas under bridges, passageways, or bin shelters, or build huts for themselves (Nóžka, 2016; 2014). Para-accommodation spaces occupied and organised by street homeless people usually give them a greater sense of home than shelters and hostels, and this is something that is not obvious to non-homeless people (cf. Schneider, 2022). Referring to their own experience, they indicate that life in such places (like a shelter or hostel) runs in a sense of constant pressure generated by oppressive rules denying them their subjectivity, crowded together in a way that reduces the sense of home comfort and control (cf. Kostrzyńska, 2018). Living in para-accommodation, meanwhile, often creates a chance for regaining these opportunities lost in a shelter: autonomy, a sense of freely organising and arranging one's own space, which usually makes it necessary to keep an eye on it. Effective way of supervising a space is sharing it with another homeless person and looking after it on a rotating basis. Practices performed to protect and monitor the site also include establishing a neighbourhood, which is reproduced using multiple mutual influences and often prosaic, routine contacts (cf. Nóžka, 2020).

An established and accepting neighbourhood is a potential source of diverse goods (e.g., footwear, clothing, hot meals, everyday items), shared by its non-homeless and homeless residents. People therefore constitute an integral element of livelihood practices. Homeless people might make a living, firstly, through work offered by non-homeless people, which is usually unofficial and seasonal, entailing minor services. Secondly, they are often engaged in a type of "self-employment" involving begging and/or collecting. The effectiveness of the latter activities depends on the presence of other people, as they occur with their participation or thanks to them. The presence of others is also often indirectly necessary, e.g., when people leave cigarette butts from which tobacco is obtained or bottles and cans, which homeless people collect and give to recycling collection centres. The means necessary for life – recyclables, domestic equipment, clothes, food – are often obtained from rubbish containers found on housing estates and adjacent to restaurants, industrial plants, etc. (Nóžka 2016; 2020).

Since some citizens not only have no home but for various reasons do not make use of welfare institutions and remain outside of the support system, I was interested whether and to what degree, during the epidemiological crisis, the restrictions and directives implemented by the government had an effect on street homeless people's everyday lives. It is worth emphasising that data on everyday life has enormous potential in supporting design of the strategies and tools of action within the wide-

ranging welfare system (Zinn, 2013). This data provides the basis for understanding the situation of people on whose behalf and with whose participation welfare, intervention and development programmes are carried out. A dynamic approach to human actions constitutes the foundation of monitoring the solutions implemented and evaluation of their effects (e.g., Lades et al., 2018).

### *Empirical data sources*

An exploratory study was conducted between December 2020 and March 2021 in Kraków (Poland) in an effort to fill the gaps in knowledge on the everyday lives of street homeless people and initiatives to help them during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kraków, as well as other large Polish cities, is characterised by greater homelessness than smaller towns. Homeless people choose to stay in larger conurbations because of the availability of para-accommodation spaces, casual work, and an extensive support system. The study focused on the situation of what is called street homeless people owing to their everyday routines discussed above, in which important needs are met outside of the institutional support system. The study had two stages. In the first stage, I wanted to determine whether these people's everyday lives had changed, and how. What forms of support did they benefit from, if any? In ascertaining the homeless people's everyday practices, I considered two related contexts: establishing a dwelling (place of residence) and making a livelihood. This information was gathered using semi-structured interviews with homeless people.

Selection of the sample for the research was purposive, based on availability of participants. For ethical reasons, only adults who had given their voluntary and informed consent were invited to take part. The interview was conducted in the place where the subject was currently staying, a para-accommodation space organised by the individual. The participants were recruited during the Winter Action programme, with the permission of the department for homeless people at the Municipal Social Services Centre. This programme entails social workers (streetworkers) accompanied by the municipal police visiting places inhabited by homeless people. The aim is to monitor the situation of people occupying spaces regarded as non-residential, giving them support during the winter, in the form of information about available benefits, pre-medical help, and transport to shelters or medical centres. The interviewer was a streetworker with experience working with homeless people and conducting interviews. During the field visits, the streetworker contacted 94 homeless people, not all of whom were included in the research. People who did not give consent, those under the influence of psychoactive substances, as well as those in a bad mental and physical condition for whom a pre-medical intervention had been conducted within the Winter Action initiative did not participate. In total, interviews with 42 homeless people were analysed. Each meeting lasted about half an hour, beginning with a presentation of the objective and procedure of the research, information on its anonymity and that it could be interrupted at any moment. An interview then took place based on the questionnaire, containing questions on the place where the participants were staying (whether it had changed and when, how long they had been

there), contacts with people, ways of organising a livelihood, whether anything had changed in their lives since the introduction of sanitary restrictions in the public space and what, how they had been informed of them, as well as whether they were scared of infection with the COVID-19 virus and whether and how they protected themselves against it. In line with the interviewees' preferences, the interviews were not recorded. The streetworker conducting the interviews noted the responses and at the end described the participant's dwelling (type of para-accommodation, technical condition, availability of heating).

The aim of the second stage of the research was to answer the question: what efforts were made to support homeless people during the epidemiological crisis? What were their potential effects? Determining this information and discussing the effectiveness of welfare initiatives was based on diverse materials going beyond the data collected during the interviews with homeless people. The collected materials were supplemented with information obtained from streetworkers and municipal police officers working in the street homeless community day-to-day and involved in Winter Action. The unstructured interviews concerned the situation of homeless people during the pandemic and the varying services offered to them. In addition, according to key words applying to the research area (e.g., homeless people, pandemic, COVID-19, social welfare, forms of support, vaccination, social intervention), a review and then analysis of the contents published on websites was carried out: from online magazines, the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, Human Rights Commissioner, and Supreme Audit Office. The materials collected during the research were categorised and condensed. The data was selected considering the research objectives and problems (Maison, 2010). Its representations were then determined, dividing the materials into thematic segments (e.g., forms of support, aim, implementer, organisation, implementation, effects of initiative). The data was formatted using matrices (Miles & Huberman, 2000). Extracts from texts and informants' statements were arranged in a table into rows and columns. The data included governmental/legislative initiatives with official data, highlighted needs and problems (of homeless people, welfare institution staff), and views on their implementation, accessibility, and effects.

### ***The (in)variability of everyday life of street homeless people in the context of the forms of support offered to them during the pandemic***

The sanitary restrictions introduced by the Polish government in March 2020 contributed to the work of support organisations in the homeless community being remodelled, with tightened admissions and rules for staying in shelters and hostels. Some of these rules made access to such centres harder, while others discouraged their use (e.g., demanding a current COVID-19 test, imposing quarantine). From the time of the introduction of the first restrictions to the beginning of the research in December 2020, a great deal changed in this regard and good practices were developed. Certain constraints were scrapped, while the centres and organisations working for homeless people also introduced various new solutions. The expert interviews revealed that in Kraków, in the research period, hostels accepted homeless people without the

previously required COVID-19 test. Limits on admissions were raised in hostels and shelters, thus increasing crowding. Accommodation in the municipal warming centre was available without restrictions. A new initiative was a mobile aid point, a night bus taking homeless people looking for accommodation to the warming centre. Kraków's soup kitchens, meanwhile, were working according to government guidelines, serving food to poor people to take away or packed lunches. Organisations that had supported homeless people in the public space did not resume activity in this form owing to laws prohibiting large gatherings in the public space. Some operated in the form of mobile information points or by visiting homeless people in the places where they lived, providing them with hygienic materials, clothes, and hot meals.

What do the everyday lives of street homeless people look like in this context? Let us begin with the homes set up by the research participants and the ways they are organised. The vast majority (41 people) were not interested in benefiting from accommodation in facilities. This aversion was caused by bad experiences and negative ideas about such places as well as the perceived benefits of staying away from them. There were negative evaluations of the institutional regime and lack of acceptance of the rules binding at such institutions, as well as distaste towards the people using hostels, emphasising their unethical and uncouth behaviour as well as poor hygiene. The participants emphasised their familiarity and/or attachment to the places they currently occupied and people from the neighbourhood, their own independence and self-reliance in earning a living. They also said that the pandemic had also put them off using homeless hostels. For several people, the state of epidemiological threat was an additional argument for avoiding them. In their opinion, the likelihood of SARS-CoV-2 infection increased in crowded hostels.

The data collected by streetworkers showed that before the outbreak of the pandemic, street homeless people were more willing to use accommodation offered by hostels or warming centres on freezing nights – conditions which prevailed during our research. This particularly applied to people living in unheated para-accommodation, which was the case of most of the participants (34 people). The participants occupied diverse spaces and chose various forms of dwelling, with only allotment gazebos, stairwells, and lofts and heating ducts being heated. The remaining dwellings, which did not have heating, were buildings and houses to be demolished; tents and huts; a car and camping trailer; garages; a storage room and recreation shelter located in the estate space, a cellar; the loft of a tenement house, cavities of buildings, a recess under a flyover. Irrespective of the place and form of the dwelling, the participants do not maintain many social contacts, with some claiming not to keep any and saying that they only have fleeting relations with other people.

The participants usually said that they did not want institutional help because they could manage on their own, or that they received support from homeless and non-homeless people from their neighbourhood. Especially people living long-term in a given place claimed that from their perspective nothing had changed. Most of the participants continue to make a living from “self-employment”, meaning begging and/or collecting recyclables. As before the pandemic, they also look for necessary resources (e.g., clothing and food) in rubbish bins.



*I've been homeless for 25 years and I've never taken advantage of the help of the Municipal Social Services Centre, because I don't need them.*

Some of the participants do casual work, benefit from the financial support of a social welfare centre or have a regular income in the form of a pension or disability allowance. Those supported by welfare institutions were usually aware of their changed rules of operation. They had learned this information from other homeless people and employees of welfare institutions and uniformed services. In terms of institutional help, the participants mainly benefited from meals. They were unhappy about the closing of cafeterias, where they could previously go, warm up, talk, and eat a hot meal at a table.

To conclude, the informants usually declared that, despite the ongoing ban on spending time in public places, their dwelling and livelihood had not changed, and it was also suggested by the comparative analysis of the everyday routines of homeless people before the pandemic. This was stated by people who knew the area where they were living and continued to receive support from people who knew them, including residents tolerating them sleeping in their stairwell and employees of estate shops offering a hot drink or to heat up their meal. Those people who rummage through rubbish bins around blocks of flats had not noticed a difference in access to resources: *[Nothing's changed here] I collect food from the buns. Lots of people live in the blocks and lots throw things away. No, I don't need help.* Some of the participants also pointed to the benefits arising from the ongoing crisis. They noted the better food served in soup kitchens and greater engagement from the staff of welfare institutions and non-governmental organisations, who have shown more interest than they did previously. Sometimes, people's previous everyday routines for making a living, which constituted an element of activity structuring their day before the epidemiological crisis, have been replaced by waiting for help that was delivered to the place where they were staying.

A few of the participants had also noticed difficulties caused by the pandemic. One manifestation of this was greater fear of homeless people among non-homeless people, which can make it difficult for them to get support and reduce opportunities for casual work. Some practices of homeless people became ineffective on empty streets – such as “angling”<sup>3</sup> among passers-by. Furthermore, those participants who made a living from collecting recyclables said that fewer people in the public space meant that there were not so many cans and glass bottles in rubbish bins. Recycling collection centres had also changed their working model, and some of them had suspended operations.

*I collect cans and bottles. There aren't so many now, because fewer people are going outside, so for example today I only collected 5 zloty.*

According to these informants, possibilities for making a living during the pandemic are complicated. Despite this, however, they did not consider changing the associated practices, which are part of their day-to-day routines.

The findings from the interviews led to questions on the effectiveness of the welfare system for homeless people. Firstly, it was ascertained that the research participants

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<sup>3</sup> “Angling” is a popular phrase used in the Polish homeless community to describe “fishing” for potential people to help, entailing active, frequently pushy begging.

had begun to adapt to the situation of diminishing resources, which were already scarce before the pandemic. Yet, this situation did not prompt them to make use of institutional help. Secondly, it was noted that an aversion to specific forms of institutional support before the pandemic discouraged people from using their services in the epidemiological crisis. Among the manifestations of the lack of trust in institutional support was the fact that using a shelter was seen as being riskier than staying outside of it. The risk of hypothermia or lack of basic needs sometimes became secondary. Thirdly, certain solutions halted the research participants' everyday activity, which was a source of material and social resources. Some of them in isolation began to expect help. Particularly important in this context are the findings from the analysis of government communications and media statements of welfare institution staff concerning initiatives to support homeless people during the pandemic. The next part of the article examines those solutions which were not effective and could actually worsen the situation of street homeless people by triggering mechanisms reproducing their marginal position.

***Mechanisms of reproduction of the marginal position  
of street homeless people in the context of state authorities'  
actions to reduce the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus***

According to streetworkers, the most difficult moment for homeless people was the first half a year after the Polish government introduced restrictions associated with the state of epidemiological threat, between mid-March and August 2020. There was a great deal of disinformation at that time, and the laws and procedures were changing dynamically. As a result of sanitary requirements, access to welfare institutions was reduced considerably, cafeterias, bath houses, and public toilets were closed, and soup kitchens operated under new rules. There were arguments, name-calling, and fights outside closed cafeterias. Most homeless people at the time declared that they were afraid of the virus. "People in a homelessness crisis often do not understand the current situation. The entire system for bringing them help was turned on its head" (Wroczyńska, April 14, 2020). Concerns were caused both by changes to the operation of the support system for homeless people and by increasingly empty streets as a result of the introduction of a restrictive ban on movement and the threat of fines for violations.

The laws later began to change, as restrictions were loosened and aid institutions developed new working methods. And although many participants in the research declared that the pandemic had not changed their situation, comparative analysis of dwelling and livelihood practices before and during the epidemiological crisis shows a break in the continuity of everyday routines. This was confirmed by some of the informants, as well as streetworkers, whose long-term observation revealed the dynamic of changes in the everyday practices of street homeless people. Analysis of the interviews with homeless people and employees of various aid centres demonstrated the potential links between these practices and the actions of state authorities aiming to reduce the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. These actions did not necessarily contribute to an improvement in their situation.

### ***Increasing susceptibility to stigmatisation and persisting negative stereotypes***

The fact that the public space was deserted and street traffic disappeared almost overnight made homeless people, usually hidden in the urban crowd, more visible. This made the problem of homelessness more visible for decision makers than it had been before the pandemic. Information about disoriented homeless people in the public space began to be broadcast in the media, and welfare organisations operating on behalf of homeless people pointed out that they were being overlooked in government support programmes. Welfare institutions lacked personnel, hygienic materials, masks, and clear rules regarding their continued activity.

The state authorities' reaction to the situation was public manifestation of care, which included appeals on ministry websites to support homeless people. One publication stated that "given their current situation, homeless people are at the most risk from the effects of the virus"<sup>4</sup>. Unintentionally, these well-meaning words stigmatised and ultimately compounded the negative public response to homeless people – this time as potential carriers of COVID-19 (cf. Wołodźko, 2020). We can identify two factors to explain this mechanism. Firstly, the epidemiological crisis has brought invisible, constant, and unclear sources of threat. Anybody can potentially infect anyone else. This situation casts a shadow on strangers and socially uncertain people. Homeless people, living on the margins of society, are regarded as such individuals (cf. Lee & Schreck, 2005), with their everyday practices embedded in the public space highlighting their marginal nature. Secondly, therefore, although homeless people do not have many social contacts and there is no evidence that they contribute to the spread of the virus more than other citizens, the circumstances resulting from their life situation help to heighten this kind of stigma. Homelessness means being in the public space without a home in which to isolate, daily mobility eking out a livelihood; ascribed and actual lack of hygiene (cf. Culhane et al., 2020). These factors are viewed as variables that increase the risk of infection. As a result of the fear of infection, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, the suggestion – albeit expressed out of concern – that homeless people could be responsible for transmission of the virus fell on fertile ground. This in fact unjustified emphasis on a selected – and socially stigmatised and unintegrated – group of people as spreaders of the virus, which entered the public consciousness in the form of a government communication, could not fail to have an impact on the attitudes of others during the epidemiological crisis.

*Even when there was no coronavirus, people treated us homeless like lepers [...]. And when the pandemic started, most people decided that it was us who spread coronavirus [...] people completely turned away from us* (statement of a homeless person, in: Trębacka, July 25, 2020).

With time, homeless people began to be aware of the new stigma. The interviews with experts working with homeless people showed that, concerned about avoiding passing on infection, they put on protective masks and gloves, and were often told: *Don't be scared, I'm not contagious.*

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<sup>4</sup> Example publication on the ministry website: "Help for homeless people during the pandemic" (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, March 20, 2020).

***Apparent action – pushing and keeping street homeless people  
out of the social service system***

According to representatives of NGOs, the concern for the fate of homeless people manifested by state authorities did not result in sufficient initiatives. As such, the state authorities' actions proved to be only apparent. Such measures highlight the contrast between the official objective and their actual uselessness, and even harmfulness. They usually do not serve to solve the problem directly and are taken as a matter of course, out of caution and for show, to maintain the positive image of policymakers as fulfilling formal requirements and/or social expectations. Sometimes, such initiatives are simply incompetent (cf. Lutyński, 2018). As such, they might generate major social costs.

*Homeless people are not entitled to COVID-19 tests. Because although tests are also for uninsured people, to get a referral [from a doctor] you need to be insured. And yet one positive test at a shelter with several dozen people can lead to infection on a mass scale, said the [opposition] MP Hanna Gill-Piątek during a parliamentary debate (Nowosielska, October 28, 2020).*

The aforementioned exclusory laws reproduced the status quo by only appearing to give homeless people the right to free COVID-19 tests. The apparent nature of this action is displayed not just by contradictory regulations, but also by conflicting messages sent to homeless citizens. On the one hand, they were persuaded of the need to isolate and avoid gatherings and fined for contraventions. On the other hand, when it became clear that there were outbreaks in social welfare homes, and contrary to the opinions of experts that communal accommodation increases the risk of infection, homeless people were expected to isolate in overcrowded hostels. Bearing in mind that the homeless population in Poland is mainly made up of older and sickly people (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2019), a dual risk was created. Only few individuals, however, stated outright that the reason why they did not use a hostel was the risk of infection. Asked whether they were afraid of infection, only three of the informants said that they were afraid, the rest answering that it was "hard to say", that this did not affect them and they had no reason for concern. Some also diminished or downplayed the problem.

*I think I already had coronavirus. I felt this foul, bitter taste. But maybe that was spoiled food from the kitchen [laughs] [living in a tent].*

Analysing their statements and everyday practices revealed during the interview, I looked for the connection between the current situation and the homeless people's declared fears after declaration of the state of epidemiological threat. I assumed that the initial disinformation and concerns about infection would be significant, and, coupled with the lack of support for coping during the pandemic as well as adequate measures as it spread, might bolster repression and denial of the potential threat (World Health Organization, 1992, p. 11). The same participants on the one hand declared that they were not afraid of infection or its consequences, but on the other spoke about isolating, avoiding contacts with other people and avoiding the hostel – even when it had free spaces and could actually be used.

Streetworkers' observations showed that the number of people living in unheated para-accommodation and adopted (not always) covered places in the public space increased. It was observed that people occupying such spaces tended to make use of institutional accommodation on cold days before the pandemic, but have now begun to avoid them. The Ministry of Family and Social Policy guidelines seeking to improve the situation of homeless people in fact overlooked these circumstances. Without appraisal of the situation and consideration of the diverse needs of the recipients of help, they assumed that the obvious place of support and temporary residence for homeless people is shelters and hostels and their needs comprise accommodation and food. This reductive way of thinking is far removed from the needs of homeless people, who faced significantly reduced possibilities of independent functioning as a result of the epidemiological crisis. As was the case before the pandemic, in their everyday residential and livelihood practices, the participants in the research have various ways of sustaining conditions allowing them to satisfy their most important needs, such as autonomy, self-determination or a sense of belonging, e.g.: *I don't want to use a centre, wherever I lay my head is my home* [living in a tent]. Provision of the offered support to satisfy the physiological needs evidently omits an array of important psychological and social needs of homeless people. Such initiatives point to the objectification of the aid process and of the people at whom the aid is targeted. The risk of objectification appears on every occasion in a situation when aid concentrates largely on what is offered, rather than whom it is aimed at.

### ***Omissions in the support distribution process and exacerbating deprivation of needs***

Homeless people in the margins of society during the current crisis may experience the omissions in the support distribution process in various ways (cf. Kaniasty et al., 1990). There is no shortage of views that "people in a crisis of homelessness have been lost somewhere in all the procedures prepared for the fight with the coronavirus pandemic" (Hanna Gill-Piątek, opposition party MP, in: Gontarek, October 28, 2020). For example, although the most difficult moment for homeless people was the first half a year after the Polish government introduced restrictions associated with the state of epidemiological threat, at that time non-governmental organisations supporting the homeless were not covered by any additional solutions (The appeal of the Human Rights Commissioner; Rzecznik Praw Obywatelskich, March 17, 2020). On the ministry website, however, under the heading "The homeless are not without help during the pandemic", we read that government instructions mainly involve identifying infected homeless people and isolating them (in collective isolation centres), and that procedures have been created for institutions supporting homeless people, for instance obliging them to keep staff to a minimum. There were appeals: "to social organisations, employees and volunteers of social organisations and people of good will for help and support, especially for centres supporting homeless people" (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, March 20, 2020).

The findings on the circumstances reveal that the measures undertaken by the authorities overlooked homeless people's real situation regarding access to resources,

including the fact that even if they have a social support network, it is fragile and usually unstable. By assigning support of homeless people in the pandemic to citizens and relying on their self-organisation, the government seems to be overlooking both the extraordinary aspects of the situation that hinders this self-organisation, e.g., restrictions on movement represent an additional level of difficulty in delivering aid to street homeless people, and the economic weakness of the system of socio-institutional support for the homeless.

*The situation is so difficult that soon people will be arriving in homeless shelters just to die [...] homeless shelters are mostly run by NGOs. That's why we're invisible in the system. If I want to get a COVID-19 test done, I have to contact the founding organisation of the mission, that is myself* (Adrianna Porowska, head of the Camillian Mission for Social Assistance, which runs a hostel for homeless people, Dziennik Gazeta Prawna, November 7, 2020).

To a great extent, this system's activities in Poland are based on unstable financial sources, low-paid jobs and volunteering. This translates to limited and low-quality support.

## Conclusion

Before the pandemic, there was a lack of shielding and community measures targeted at them, as well as reliable data on the availability and effectiveness of services they could benefit from on an everyday basis (cf. Baptista & Marlier, 2019). The epidemiological crisis resulted in homeless people and their everyday practices becoming more visible in the public space, with the governments of many countries taking unprecedented steps to support them in the pandemic (e.g., Sadler, 2020). Among the motives was the assumption that homeless people's living conditions and lifestyles increase the risk of illness and spread of infections. Homeless people's lifestyle was seen as representing a threat to the health of all citizens (cf. Parsell et al., 2023). The Polish government's actions also reproduced the generalised image of homeless people as contravening restrictions and constituting a potential source of spreading of the virus. By promoting solutions involving isolation of homeless people in communal living institutions, at the same time, they brought about a continuing drain on community welfare services. The aim of closing welfare centres and minimising street work was to limit the spread of the virus. New solutions emerged over time that can also be seen as good practices after the pandemic, such as mobile aid points. These were provided by a bus travelling around the city providing information and handing out hot drinks, where people could warm up and be taken to a shelter if they wished. Increased flexibility and adapting initiatives to changing needs can also be regarded as a good practice – this includes distributing packed lunches or organising open-air canteens.

Although the welfare system responded innovatively at the local level to the fact that some citizens not only have no home, but for various reasons do not make use of welfare institutions and remain outside of the support system, this was not taken into account in national quarantine projects. It is symptomatic that the majority of



participants in the research, despite their worsening living situation, did not take advantage of the available institutional help. Facing an epidemiological threat, in an uncertain situation (e.g., changes in access to services taking place overnight), and with limited opportunities for an independent livelihood, these people reacted by adapting. The identified forms of adaptation involved redefining and becoming accustomed to the situation, neutralising the threat by denying or downplaying it, as well as, in the case of diminished livelihood opportunities, adjusting by further reducing their own needs. As one participant said: *People are going out less now, and besides it's winter, so there are fewer bottles. So less money. And when there's less money, you need to demand less. I reduced my demands, but you know, I get by [laughs].*

Looking at the situation of homeless people from the perspective of their everyday routines leads to the conclusion that both the social and the institutional circumstances caused by the epidemiological crisis not only contributed to reproduction of the marginal position of homeless people but could also lead to their further exclusion. These circumstances were also worsened not only by the sanitary restrictions expected during the pandemic, but also the apparent reaction from the state authorities to the visible and/or known problems of homeless people. This appearance of actions originates from disregard for this knowledge, including: (1) the complexity of the needs of the internally diverse homeless community, and (2) the complexity of the homeless welfare system (connected to various ministries: health, education, housing, finance etc.), including ignorance of the peculiarities of the workings of NGOs, which are the mainstay of the system in Poland. This is one of the reasons for the implementation of solutions that are inadequate, and even mutually exclusive and in practice useless.

Yet it was not the epidemiological crisis that contributed to apparent actions; the crisis highlighted the appearance of actions from the state authorities to solve the problems of homelessness, failure to diagnose the needs and extent of effectiveness of offered support, and lack of understanding of the challenges faced by organisations working on behalf of homeless people. This knowledge may have reached the government as a result of work with employees of welfare institutions, experts and consultations planned for implementation of measures. After all, a key principle in building a cohesive and efficient support system is making decisions based on expert knowledge and genuine intersectoral cooperation. Even before the pandemic, however, the Polish government was limiting dialogue with civil society organisations, politicising, and centralising its administration (Pazderski, 2018).

The Polish authorities also saw it as inexpedient to coordinate the activities of various ministries on behalf of homeless people, although this was recommended in 2020 by the Supreme Audit Office and Human Rights Commissioner, highlighting the ineffective dispersion across various ministries of measures for homeless people. For example, it was presumably a lack of interministerial cooperation that resulted in contradictory regulations coming into force and uninsured citizens being denied access to COVID-19 tests. Similarly, despite the suggestions of these bodies, the appointment of a plenipotentiary for homeless people was deemed to be unjustified (Rzecznik Praw Obywatelskich, February 19, 2020), although advocacy for homeless people seems to be a self-evident element of building a cohesive and effective support system. Ignoring



the voice of the people for whom the system is organised means that their needs are also overlooked. The actions undertaken by government and local authority administration bodies and non-governmental organisations mostly cover satisfying basic needs: accommodation, food and essential clothing (NIK, 2020). The results of the research show that the epidemiological crisis did not change anything in this respect.

It should be noted that homeless people's affairs were also not valued in political programmes before 2015, when the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party came to power in Poland, ruling for the next eight years. Homelessness is not perceived – either by ordinary citizens or by the government, which is sensitive to their views – as a common problem requiring extraordinary measures, considered and diverse interventions. On the one hand, the results of the research revealed systemic mechanisms connected with such thinking for (re)producing and perpetuating the marginal position of homeless people as well as individual and social problems associated with homelessness. On the other, they add to knowledge on the principles of building a cohesive, effective, and resistant support system. The pandemic confirmed the importance in crisis management and in a crisis of trust in the welfare system as well as interpersonal solidarity. Trust and solidarity reduce the level of fear and bolster civic (self)discipline, cooperation, and mutual support in uncertain times. As a social resource, they develop over a long period and require engagement. They are promoted, firstly, by civic and anti-discrimination education, and secondly, by the principles mentioned above, including knowledge-based initiatives, cooperation, and empowerment. Understanding the need for state authorities to implement these principles is a condition for building the social cohesiveness that is so important on an everyday basis and during a crisis, and a key element of which is a resistant and effective social welfare system.

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## *Challenges of deinstitutionalisation of social services in Albania and Poland*

### *Abstract*

The purpose of this article is to analyse the challenges facing the deinstitutionalisation of social services in Albania and Poland. It presents the key legal framework that guides the process and attempts to identify the main challenges. The article emphasises the importance of continued commitment, investment, and cooperation between governments and key stakeholders committed to overcoming these challenges and ensuring the successful transformation of their social protection systems. It is also a comparison of the welfare/social assistance system between a former communist country that is now part of the EU and another one that aspires to join the EU.

The methodological premise was to present the challenges related to the deinstitutionalisation of social services in Albania and Poland based on an analysis of foundational data. The framework was evidence-based, emphasising the practical dimension of deinstitutionalisation analysis.

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The deinstitutionalisation of social services in Albania and Poland is a complex and difficult process that requires transforming social protection systems and developing a range of community-based services and supports for vulnerable populations. It represents a challenge for social policy in both countries.

**Keywords:** deinstitutionalisation, process, challenges, social services, community services

## *Introduction*

The deinstitutionalisation of social services represents a pivotal challenge and opportunity for post-communist countries transitioning to more community-based social protection systems. Albania and Poland, both with histories of communist governance, are at different stages of this transformation and their integration within the European Union (EU). This article aims to compare the deinstitutionalisation processes in Albania, an EU candidate, and Poland, an EU member, to elucidate the role of historical legacies, demographic shifts, and the EU adhesion process in shaping social policy reforms. By examining the key legal frameworks, implementation challenges, and the broader implications of these reforms, this study seeks to contribute to the understanding of how countries can navigate the complex landscape of social services reform in the context of EU integration. The comparison is particularly relevant to the field of social policy, as it provides insights into how post-communist countries can leverage lessons from each other's experiences to advance their social protection systems.

Deinstitutionalisation involves the transition from large, state-run institutions for vulnerable populations, to smaller community-based services that aim to integrate these individuals into society.

In recent years, Albania has made significant steps in the deinstitutionalisation of social services for various groups, including children, individuals with disabilities, and the elderly (UNICEF Albania, 2018). In Poland, deinstitutionalisation mainly concerns seniors, people with disabilities, mental disorders, in the crisis of homelessness and foster care (Strategy for the Development of Social Services, Public Policy to 2030 with an outlook to 2035). This process has been guided by numerous legal frameworks and strategies, which will be mentioned further in this article. We will also explore the key challenges faced by Albania and Poland in implementing these policies and suggest possible solutions to overcome these obstacles.

In the early 2000s, Albania began to implement a number of reforms to shift the focus of its social services from institutional care to community-based services. Various projects and initiatives have been supported by international organisations, such as UNICEF and the European Union, and have targeted improvements in child protection, support for children with disabilities, and alternative care options for minors. Efforts have also been made to improve the support available for individuals with mental health issues and disabilities. The Mental Health Strategy (2012–2020) aimed to develop community-based mental health services, reduce stigma, and promote the rights of people with mental health issues.

Social services are commonly associated with the concept of welfare, as countries with large welfare programmes often provide a wide range of social services. Social services are employed to address a wide range of societal needs. Development of this field is also directly related to the process of deinstitutionalisation, understood as the process of transition from institutional care to services provided in the local environment (local community). Modern Europe, including Poland, is facing, on the one hand, growing social problems and, on the other, the awareness of the need to solve them. An integral element of deinstitutionalisation of services is prevention, aimed at counteracting placing people in institutional care and, in the case of children, being separated from their families and placed in foster care. Deinstitutionalisation as a process with a very broad scope takes time. It needs to be properly prepared, defining not only strategic goals but operational ones related to the implementation of the next stages of action, and this is exactly the process for which Poland is preparing.

The methodological premise was to present the challenges related to the deinstitutionalisation of social services in Albania and Poland based on foundational data analysis. The framework was an (evidence based), with an emphasis on the practical dimension of deinstitutionalisation analysis.

However, challenges remain, as the deinstitutionalisation process is complex and requires ongoing commitment and investment. Both Albania and Poland still need to continue developing a more comprehensive, well-funded, and efficient system of social services that meets the needs of their vulnerable citizens.

### *State of the fact*

Albania and Poland, emerging from decades of communist rule, faced the monumental task of transforming their centralised, state-driven social protection systems. The end of communism marked the beginning of a challenging journey towards establishing welfare systems that could address the diverse needs of their transitioning societies. In Albania, the collapse of the communist regime left a fragmented social protection system, ill-equipped to handle the emerging societal challenges. Poland, on the other hand, embarked on a path of rapid economic transformation, which, while stimulating growth, also widened social inequalities and introduced new vulnerabilities.

Under communist rule, both countries established centralised, state-run social services that aimed to provide universal coverage but often lacked the flexibility and responsiveness to meet individual needs. In the post-communist era, demographic shifts, including ageing populations and migration patterns, presented new challenges for these systems. Albania faced significant emigration, impacting its labour market and social services demand. Poland, while also experiencing emigration, saw different demographic pressures, such as a declining birth rate, shaping its social services needs differently.

In Albania, the centralised system established under communism was rigid, with minimal emphasis on individualised care or community integration. The post-communism transition period has been marked by significant economic and social upheaval, impacting the country's capacity to reform its social services.



In contrast, Poland, even during its communist era, experienced periods of reform and resistance that introduced a degree of variability in its social services system. Poland, in the post-communist period, embarked on rapid economic transformation, which, combined with its early efforts towards social services reform, laid the groundwork for a more structured approach to deinstitutionalisation.

The European Union has played a significant role in shaping the social policy reforms in Albania and Poland, albeit in different capacities. Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, marked a new chapter in its social policy evolution providing a framework for reform and access to EU funds and best practices. The EU's emphasis on human rights, social inclusion, and the decentralisation of care have guided Poland's approach to deinstitutionalisation, ensuring a move towards a more inclusive and personalised system of care.

For Albania, the path to EU integration has been a catalyst for reforming its social protection system. The EU integration process has highlighted the necessity for Albania to align its social services with European standards, particularly in the realms of inclusivity, quality, and accessibility. The journey towards EU candidacy status has thus become intertwined with Albania's efforts to modernise its social services, necessitating legislative reforms, investment in community-based services, and a shift towards more person-centred care.

In the landscape of social policy and employment, Albania demonstrates commendable progress, particularly in the enhancement of labour market institutions and the provision of services to vulnerable groups. As highlighted in the *Albania 2022 Report* by the European Commission, the nation's efforts in implementing recommended reforms have been significant. Progress can be seen especially in strengthening the quality and effectiveness of labour market institutions as well as providing employment services to the most vulnerable groups (European Commission, 2022). The social care reform is progressing, but some advancement of financial and administrative efforts is required to strengthen the local level capacities for service delivery and the links to active labour market measures. Albania needs to address the coverage and financial allocation of the Social Fund, ensure implementation of legislation of social services and of the management information system for social care (European Commission, 2022). Public spending on social care services programmes for Albania continues to be modest and there is yet no mechanism for monitoring the situation of the vulnerable ones and with no access to such services. The triple shock stemming from the 2019 earthquake, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the consequences of the war against Ukraine has negatively impacted the most vulnerable categories, which needs to be assessed and mitigated.

According to the Survey of Income and Living Conditions wave 2020, published by the Albanian National Institute of Statistics (Table 1), the ratio of population at-risk of poverty rate in Albania, in 2020, was 21.8% compared with 20.6% in 2019. It remains below the EU 27 average. Cash transfers continue to constitute about 95% of the social protection sector's overall budget. 60 municipalities out of 61 have adopted social care plans with the support of donors and civil society organisations. Monitoring the implementation of the local social plans, budget allocation to social services from the local government and guidance to local government are crucial. During 2021, there

were 339 social care services provided as compared to 229 in 2019 (European Commission, 2022).

**Table 1.** Indicators as per year

Year	Indicators	
	At-risk of poverty rate (%)	Social care services provided
2019	20.6%	229
2020	21.8%	339

Source: National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT).

In spite of the positive progress, the government needs to intensify efforts in further consolidating the mechanism of the Social Fund ensuring adequacy, equity, and transparency of the implementation of the fund, alongside the increased budgeting of the social fund in the midterm budget in order to ensure sustainability of services.

In Poland, in the recent years, there has been an ongoing discussion of necessary reforms in the area of social policy, in particular the broadly defined social welfare system. They are intended to help improve it so that it corresponds more accurately to the dynamically emerging new social challenges and risks (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, the refugee crisis, the transformation of labour markets), as well as changing social risks (e.g., an ageing population, an increase in the number of dependents, new forms of social exclusion). The most important areas of postulated system changes and issues raised in the area of regional and local social policy include, first of all, moving away from selectivity to universality of social services, changing the direction of policy to activation and social inclusion in the context of better social development and higher quality of life, working towards viewing the area of assistance as a social investment rather than a cost, giving special importance to social services and including them as a key conceptual category in the area of social policy, including social assistance, promoting the integration of services and the importance of cooperation as well as increasing the degree of coordination of assistance activities, recognising the importance of individualisation and personalisation of assistance activities, the need to better match them to the capabilities and resources of specific individuals or groups, recognising the importance of individual needs and diverse lifestyles, accepting and attempting to meet the growing new expectations of institutions of social assistance and integration, developing community and residential services as well as prudent, responsible deinstitutionalisation of social services provided on a stationary, “closed” basis.

In 2022, the extent of economic poverty in total households in Poland remained at a similar level as in 2021, although the average material situation of households worsened in reality due to high inflation, among other factors. As in the previous year, the extreme poverty rate was less than 5%, the relative poverty rate was about 12%, and the statutory poverty rate was about 7% (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to focus on the universal access to services provided in the residential environment and identify the development of services provided in the local environment as the essence of the DI process in Poland. Good planning and staggering the necessary processes, allowing for real, sustainable, and effective change in a way

that guarantees respect for the rights of individual user groups, minimises the risk of harm, and ensures benefits for all stakeholders, are the factors facilitating the transformational success of the way social services are provided in Poland.

Polish discourse on social policy reform reveals a proactive approach to addressing emerging social challenges and adapting to demographic shifts. The nation's efforts to transition from selective to universal social services, as part of its broader strategy to enhance social development and life quality, underscore a commitment to viewing social assistance as an investment rather than a mere expenditure. This comprehensive outlook, aiming to integrate services and foster cooperation across sectors, seeks to personalise assistance, catering to individual needs and lifestyles. Yet, the journey is not devoid of obstacles. Deinstitutionalisation efforts should first focus on the universal access to services provided in the residential environment, as only such an unrestricted access to a broad spectrum of interdisciplinary community services can reduce the demand for inpatient long-term care services.

In an ideal situation, the satisfaction of social needs for the implementation of services at the place of residence (in the local environment) will lead directly to the closure of inpatient long-term care institutions, as there will be no demand for such services. It should be stated that the definition of the deinstitutionalisation process will include a number of activities aimed at developing services in the local environment, and among them (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2021, 73–74): “2. Priority of social services provided in the residential environment over inpatient services. 3. Development of local and individualised services, including preventive services to reduce the need for institutional care. 4. Action to use the resources and capacity of institutional long-term care for the development of new community-based services. 5. Securing inpatient long-term care services as the last and least desirable component of the system”.

These basic activities of the deinstitutionalisation process are aimed at improving the functioning of people with disabilities in the community, developing social services, changing the profile of the institution and the scope of its activities, adjusting the offer to actual needs, adequately preparing support staff, networking services as well as building inter-institutional, intersectoral and inter-ministerial cooperation (Zdebska, 2021, 102–103). According to the pan-European guidelines, the state is required to provide a wide range of support services, including housing, so that beneficiaries have a real choice (Europejska Grupa Ekspertów ds. Przejścia od Opieki Instytucjonalnej do Opieki świadczonej na poziomie Lokalnych Społeczności, 2012, 138). There is no single coherent, transparently funded long-term care system in Poland. Long-term care services are provided through three subsystems (Zdebska, 2021, 104–105):

*Informal care, family and provided by those in the immediate environment. When talking about the informal sector in the sphere of care, one mainly takes into account the provision of care by family members, friends, neighbours and representatives of informal aid initiatives, volunteer work, etc. It refers to the totality of actors who provide care as part of non-professional and non-professional activities. In practice, the boundaries of the informal sector and its relationship with the formal care sector are sometimes blurred (Błędowski, 2020, p. 24).*

Types of care: family and mutual support (material help, mental support in illness, suffering and disability, intellectual assistance in making important decisions or dealing with life matters and physical assistance in performing various activities), parental alimony, assistance provided by neighbours and other people from the immediate environment (most often it will be completely selfless support, resulting from interpersonal relationships, neighbourly ties, and cultural norms. Sometimes it is a form of non-formalised paid care service). Respite care is a way to counteract negative situations related to informal family care. Its task is to relieve family members or caregivers of dependent people by supporting them in their daily duties or providing temporary replacement.

**Formal care**, services of the social welfare system. The social assistance system in Poland provides a significant range of long-term care services. These services are provided at two levels of service implementation, i.e., at the district level and at the community level. Types of care: services at the municipal level (care services, specialised care services, services in support centres, services in sheltered housing, family care home); services at the county level (social welfare home, other district services, i.e., pursuant to Art. 19 point 11 of the Act of 12 March 2004 on social assistance, the district's own task is also to run sheltered housing for people from more than one community and district support centres, including homes for mothers with minor children, and pregnant women, excluding community self-help homes and other support centres for people with mental disorders. Most often, these are training apartments for independent residents of care and educational institutions or family foster care, implementing an independence programme, community self-help homes and other support centres, mainly for mothers with children and people experiencing violence in the family.

**Formal care**, long-term care services of the health care system. On the part of the health care system, guaranteed support services for dependent persons are provided (Regulation of the Minister of Health of November 22, 2013 on guaranteed benefits in the field of nursing and care services as part of long-term care). Types of care: long-term nursing care, long-term home care teams for adults and children and adolescents, mechanically ventilated, care as well as treatment facilities and nursing and care facilities, home and stationary hospices, and palliative care units”.

Both Albania and Poland exhibit a concerted effort towards deinstitutionalisation, albeit navigating through distinct challenges influenced by their unique socio-political landscapes and stages of EU integration. This shared objective towards transitioning to community-based care underscores a broader commitment to reforming social protection systems. Such reforms are not only pivotal for enhancing the quality of life for vulnerable populations but also for aligning with European standards of social welfare.

Albania's strides towards enhancing its social protection framework, amidst economic constraints and crisis aftermaths, highlight the critical phase of its EU candidacy journey. In contrast, Poland leverages its EU membership to refine its social welfare model, focusing on inclusivity and adaptability to changing social landscapes.

### ***Legal development inherent to deinstitutionalisation***

Several legal frameworks and policies have been developed in the last years in Albania, to support social services in general and the deinstitutionalisation of social services in particular. More important ones are listed below.

The Law on the Rights and Protection of the Child (2017) which draws attention to the rights and protection of children in Albania; establishes the legal framework for the protection of children's rights and the implementation of state policies aimed at their well-being. It also provides guidelines for developing and implementing programmes and services focused on the prevention of child separation from their families, deinstitutionalisation, and the provision of alternative care. The law prohibits the establishment of new residential institutions for children and promotes family-based care solutions.

The Law on Social Services (2016) which provides a comprehensive framework for the organisation, delivery, and monitoring of social services in Albania. It emphasises the importance of providing community-based services, focusing on prevention, early intervention, and social inclusion. It also calls for the establishment of a quality assurance system for social services and the development of a licensing system for service providers.

The Law on Mental Health (2012) which focuses on the protection and promotion of mental health, as well as the prevention and treatment of mental disorders. The law encourages the establishment of community-based mental health services and the reduction of the reliance on psychiatric hospitals. It also establishes the legal framework for the protection of the rights of persons with mental disorders and promotes their social inclusion.

National Strategy on Persons with Disabilities (2016–2020), that set out the government's vision and priorities for improving the lives of persons with disabilities in Albania. The strategy focused on the deinstitutionalisation of persons with disabilities and their integration into community-based services, with an emphasis on social inclusion, equal opportunities, and participation in all aspects of life.

National Strategy and Action Plan for Social Protection (2015–2023) which provides a strategic framework for the development and reform of Albania's social protection system. The strategy aims to create a more efficient, inclusive, and sustainable system that addresses the needs of vulnerable populations. The strategy includes specific objectives related to the deinstitutionalisation of social services, such as the development of community-based services, the improvement of the quality and accessibility of services, and the strengthening of the legal and policy framework.

This legal framework provides the main ground for the transformation of Albania's social protection system, stressing the importance of providing care for vulnerable populations within families and communities, rather than in institutions. The main part of legal framework on social protection has been perpetually updated and transformed over the last ten years, with the aim to meet the EU acquis and EU expectations, with Albania as an EU candidate country. Although Albania has established several legal frameworks to guide the deinstitutionalisation process, there are still gaps and inconsistencies in the legal and policy framework that must be

addressed. These include the need for clearer regulations and guidelines for the implementation of policies and the development of a comprehensive legal framework that encompasses all aspects of deinstitutionalisation. Not only does this massive legal framework transformation require prepared human resources, financial, and institutional capacities to be effectively implemented, but also very detailed analyses and assessments to evict overlapping or conflicting competencies between different institutions involved.

Meanwhile in Poland, in recent years, several legal frameworks and policies have been developed to support the deinstitutionalisation of social services in Poland. The most important include:

- Strategy for the development of social services, public policy until 2030 (with an outlook until 2035), Resolution No. 135 of the Council of Ministers of June 15, 2022 (Uchwała nr 135 Rady Ministrów z dnia 15.06.2022).
- Law of July 19, 2019 on the implementation of social services by the centre for social services (Ustawa z dnia 19.07.2019).
- National Framework Guidelines for the Creation of Local Plans for Deinstitutionalisation of Social Services (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, n.d.). The guidelines were prepared as part of the project “Development and pilot implementation of mechanisms and plans for deinstitutionalisation of social services” implemented under the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development 2014–2020, Priority Axis II Effective public policies for the labour market, economy and education, Measure 2.8 Development of social services provided in the local community, co-financed by the European Social Fund (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2018).
- Amendments to the Social Welfare Act of March 12, 2004 (the Act of July 28, 2023 on Amendments to the Social Welfare Act and Certain Other Acts) in terms of introducing, among other things, the “new” social welfare benefits – care services in the form of neighbourhood services and short-term support services in social welfare homes, training or assisted housing was also introduced in place of the previous assistance in the form of sheltered housing (Ustawa z dnia 28.07.2023).

### ***Key challenges of deinstitutionalisation process***

The process of deinstitutionalisation is complex and is facing several challenges in Albania. It is difficult to reach an in-depth analysis and multilevel examination, as Albania has a very recent social policy system (Pere, 2019, 73–87) whose functioning has been recently affected by a new lawmaking on territorial decentralisation that is going to profoundly affect the distribution of responsibilities in the Social Services delivery (Dizdari et al., 2019, 193–216). However, based in different reports and studies, the main challenges are:

- Insufficient funding (UNICEF, 2018). The lack of sufficient funding remains a significant challenge to the social protection services in general and deinstitutionalisation process in particular. In one of the last studies (surveys), several municipalities were asked about the difficulties they face in implementing their



social plans according to the deadlines and expected quality. Lack of funding (90%) and human resources (60%) were the main findings, followed by lack of experience (46%) (Rama & Polo, 2022). Municipalities in Albania have a low, insignificant financing role in the “social protection service” function, where they only manage to cover 6% of the expenditures incurred under this function with their own funds (Co-PLAN, 2022); meanwhile the other 94% is covered by central government funds. Limited financial resources obstruct and retard the development and expansion of community-based services. It also hampers the training and capacity building of professionals working in these services. Increased funding for community-based services is crucial to support the transition from institutional to community-based care.

- Lack of human resources. Although the legal framework appears to be complete and in line with international standards, full realisation of the rights of excluded groups are violated by a lack of institutional, human, financial, and professional capacity. Cross-sectorial initiatives, particularly those on disability, juvenile justice, deinstitutionalisation, and decentralisation require strengthened multidisciplinary planning and coordination. With regard to the new Law on Child Rights and Protection, the minimum requirement is one Child Protection Worker in every municipality and administrative unit with more than 3,000 children. Notwithstanding the commitment of the municipalities, there still is a gap in realising this standard. When the municipalities have been asked about the sufficiency of the personnel of the Needs Assessment and Referral Units to fulfil their functions, they answered that only 20% of municipalities consider the staff sufficient (Rama & Polo, 2022).
- Lack of comprehensive, high-quality community-based services (World Bank, 2017). The development of a diverse range of high-quality, accessible community-based services is essential to ensure that vulnerable populations receive appropriate care and support. Albania still faces challenges in providing such services, including a lack of trained professionals, limited availability of services, and inadequate infrastructure. The last surveys regarding the training plans have shown that 34 municipalities (56%) do not have such a plan; and more than 97% of municipalities declare that they still need to receive training in their field of competencies (Rama & Polo, 2022).
- Resistance to change (World Health Organization, 2018). Resistance to change among some stakeholders, including institutional staff and local authorities can harm the implementation of deinstitutionalisation policies. This resistance may be due to a lack of understanding of the benefits of community-based care, concerns about job security, or entrenched attitudes towards institutional care.
- Limited awareness and understanding (Lumos Foundation, 2017) of the rights and need of vulnerable populations, as well as the benefits of deinstitutionalisation can contribute to resistance to change and slow progress in the implementation of deinstitutionalisation policies. Public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives are crucial to changing attitudes and fostering greater understanding of the importance of community-based care.
- Weak monitoring and evaluation systems (European Commission, 2018). Effective monitoring and evaluation systems are essential to ensure the quality and effect-



iveness of community-based services and to track progress in the deinstitutionalisation process. Albania faces challenges in establishing robust monitoring and evaluation systems, including limited capacity and resources for data collection, analysis, and reporting. Public spending on social care services programmes for Albania continues to be modest and there is yet no mechanism for monitoring the situation of those who are vulnerable and with no access to such services (European Commission, 2022).

- Coordination among stakeholders (UNICEF, 2018). Effective coordination among stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organisations (UNICEF, 2018), service providers and users is crucial to the successful implementation of deinstitutionalisation policies. However, coordination efforts in Albania face challenges, including a lack of clear roles and responsibilities, limited communication and information sharing as well as insufficient collaboration among stakeholders.

The deinstitutionalisation process in Poland, as in Albania, is complex and involves with several challenges. The very fact that it is a multi-year process requires obtaining political consensus on its directions and pace, so that possible political changes do not disrupt its course (Błędowski, 2021, 4). We are talking about guidelines for implementing and supporting a sustainable transition from institutional care to alternative family and community-based care for children, people with disabilities, people with mental health problems, people in crisis of homelessness, and the elderly in Europe.

Some of the key challenges include:

- development of local, universal, and individualised services, including services of a preventive nature that can reduce the need for institutional care;
- empowerment of nursing home residents who are able to function outside the institution;
- coordination of social services with health services;
- co-production of services, which will complement and strengthen the current market for social services;
- education and development of human resources and aid professions, especially in the coordination of and implementation of social services in the community;
- development of social service centres as units for networking and coordinating social services;
- securing inpatient long-term care services, as the last and least desirable component of the support system.

### ***Addressing the challenges of deinstitutionalisation in Poland and Albania***

To ensure the successful deinstitutionalisation of social services in Albania and Poland, the following strategies should be considered:

- Increasing funding for community-based services (World Bank, 2017) is essential to support the development and expansion of high-quality, accessible services that can meet the needs of vulnerable populations. This may involve reallocating

resources from institutional care to community-based care as well as seeking additional funding from international donors and partners.

- Developing a diverse range of high-quality, accessible services (World Health Organization, 2018). Investing in the development of a diverse range of community-based services is crucial to ensuring that vulnerable populations have access to appropriate care and support. This includes investing in infrastructure, capacity building, and training for professionals working in these services. Additionally, it is important to involve service users and their families in the design, development, and evaluation of services to ensure that they are responsive to the needs of the target populations.
- Promoting awareness and understanding of deinstitutionalisation (Lumos Foundation, 2017). Public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives should be implemented to increase understanding the rights and needs of vulnerable populations and the benefits of community-based care. These efforts can help change attitudes, reduce resistance to change, and foster support for the deinstitutionalisation process.
- Strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems (European Commission, 2018). Efforts should be made to establish robust monitoring and evaluation systems to track progress in the deinstitutionalisation process and ensure the quality and effectiveness of community-based services. This involves investing in capacity building and resources for data collection, analysis, and reporting.
- Enhancing coordination among stakeholders (UNICEF, 2018). Strengthening coordination among stakeholders is essential to the successful implementation of deinstitutionalisation policies. This may involve establishing clear roles and responsibilities, improving communication and information sharing, and fostering collaboration among government agencies, non-governmental organisations, service providers, and service users.
- Addressing gaps and inconsistencies in the legal and policy framework (World Bank, 2017). Efforts should be made to address gaps and inconsistencies in the legal and policy framework guiding the deinstitutionalisation process. This includes developing clearer regulations and guidelines for the implementation of policies and creating a comprehensive legal framework that encompasses all aspects of deinstitutionalisation.

The process of deinstitutionalisation is complex and requires the involvement of many actors. However, given the current situation in both Poland and Albania, it is a necessary and even priority process in social policy. Key to this process, therefore, are the following issues:

1. Responsible management of deinstitutionalisation processes: many fears and anxieties (e.g., of losing jobs as a result of implementing deinstitutionalisation measures). Usually such perceptions are due to a lack of knowledge and preparation for this process, insufficient information activities about the scope of planned changes on the part of decision-makers, which is not conducive to social discourse in this area. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the area of education and training, including broad social promotion in the development of social services and the deinstitutionalisation process.

2. Development of environmental services: community-based services have been growing intensively in recent years, however, demand for them has also been growing steadily. They are seen as an effective support to prevent people from being unnecessarily, or excessively, placed and detained in 24-hour residential facilities. The increase in the number of dependents observed in recent years poses a major challenge for the community. In response, a real priority for local governments strategically, financially and in terms of information should be the further development of community-based services. The main activities of municipalities and social welfare units should focus on expanding and developing new community-based services, while 24-hour facilities should change their current formula and enter more strongly into the community.
3. Cooperation with the local community as a key element of the deinstitutionalisation process. Institutions should not only “go out” to the community but also involve the community in the operation of facilities and provision of services to the local community. Of course, there are many examples of such activities, still the opportunities are not used effectively. In Poland, as of November 1, 2023, care services become a new form of social assistance provision.
4. Cooperation with NGOs. The involvement of NGOs is the key element of the deinstitutionalisation process. They can play an important role in the delivery of social services, especially in the context of community services. They can also help promote values such as autonomy, self-determination, and social integration of residents.
5. Shortage of professions and helping professionals. At present, the problem of hiring workers to carry out these tasks is becoming more frequent and is clearly growing. This is due to, among other things, very difficult and often dangerous work in the field, low wages (in Poland at a low level, one of the lowest in the market), and low social prestige. Meanwhile, the scope of work of social welfare centres is steadily increasing and requires professional staff. The category of client in social assistance is changing, new problems are emerging and this requires highly specialised professionals. Rural environments and smaller cities face significant difficulties in attracting new and appropriately qualified staff. This is due to both limited financial possibilities and the specific nature of the work itself as well as the responsibility associated with it. The shortage of aid workers in the labour market lowers the expectations placed on those hired, which may consequently affect the quality of the work provided.
6. The deinstitutionalisation process requires, in part, a change in the mentality of employees, who must promote the values of autonomy, self-determination, and social integration of residents, as well as social change. To this end, it is necessary to carry out informational and educational activities dedicated to employees of aid institutions showing the right of dependents, people with disabilities, people in mental crises and crises of homelessness, foster care, the sick, and the poor to live not only in the institution, but also in the community, and publicising the right to make decisions about their lives and the services provided.
7. In the context of deinstitutionalisation, competence development is also crucial, including staff training as well as ensuring adequate medical and technological

competence. Well-prepared staff is crucial for the successful implementation of the deinstitutionalisation process. Training should include both technical aspects, such as the operation of new technologies, and interpersonal aspects, such as communication with dependents and medical issues tailored to their jobs. In addition, staff should be prepared to work in a new model of care that is more community-oriented and less institutional.

8. The role of social service centres in Poland, i.e., the process of systematic transformation of social welfare centres into social service centres, which represents an opportunity for the development of community-based activities. The key role here is to move away from the independent implementation of some services by social welfare institutions, in favour of the coordinating role of local governments and cooperation with other partners, identified in the course of the analysis of the resources of the local community. Such actions do not mean the liquidation of currently existing entities providing services addressed to dependents but the involvement of further partners enabling community-based activities and opening of entities to local communities.

## ***Conclusions***

This article has embarked on a comparative exploration of deinstitutionalisation processes in Albania and Poland, shedding light on both the converging and diverging pathways these countries have taken within the framework of social services reform. Through this comparative lens, we gain a richer understanding of how historical legacies, socio-economic challenges, and the overarching narrative of European integration have shaped their respective strategies and outcomes.

Albania and Poland share a common historical backdrop of transitioning from communist regimes, which has significantly influenced their approach to social welfare. Both nations embarked on the path of deinstitutionalisation with a vision to replace outdated, institutional care models with more inclusive, community-based services. Yet, the trajectory of their reforms and the challenges encountered highlight the intricate dance between past influences and future aspirations. Poland's earlier accession to the EU provided a scaffold to remodel its social services landscape, drawing from European standards and funding mechanisms. Conversely, Albania's status as a candidate country has meant navigating these reforms with an eye towards future integration, leveraging lessons from neighbours like Poland while contending with its unique socio-political context.

The deinstitutionalisation of social services in Albania and Poland is a complex and challenging process that requires the country to transform its social protection system and develop a range of community-based services and supports for vulnerable populations. By addressing the challenges outlined in this article and building on the legal frameworks that guide this process, Albania can create a more inclusive, compassionate, and effective social protection system that ensures the well-being of all its citizens. This will ultimately improve the lives of vulnerable populations and foster a more equitable society for all citizens. As the country moves forward, continued

commitment, investment, and collaboration among stakeholders will be essential to overcoming the obstacles and ensuring the successful transformation of Albania's social services landscape.

Deinstitutionalisation efforts in Poland should lead to universal access to services provided in the community environment, as only unrestricted gateway to a broad spectrum of interdisciplinary community-based services can reduce the demand for inpatient long-term care services. It should also not be forgotten that in no European country, or in the United States, was it possible to abolish institutions completely, but only to reduce the scope of their activities. This process is aimed at caring for people and their right to a normal, good, dignified life in conditions that are suitable for the person and not the choice of others, and this is what we want to strive for in Poland. The result of preparing this process will be empowerment, social integration, and often independence combined with mental and emotional comfort. Constructing a support system with respect for human and civil rights.

Conclusions on the challenges of deinstitutionalisation of social services in Poland and Albania indicate significant differences in the possibilities of implementation of deinstitutionalisation.

Deinstitutionalisation is already advanced in Poland, and the narrative around the process raises various hopes, fears, and concerns (Grewiński et al., 2024, 12). Albania still faces challenges in providing such services, including the lack of trained professionals, limited availability of services and inadequate infrastructure. Service recipients value institutional support, do not want any reduction in 24-hour services, and expect services to be developed in an environment. In both Poland and Albania, knowledge of deinstitutionalisation is quite superficial in institutions and needs to be deepened, but staff are motivated to change.

In Poland, institutions have the potential to create new services, at the same time, they have many concerns about financial and human resources (Grewiński et al., 2024, 15). Albania faces a shortage of trained specialists, which arguably delays the effects of the deinstitutionalisation process.

Institutions in both countries make little use of technology and e-services, however, they recognise their potential. It is, therefore, worth expanding opportunities for new technologies and Internet use.

A particularly important challenge is cross-sector cooperation. On the local ground, there are often no entities that can implement or co-produce social services. Arguably, the goal or challenge of this process is the need for increased involvement in supporting this process. Involvement of central and local authorities, institutions, organisations, and the local community.

In sum, the comparative analysis of deinstitutionalisation in Albania and Poland enriches our understanding of social policy reform's multifaceted nature. It highlights the critical interplay between historical contexts, socio-political dynamics, and the transformative potential of European integration in shaping more inclusive and humane social service systems.

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