

Ending homelessness in Central and Eastern Europe: making the shift to a housing-led system

Comparative report





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Foreword

Housing has the power to change the lives of people in need. For people who find themselves without a home, finding a place to live is transformational. That is why World Habitat believes that housing-led solutions to homelessness are so important. We know they work because there is plenty of evidence that they do.

We also know that the status quo is not working. Through our work on the World Habitat Awards, the European End Street Homelessness Campaign, and our Community-Led Housing Programme, we know that progress towards fairer and more equitable housing systems are more challenging in some places than others. This is true in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where levels of social and other types of affordable housing are inadequate, and as a consequence homelessness is rising. I am pleased that World Habitat can help by exploring the feasibility of increasing housing-led solutions in this region.

We have commissioned this feasibility study to identify the barriers to policy change in CEE. The study focuses on four countries: Croatia, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. These are countries that World Habitat knows well and where we have long established working relationships. We know that, despite the barriers, there is in each country the commitment, drive, and the desire to improve housing outcomes for people who are homeless. What is lacking however, is the systemic shift in housing policy towards a housing-led system, rather than one that relies on traditional models of shelter-based provision or insecure housing. Street homelessness is a systemic issue. Solving it requires solutions that are interconnected with other areas such as institutional social care, affordable housing and political decision making.

This feasibility study draws on the experiences of practitioners working in Croatia, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. It is not limited to those countries, however. It goes further, comparing, contrasting and analysing housing contexts in the wider CEE region. World Habitat's experience is that housing solutions can inspire change and be successfully adapted from one place to another. Accompanying this main report are four specific policy briefs for each of the four countries. These take a more direct approach with recommendations of the changes needed in each country. They are available in English and their local language. I strongly encourage you to read them, build on the learning, and challenge those with their hands on the policy levers of change.

We cannot end homelessness working alone. Our vision is a society in which homelessness is prevented and, if it occurs, it is rare, brief and non-recurring. World Habitat's aim is to be a catalyst in the region. We will work collaboratively and constructively with those that can be part of the solution to homelessness. This report offers specific policy recommendations for EU member states, municipalities, funders working in the region and for housing practitioners. We don't underestimate the scale of the challenge at hand; but World Habitat is committed to shining a light of positive housing practice wherever it is needed. We believe that however challenging it is, together we can end street homelessness.

David Ireland, CEO
World Habitat

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Glossary

De-institutionalisation based services (or de-institutionalisation):

dismantling of large congregate institutions serving people with disabilities or permanent health issues, and shifting the services to small community-based arrangements in integrated environments, e.g. in scattered housing units with floating support services addressing the complex needs of clients.

Floating support: support offered to people which is not linked to their accommodation, is often short term and not offered by the housing provider. Floating support can, for example, be support with issues to do with tenancy sustainment, life skills, employment or drug and alcohol misuse.

Harm reduction approach: an approach which is designed to reduce or minimise the physical and social consequences of a person's (legal or illegal) behaviour, e.g. people facing addictions are not banned from services, rather, they are encouraged to develop control over their addictions, i.e. through safer and managed use.

Housing-led: a housing intervention through which low-intensity services are offered to people whose needs can be met to a large extent just by the provision of an adequate, affordable and secure home. Floating support is offered to clients if needed.

Housing First: a housing intervention for people experiencing chronic homelessness and having complex support needs. Housing First programmes are based on the right to housing, and the separation of housing and social services. Clients can live without time limits in scattered housing; the support offered is personalised and tailor-made and the provision of housing is not linked to the acceptance of support.

Intergenerational transfers: financial support or wealth passed on by parents or grandparents to children or grand-children for them to access home-ownership or be able to invest into a costly asset (e.g. an inheritance is such a typical intergenerational transfer).

Roofless: living situation of people with no usual place of residence who make use of overnight shelters, low threshold shelters, or rough sleeping.

Rough sleepers: people who conduct their daily routines in public space or external space, and who live in the streets or public spaces, without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters.

Staircase model: the most common homelessness service provision model in Europe. Transitional accommodation is provided in stages as clients take steps to make changes and progress (e.g. by reducing drug or alcohol misuse or engaging with social services) to become perceived 'housing ready' and therefore ready for 'normal' housing.

Universal prevention: prevention systems that address the housing affordability issues of the wider population in general, e.g. through means tested rent or housing allowances.

Upstream prevention: prevention systems that address the needs of groups with an elevated risk of homelessness as early as possible, and work to lift barriers of these groups to access help if needed, e.g. people leaving institutions, young people not in education systems, or veterans.

Social rental agency: an organisation that rents or purchases homes on the private rental market to rent them on to vulnerable groups, e.g. people experiencing homelessness. This model mitigates the risks for people in vulnerable groups including, for example, tenure insecurity or affordability issues. Social rental agencies may offer floating support to tenants to prevent housing loss.

The Pathways Model: the mainstream Housing First approach developed by The Pathways Model to End Homelessness for People with Mental Illness and Addiction by Sam Tsemberis in New York in 1992.

Introduction

1.1 / Introduction to this study

This report was developed as one of the deliverables within the project: 'Feasibility study into moving to a housing-led system in Central and Eastern Europe'.

In response to the call for proposals issued by World Habitat, to complete and deliver an independent feasibility study into the potential for moving to a housing-led system in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the Metropolitan Research Institute and Budapest Institute for Policy Analysis designed a research project that encompassed a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities associated with moving to a housing-led system in the region.

While the research focused on four countries where World Habitat has partners (Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia) the core findings and recommendations are applicable to the Central and Eastern European region in general.

The study was informed by qualitative research with major stakeholders in the region, in addition to desktop research. In addition to interviews with researchers and local organisations, online and live co-creation workshops were organised in the four countries to validate the research results and enhance the creation of tailor-made recommendations for

reasonable solutions. During the data collection process, the team interviewed 18 organisations and researchers in Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, and a total of 28 key stakeholder participants in the four countries worked on developing feasible recommendations during three online and one live workshop.

Our main research questions were centred around the identification of barriers to policy change on the basis of comparing outcomes and policy levers across countries and time. In the analysis, we focused on the regulatory, political and institutional context of housing policy and housing-led responses in the four countries, on social/affordable housing policy responses (whether by governments or NGOs) that impact the prevention and alleviation of homelessness, and on the barriers to housing-led solutions and promising practices.

1.2 / Structure of the report

The level of challenges in the four countries varies in terms of access to affordable housing, the main issues associated with the homelessness provision sectors, and the level and scope of housing-led initiatives. Thus, the study analysed a variety of situations and dynamics within the provision sectors

and the housing systems of Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. The report systematises the findings into four thematic and concluding chapters.

In Chapter 2, we review the situation of homelessness and the challenges associated with the homelessness provision systems in general.

In Chapter 3, we address twofold barriers: firstly challenges at the housing system level and secondly challenges faced by providers related to expanding their services to housing-led and Housing First programmes.

In Chapter 4, we discuss lessons from the field and define the key components needed for change.

In Chapter 5, our conclusions focus on systemically explaining the limited upscaling and entry points for change.

Chapter 6, the closing chapter of the study, includes the recommendations for the four countries under analysis, along with some general recommendations concerning how housing-led solutions in each country can be integrated into mainstream housing policies and current practices. We define what changes in programmes and mainstream housing interventions are needed to create more space for scaling up housing-led responses (while more country-specific recommendations are contained in the four country briefs).

2

Homelessness in Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia

Across Europe 'homelessness' is diversely defined but has important and consistent components. A comprehensive European-level mapping of homelessness and housing exclusion (HHE) and an overview of responses to these social challenges found that European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion¹ (ETHOS Light), developed in 2007 to measure homelessness in a comparable way, is often used as a reference typology. There is consensus that “the more visible the HHE situation (e.g. rough sleeping, living in emergency shelters), the higher the probability of that condition being defined as homelessness” (Baptista and Marlier 2019, p. 12). At the same time, the more latent or 'hidden' the situation appears, the fewer the countries that are inclined to consider particular living situations forms of homelessness.

“ Beyond inconsistencies amongst homeless definitions, there are significant limitations concerning access to systematic data on homelessness.

Although definitions vary across countries and regions, most are strongly connected with where people live or that they live unsafely. For example, an overview of definitions of homelessness across 24 EU and

non-EU countries found five core elements of the definition that may be stand-alone categories or appear in combination. Namely:

- A lack of tenancy right/status
- An income situation (affordability) insufficient to sustain housing
- Living conditions as defined topologically (e.g., living on the street), institutionally (living with service provision), living in physically inadequate or unsafe structures, or living with family and friends involuntarily
- Involving the threat of losing a home, or of having no home to return to (e.g., after prison)
- Involving the lack of a registered address (Busch-Geertsema and Teller 2021).

The limited comparability of the definitions demonstrates that the basis on which to develop a comprehensive estimate of the extent and profile of homelessness is also lacking. Beyond inconsistencies among the definitions, there are significant limitations concerning access to systematic data on homelessness: in some countries, regular country-level data collections are supplemented by registry-based data, whereas in others, sporadic local-level data collections dominate.

1. <https://www.feantsa.org/download/fea-002-18-update-ethos-light-0032417441788687419154.pdf>

Significantly, national-level analyses point to an increase rather than a stabilisation or decrease in homelessness across the EU (Baptista and Marlier 2019).

The following sections focus on Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia and are aimed at assessing the level of the challenge of homelessness and housing exclusion, the key characteristics of homelessness provision systems and features that address the loss of housing, and the scale of housing-led initiatives. The section concludes with reflections on the social costs of homelessness.

2.1 / Estimating levels of homelessness

In Croatia, there is a 25-fold gap between the official figures for homelessness and the estimates of the organisations working in the field.

Whereas approximately 380 people were served by providers in 14 registered shelter services (data as of 2018), estimates of rough sleepers quote approximately 1,000 people (Bezovan 2019). If ETHOS Light categories were employed to estimate the overall figures, the number of people affected by homelessness and housing exclusion would total approximately 10,000 people (ibid.). However, the legal definition encompasses “the most visible and most vulnerable category of people without a roof over their head” (Bezovan 2019, p.5) and includes, more recently, residents of organised residential units (e.g., for younger people who can work) and emergency shelters (for the night) (prenoćišta). Thus, whereas the regulation formerly covered 24-hour shelters only, it now covers the categories of those who are roofless as well as some of the houseless. Still, the official figures reflect only the tip of the iceberg.

In Hungary, the estimated number of people without homes or roofs is 30,000, and approximately ten times more people live with insecure tenancy or in inadequate housing. The yearly point-in-time homelessness count, based on the voluntary participation of providers across the country each year, generally finds that around 7,000–10,000 people are in contact with emergency shelters, transitory homes and street outreach services, out of whom about 3,000 make contact while sleeping rough. The fluctuation and turnover of the unhoused population are rather high across different types of services, while rough sleepers are reported to be mostly men. The yearly survey collects data about the profile of service users, too, finding that roughly, “every fourth homeless person is affected by mental problems; around half have serious ill health; half have only the first eight grades of schooling; half do not have any regular income; and every fifth homeless person has at least one addiction. Every fifth homeless person has been in the public child protection system. About two-thirds consider that they have health issues which prevent them from taking up work. A third (a proportion that is steadily increasing) are Roma” (Albert et al. 2019, p.4). The legal definition of homelessness includes an additional significant group beyond direct service users: those who do not have a formally registered address. According to estimates, this group includes a further 24,500 people and over 80,000 people who only have a “temporary or mailing address” (Ámon et al. 2018).

In Romania, the number of rough sleepers was around 15,000 people in 2019, predominantly living in large cities, with a large proportion of youth and homeless families.

Figures in the Romanian context range from 3,000 (public administration estimates) to over 162,000 (2011 Census) people according to different strategic papers (Braşoveanu 2021), and the last country-level approximation dates back to 2009 (Pop 2019). The official definition as included in the recently launched homelessness strategy includes numerous groups: “single persons or families who, for single or cumulative reasons, social, medical, financial, economic or legal, live on the street, live temporarily with friends or acquaintances, are unable to support a rental property or are at risk of eviction or are in institutions or penitentiaries of where they are to be discharged or released within 2 months and have no domicile or residence” (Braşoveanu 2022). According to Pop (2019), service providers have observed a change in the profile of homelessness, with a growing share of young adults, older people, and entire (often Roma) families who fall back on the streets due to evictions. In parallel with the development of the strategy, an entirely new quantitative data collection process was designed and piloted in 2021, covering a whole range of ETHOS categories, but no national figures and profiles are yet available (the data collection process included a sample of 1,220 people nationwide) (Ministry for Social Affairs, 2022).

In Slovakia, the last available country-level data report stated that there were over 23,000 people living in long-term transitional shelters or similar arrangements. This figure from 2011 excluded rough sleepers and those staying in emergency accommodation. More recent local counts – for example, the 2016 Bratislava data collection process – indicated that out of the approximately 2,000 people experiencing homelessness who were counted, 30% were rough

sleepers, and close to one-third lived in homeless accommodation services. Lone middle-aged men represented a large share of rough sleepers, 50% of those experiencing homelessness in Bratislava had long-term health problems, and 40% of them had experienced over ten years of a homelessness trajectory. In the same year, close to 10,000 individual people were served by homelessness service provision across Slovakia, with providers reporting significant increases in the number of clients compared to the beginning of the decade, with a considerable rise in clients using night shelters (over 50% more) and homeless hostels (approximately one-fifth) (Gerbery 2019).

2.2 / Current approaches to tackling homelessness

“ The lack of affordable housing is a key reason for housing exclusion, exacerbated by low levels of public investment in social housing and inefficient prevention systems.

(Kenna et al. 2018)

Whereas it is broadly acknowledged that homelessness and housing exclusion are caused and sustained by structural factors (such as pressure in the housing market), truly integrated responses to address this are rare across EU Member States. Despite the most recent EU-level political momentum to end homelessness by 2030, strategic responses that include a shift in the design of homelessness services (that is, moving away from emergency responses and temporary accommodation to preventing and ending homelessness through housing-led responses) are still the exception rather than the norm (O’Sullivan 2022).

Homelessness provision systems are overwhelmingly dominated by emergency and temporary responses rather than prevention or services aimed at ending homelessness in all four Central and Eastern European countries.

Responses to homelessness in the four countries are offered within an institutional context of a strong staircase approach focus.

Thus, low-intensity support services involving non-housing-based emergency support comprise the bulk of the services, the latter which are, in many countries, “a reactive response to homelessness (neither curative nor preventive), disorganised (without a strategy) and segmented (not continuous)” (Batista and Marlier (2019, p.77).

Services for people experiencing homelessness are overwhelmingly offered in urban centres and are, in large part, implemented by NGOs and charitable organisations. In all countries that joined the EU following the collapse of the Soviet Union, homelessness has appeared mainly in urban centres, due to a combination of factors such as the restructuring of welfare policies, housing systems, and job markets (Fenercuhoova and Vasat 2021). Thus, responses that address the most visible forms of homelessness have overwhelmingly been offered in towns and cities. Although public authorities are the main responsible stakeholders, serving the needs of people experiencing homelessness, they often contract non-profit organisations to implement services. In contrast, regulations are prescribed at the central government level, along with (limited) funding. In Slovakia, regions and municipalities share responsibilities and funding obligations for services described by law and are implemented by locally active providers contracted by municipalities. In Hungary, all tasks are publicly funded based on

the types of licensed provision and the capacity of service providers. In Croatia, funding is allocated based on the yearly plans of providers, and in Romania, municipalities allocate (limited) funding for authorised services. In all four countries, private donations are key to maintaining the quality of services, and EU funds have played a key role in Slovakia and Hungary in terms of improving facilities and developing and running services. However, in Croatia and Romania, the use of EU funds has remained limited.

Shelters and overnight shelters are available in all countries. Here, people experiencing homelessness are offered shared bedrooms, may receive meals, use bathrooms for maintaining personal hygiene, and staff may have the resources to provide social and psychological counselling. Importantly, however, these services are often in buildings of poor quality and which can result in alienating people further, with significant issues around staff capacity and training, and equipment shortages. This often leads to people experiencing street homelessness being deterred from accessing them. Some exceptions involving shelters with more intense and higher quality support may exist, however they are often associated with long waiting lists. Admission criteria are often different across towns and providers, with some shelters also requiring a service charge for people to stay. Life-saving additional capacity is routinely organised in cold weather, however this is not sustained and by nature is precarious. Arrangements for temporary accommodation in all four countries are characterised by low to medium-intensity non-housing-focused support in a variety of shared communal housing such as hostels, rehabilitation institutions, temporary accommodation for families with children, social reintegration residential centres, and refuge services.

Non-residential support services address the elementary physical needs of clients and offer services such as meals, clothing, and space for maintaining personal hygiene and health. Across all four countries, a range of organisations such as charities, faith-based organisations and NGOs offer non-resident services, such as street social work and outreach, day centres, and access to food and meals. Day centres are important locations for maintaining personal hygiene and, more importantly, function as contact points with trained social staff and as referral services if needed. Based on a recent overview by Baptista and Marlier (2019), in the four countries these services are generally available, whereas they all lack floating services for housed clients. Day centres usually offer services free of charge, but they may have restricted office hours.

Both universal, upstream and crisis prevention services are limited and ineffective in all four countries. Beyond the weaknesses of universal prevention systems that address the affordability issues of the population in general, upstream prevention systems that should be addressing the needs of groups with an “elevated risk of homelessness” and crisis interventions, like the prevention of evictions, are also largely ineffective among the Central and Eastern European countries (Mackie 2022). A recent report that addressed the comprehensiveness of European homelessness prevention systems noted the limited nature of preventative services in most Central and Eastern European countries, among them the four countries of interest (Baptista and Marlier 2019). In Croatia, there is no preventative approach to homelessness, and there are no shelter programmes for rapid rehousing or tackling evictions, either (Bezovan 2019 and Sikic-Micanovic et al. 2020). In Hungary, the complete cessation

of the large-scale mortgage repayment programme that addressed the severe indebtedness of the population after the global financial crisis and further cutbacks in formerly modest prevention programmes for households with unaffordable housing costs governed the pre-covid situation (Albert et al. 2019). During the years of the pandemic, the ban on evictions, and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, frozen energy prices for a large share of the population functioned as a brake on further over-indebtedness and slowed down large-scale evictions. Nevertheless, addressing the major affordability issues due to high inflation requires further preventative measures. Currently there are no stable exits from homelessness.

“ Both universal, upstream and crisis prevention services are limited and ineffective in all four countries.

In Romania, the new homelessness strategy very vaguely spells out the need to improve early prevention interventions to tackle homelessness. Beyond a fuel benefit intended to cover a portion of the heating costs of vulnerable households, no programmes are in place to prevent indebtedness associated with housing costs. Although child/youth homelessness is a significant issue in Romania, youth homelessness prevention measures are delegated to residential centres, the coverage of which is low. As Pop (2019) puts it: “The ineffectiveness of prevention mechanisms in regard to evictions and rehousing support has been, and continues to be, an important issue in Romania” (p.18). In Slovakia, prevention is of central importance in its new homelessness strategy. So far, several services have been engaged in prevention measures that are directly related to the most common pathways to homelessness, like leaving institutional care, indebtedness and facing evictions

(Gerbery 2019), but the replacement ratio of one of the key allowances, the housing benefit scheme, is low; thus, it cannot ensure secure (private) tenancies for vulnerable households. So far, providers admit that prevention is failing at every level (Lachytova and Lehotayova 2022, p. 74).

2.3 / Scale of housing-led programmes and initiatives

Housing First and housing-led initiatives are receiving more attention across Central and Eastern Europe; in particular Slovakia and Hungary have accumulated the first lessons of specific small-scale housing first/led pilot programmes in the past few years.

Housing First and housing-led approaches to tackling homelessness have been established as an integral part of service provision in a number of Western countries but at growing scales. In contrast, only a few pilot programmes have been launched in New Member States (Baptista and Marlier 2019). EU Funds played a major role in launching these programmes in both the Slovak and Hungarian contexts. These initiatives are typically very small-scale and have limited fidelity with the mainstream Housing First approach developed by The Pathways Model to End Homelessness for People with Mental Illness and Addiction (Tsemberis 2011). Housing-led programmes “are aimed at ending other forms of homelessness, share some features with Housing First but function in a different way and are aimed at homeless people with a different set of needs” (Pleace et al. 2019, p. 10). The latter may test the claim that people experiencing homelessness do not have to be ‘housing ready’ before they can access independent (supported) housing options.

Local initiatives involve useful adaptations to mainstream housing-led approaches and are of key importance for testing and developing standards in the given national contexts of programmes.

Central and Eastern European interventions can typically be characterised as housing-led solutions rather than Housing First programmes. Like other EU countries, in Central and Eastern Europe, “Housing First was observed to be out of sync with other elements of the homelessness sector and existed at the margins of homelessness policy” (Pleace et al. 2019, p.6.).

“ Local initiatives involve useful adaptations to mainstream housing-led approaches and are of key importance for testing and developing standards in the given national contexts of programmes.

Overwhelmingly, (relatively) low-intensity services are offered to people whose needs could be met to a large extent just by the provision of an adequate, affordable and secure home, and even though the programmes are termed ‘housing first’, they lack the necessary fidelity with the key principles of such an approach. Such critical issues include the temporary arrangement of tenancies in areas of dense public or supported housing (the Housing First model suggests establishing no time limits for scattered housing solutions); whether the clients are those with the most complex needs, such as addictions or severe mental health problems (the Housing First model suggests dealing with those with the most complex needs); whether the take-up of services (e.g., employment services) is personalised and tailor-made (the Housing First model would include only such services) and offered in line with the principle of active engagement and no coercion (as in the Housing First model); and whether

housing and support services are clearly separated (this is a key principle of Housing First, designed to make sure that clients access the right to housing). Nevertheless, local initiatives in Hungary and Slovakia have led to key learning outcomes, improved the design of programmes in the short and long term, and spelt out the structural barriers to institutional shifts in provision. In Central and Eastern Europe, homelessness is very strongly associated with poverty, thus, housing-led solutions may tackle the bulk of homelessness. Housing First programmes should target those experiencing homelessness with very complex needs.

Central and Eastern European housing-led programmes face challenges in terms of the availability of suitable housing. Across Central and Eastern Europe, housing-led programmes typically rely

on housing in the scarce public rented sector or the cheaper private sector.

This reliance creates a challenge when trying to secure adequate long-term affordable tenancies for clients and has resulted in the limited scale and scope of housing-led services. The social rented sector represents a fraction (estimated at 1-4%) of the total housing stock across the Central and Eastern European countries, with very low turnover/vacancy rates and decentralised modes of allocating housing that seldom favour people with homelessness trajectories, multiple vulnerabilities, an unstable or no income, and/or a lack of formal local connections. Thus, the general shortage of social housing is further exacerbated by further eligibility barriers to accessing social housing (Pleace et al. 2011).

Addressing the housing shortage

The private rental sector is often used within housing-led programmes, with additional rent supplements or housing benefit schemes associated with limited timeframes or decreasing amounts of support over time, which may challenge housing retention stability. In addition, private landlords often request specific guarantees from organisations that run housing-led programmes to prevent (former) clients without homes from dilapidating their dwellings or falling overdue on rent and utility payments. Alternatively, the organisations that run the programmes can act as social or ethical lettings agencies and 'sublet' dwellings to families/individuals, manage the stock and provide for repairs, and offer support services or referrals for tenants if needed. However, given the limited resources and high rental prices, the programmes have remained small-scale, e.g., 200-400 families/individuals were included in the programmes in Slovakia and Hungary for a limited time over the period 2019-2022, in addition to some minor programmes run outside ESIF that reached up to 5-10 families in selected cities. Exceptions to this are the Hungarian NGO From Streets to Homes Association, which acts as a social rental agency and has over 50 tenants and among whom there are people formerly without a home, and STOPA in Slovakia, which has run a programme in cooperation with ERSTE Foundation.

There is a paucity of dedicated support services and staff working to provide long-term support to people in housing-led programmes. Organisations that manage housing-led programmes strongly rely on their own capacities when they design services for clients in stable housing. Support services offered to tenants in housing-led programmes are often delivered by service providers which are embedded within informal networks of local homelessness services. These networks are then supported or complemented temporarily by some additional key professionals (like healthcare staff, mental health support staff and psychiatrists, financial experts, labour market advisors, etc.) in a targeted manner for specific tenants.

Given that housing-led programmes are still at an initial phase in most Central and Eastern European countries, there is not enough understanding about the specific skills set needed to support people experiencing homelessness, and provision is largely based on social workers' existing case management activities. In addition, there is a lack of consistency in the support being offered because of the diversity of social work techniques, resources, protocols and methods across the countries. Support staff and specific skills are often sought through informal networks or from within the organisation. Over time, these programmes tend to incrementally foster the necessary cross-sectoral cooperation, however given the temporary nature of the support programmes, many services are disrupted before long-term outcomes can be achieved for people experiencing homelessness. Whereas some funding mechanisms exist in Croatia, Hungary, and Slovakia, tenancy support services (for low-intensity need clients) in housing would need to be expanded and stabilised to sustain longer-term operations.

2.4 / The social costs of homelessness

Evidence about the social costs of homelessness and the social costs of preventing homelessness has been a core argument for improving service design and coverage and scaling up housing-led approaches to tackling homelessness. As Baptista and Marlier write, quoting Pleace and Culhane, “from an evidence-based perspective, preventing homelessness should be at the core of homelessness strategies and policies. Studies have shown that homelessness prevention is a cost-effective strategy [...]. It reduces the financial costs of homelessness but, more importantly, it mitigates the real costs of homelessness: the harm it does to human life, damaging people's health, wellbeing and reducing their life chances” (Baptista and Marlier 2019, p. 91). Such evidence has been available for more than two decades now, in particular evidence related to real cost savings that can be made through effective service design (e.g., in the realms of housing costs, mental health service costs, criminal justice budgets, and substance-use-related health costs). Housing people with experience of homelessness considerably improves employability as well, which increases life quality, and reduces welfare expenditure (Berry et al. 2003).

In Central and Eastern European countries however, referring to simple net savings or cost offsets compared to the existing provision system is a problematic argument for scaling up housing-led solutions to homelessness. In countries where people experiencing homelessness are severely 'underserved', that is, they do not access health, social and employment services at all or to a very limited extent, and where there is a shortage of social housing and

rent allowances, the benefits of housing-led approaches should be defined in broader terms. Savings on tackling homelessness via Housing First or housing-led approaches are generally linked to the cost-effectiveness of actual interventions and with benefits associated with greater housing stability and less emergency service usage and contact with the criminal justice system (Martinez-Cantos and Martin-Fernandez 2023). In Central and Eastern Europe, however, initial net costs will be high as the housing supply has to be created and maintained for housing retention results. Also, further costs will be high because very costly services (e.g. health) services for clients with complex needs have to be created and run long-term.

Most importantly, however, the avoidance of homelessness or emergency accommodation settings is the key baseline benefit, in addition to improving people's satisfaction and well-being. There is a consensus across Europe that homelessness services help prevent "heightened risks to ... physical and mental health" which restrict opportunities for social and economic integration (Pleace et al, 2013, p.13).

Human rights-based arguments should take precedence over financial concerns when the arguments for pro-housing-led policy shifts are deployed.

3

How feasible are housing-led solutions?

3.1 / The challenge of housing systems

3.1.1 / Shortage of affordable housing stock

Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, similarly to other post-socialist countries, implemented a housing privatisation programme that radically changed the tenure structure. Whereas the detailed rules varied across countries, after the regime change, public rental housing was taken over by municipalities, with the exception of Croatia, where – with the dismantling of Yugoslavia – local workers' councils became the owners of housing. The so-called giveaway privatisation (that is, privatisation of housing at a fraction of the market price) radically reduced the stock of social rental housing. Moreover, even though restitution has affected a small part of the housing markets, for example, through the in-kind restitution of nationalised housing stock in city centres in Croatia and Romania, it has introduced a prolonged period of uncertainty into housing systems (Hegedüs 2013).

Rents in the public sector typically do not cover costs. Thus, municipalities have to cover the shortfall from their own revenue. Low revenue levels that only cover a share of the operating costs, coupled with a lack of funds for renovation, have led to a decline

in the sector in terms of size and quality. As a result, municipalities are left with smaller, poorer quality housing in which they house families who can cover the very low rents. Municipalities in all countries have, from time to time, embarked on projects, but the results of such sporadic investments have not made a significant difference in the provision of affordable housing due to the lack of public funding in general. With the exception of Slovakia until 2010, municipalities across the four countries have built very few new homes (Bezovan 2013 and 2018, Beblavy and Beblava 2015, Hegedüs 2013, World Bank 2015).

Within the small municipal housing sector, two sub-sectors can typically be distinguished: a 'very social'² housing sector that targets households in deep poverty and a second segment that houses key workers or other priority groups. In the former, options are open to households with the lowest incomes and means-testing and other income-based eligibility factors are taken seriously. The latter segment is less targeted and includes provision for additional groups – for example, working families with different eligibility factors, e.g., key worker employment in local authority institutions, teachers, veterans, and other priority groups with specific vulnerabilities. Investments in the sectors remained moderate: the most strongly supported Slovakian public rental housing scheme has not brought about a major

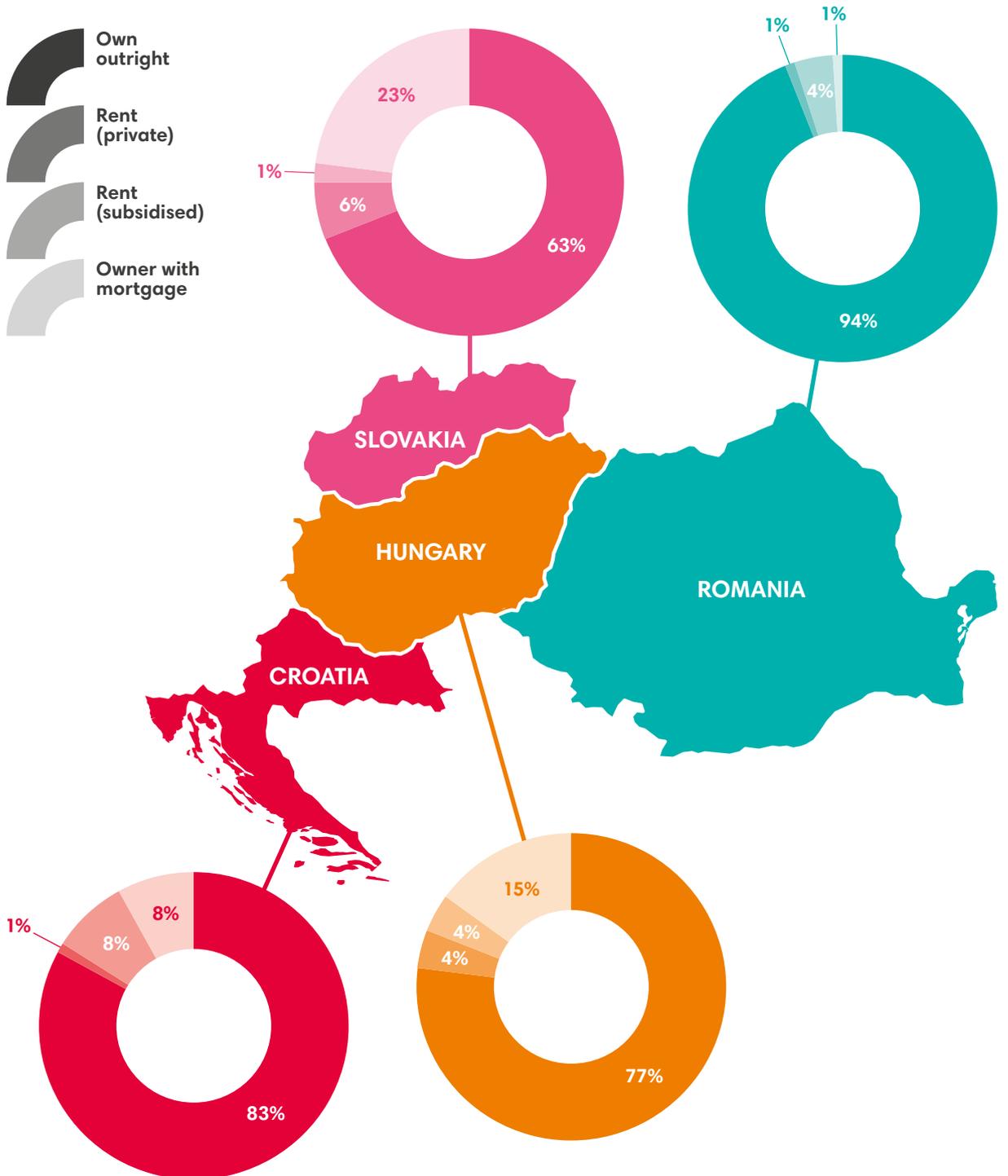
2. Very social housing is referred to as stock used to "accommodate the vulnerable and those in most extreme housing need," and is regularly found in poor quality, cheap housing segments – see Whitehead and Scanlon (2007).

change in the tenure structure. Experiments in Zagreb, in some districts of Budapest, and Romanian municipalities created only a few hundred affordable rentals. The target

groups of the programmes vary from country to country, and even the detailed allocation rules may vary from one city to another within a country (Hegedüs et al. 2013).

Figure 1 / Tenure structure (2020)

Source: EU-SILC [ILC_LVHO02__custom_3360359]



Whereas the private rental sector is reported to have grown after the 2008 global financial crisis, there is no exact data about the size of the sector in any of the Central and Eastern European countries. Given that the sector operates within the grey economy, neither censuses nor household surveys are able to give a reliable picture about the private rental sector. For example, the EU statistics on income and living conditions reports a share of approximately 1.2% of households living in the private rented sector in Croatia, 1.3% in Romania, 4.4% in Hungary and 6.1% in Slovakia (see Figure 1), which may be considered underestimates. The sector's growth is linked to the portfolio choices of upper-middle-class landlords and new demand from young people, who are postponing family formation and do not have access to intergenerational transfers to enter home ownership. House price increases, particularly in mortgage interest rates after 2020, are also among the factors that explain the increase in demand for rental housing (Hegedüs et al. 2018).

Families living in poverty are exposed to high risks in the private rental sector across the Central and Eastern European countries. A significant proportion of low-income (urban) families have been pushed out of the social rented sector and have found solutions only in the private rented sector or in settlements further from urban centres. Much of the private rental market is informal. The supply side is dominated by casual landlords, with housing increasingly becoming a desirable investment among upper-income families. Liberal legal regulation has created severe risks in the system, both for owners and tenants (Hegedüs et al. 2013).

Due to the lack of affordable public sector housing, people facing poverty are moving to cheaper segments of the owner-occupied sector, typically to homes of low quality and unfavourable locations.

While house prices are increasing, there are growing differences between them depending on location and housing quality. Regional inequalities increase the gaps in house prices, which again contributes to growing social inequality. Moreover, the quality of housing stock in the New Member States is significantly worse than that of the more prosperous northern and western European Member States, e.g., in terms of overcrowding and floor space.

“ Bratislava and Budapest market rent rates are comparable with those of Berlin, and households spend on average more than 45% of their income on private market rents in Bucharest, Budapest and Zagreb, and close to 55% in Bratislava.

Even though a large share of housing is vacant in the four countries – between 10-16% of the total stock (EUROSTAT 2015, OECD Affordable Housing Database 2020) – empty flats are not put onto the rental market due to legal uncertainty in the private rental sector and hence remain out of reach for needy households.

Housing affordability problems are fuelled by increasing housing prices and growing market rents and utility costs. Housing prices and market rents are very high relative to income, especially in capital cities, often exceeding or approaching those of growing European cities with a strong market background.

Bratislava and Budapest market rent rates are comparable with those of Berlin, and households spend on average more than 45% of their income on private market rents in Bucharest, Budapest and Zagreb, and close to 55% in Bratislava.

The Slovak capital is associated with strong affordability concerns; there, housing prices

increased by 13% in just over a year, with more modest increases in Bucharest (3.6%), Budapest (4.76%), and Zagreb (7.38%) between 2020 and 2021 (Deloitte 2021). In addition, as a consequence of utility and energy price liberalisation, housing costs have

risen rapidly in all countries, causing hardship for many. Hence, delays with utility payments or mortgage repayments affect considerable portions of the population in all countries, ranging from 5.2% in Slovakia to close to 14% in Romania (EU-SILC data, see Table 1 below).

Figure 2 / Housing affordability challenges, 2020

Source: *Deloitte 2021, **EU-SILC ILC_MDES07\$DEFAULTVIEW, ***EU-SILC ILC_MDES06\$DEFAULTVIEW, ****EU-SILC ILC_LVHO05A__custom_1513630

	Average transaction price of new dwelling (EUR/sqm)*	Multiple of annual gross salary required to purchase a 70 sqm dwelling (years)*	Share of households with arrears on utility bills (%)**	Share of households with arrears on mortgage or rent payment (%)***	Share of households living in dwellings with deficiencies (%)****
Croatia	1,688	8.1	13.6	0.8	9.4
Hungary	1,657	8.4	10.4	2.1	20.4
Romania	1,332	7	13.9	0.4	10.0
Slovakia	1,941	10.6	5.2	3.6	4.9

3.1.2 / How policy responds to the affordability challenge

In the Central and Eastern European countries, policy responses to date have not compensated for the challenges caused by mass privatisation in the 1990s and the ownership-focused shift of the 2000s.

The 1990s were dominated by housing privatisation, the dismantling of socialist-era institutions (including the settlement of 'old loans' and the completion of stalled construction projects) and the building of new state and market institutions. The second main period started around the 2000s, with increasing housing construction and the expansion of mortgage lending, for which there was varying degrees of public support. The main priority of housing policy

was to subsidise the owner-occupied sector through VAT tax credits, credit subsidies, and personal income tax credit schemes. Although there were also attempts to support public housing programmes like social housing, youth rental housing, etc., schemes were often short-term, based on political incentives, and then shut down due to budgetary constraints (Hegedüs et al. 2019).

Housing investment went through a downturn after the 2008 crisis, followed by a new upturn after 3-7 years, again with priority being given to the owner-occupied sector. The average number of new dwellings (per 1,000 inhabitants) built in the New Member States of Europe followed a clear trend: after a decline in the 1990s, it grew from the end of the decade until the

2008 crisis, and after a five-year decline, it rose again. Slovakia followed this trend most closely among the four countries covered in this study. Hungary performed better up to 2008, but the post-2008 values are substantially below the New Member States values, while Croatia's decline came earlier. Romania broadly followed the trend, but on average underperformed the New

Member States' average over the period covered. These processes have taken place in specific circumstances in different countries at different points due to macroeconomic, political and institutional factors, which are key to understanding the lack of affordable housing programmes and addressing housing vulnerabilities (Alpopi et al. 2014, Hegedüs et al. 2019, Mikus 2022, Radu 2015, Vidova 2018).

Figure 3 / New housing completions per 1,000 people 1990-2021

Source: EMF 2021

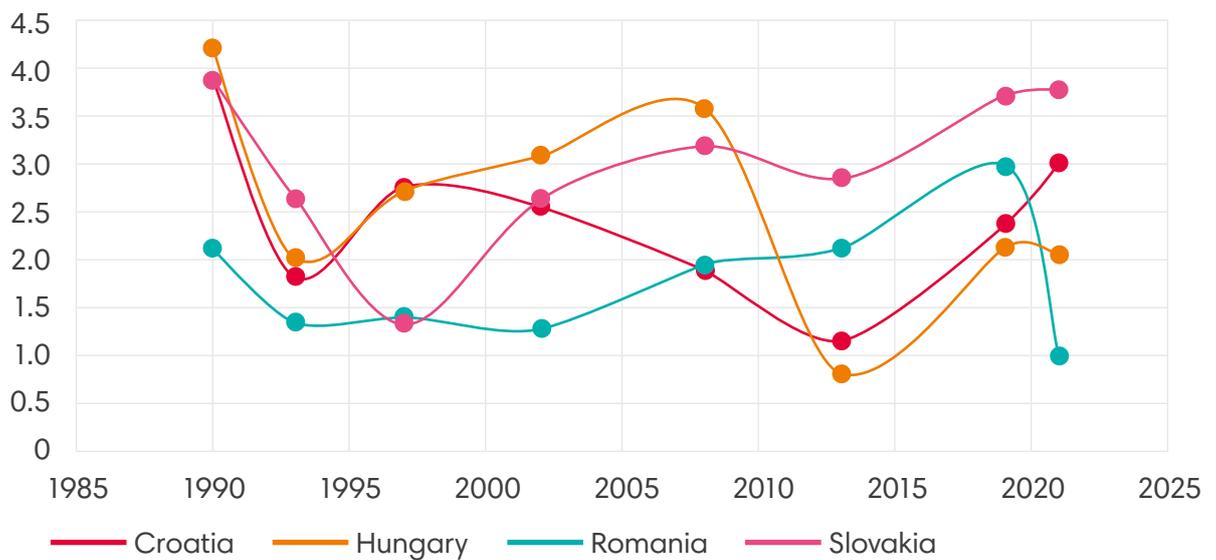
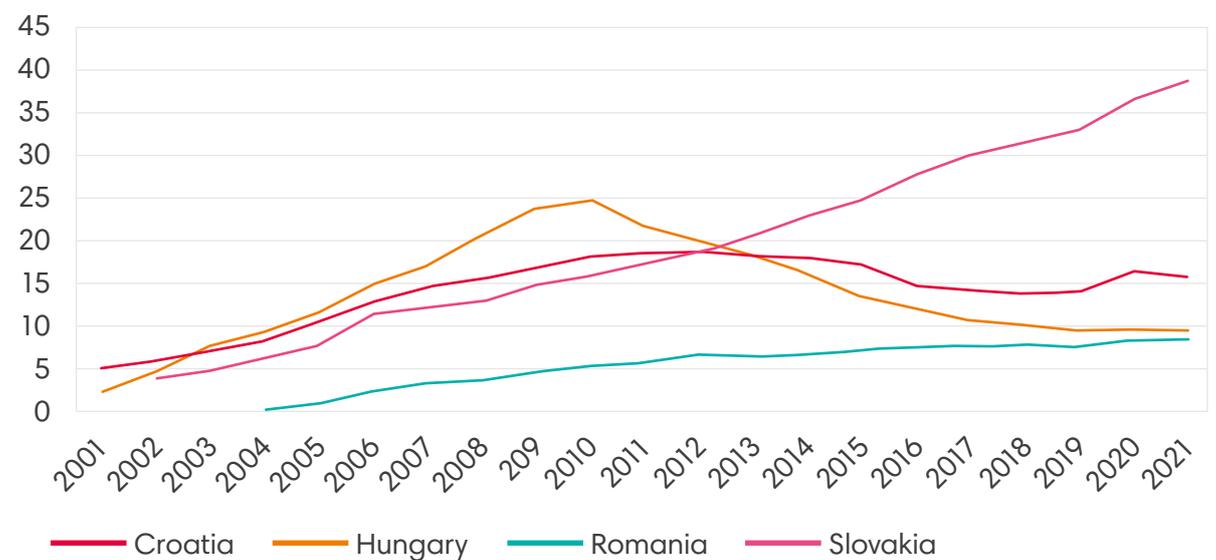


Figure 4 / Total outstanding residential loans to GDP ratio (%)

Source: EMF 2021



A significant share of housing transactions is still cash-based, therefore intra-family and intergenerational transfers play a major role, exacerbating social inequalities and the vulnerabilities of households from less affluent social backgrounds. Whereas housing finance was built up in the New Member States from the 2000s, reaching 16% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2008, its growth varied across countries. Then, after the 2008 crisis, the paths of the countries diverged. For example, Slovakia has witnessed consistent dynamic growth, whereas Romania is lagging behind the trend of the New Member States (Hegedüs et al. 2019).

“ Mainstream housing policy measures, while differing across the four countries, are focused on more affluent groups.

All countries have run small programmes for the population groups with the lowest income, among them people without homes, but mainstream housing policy measures, while differing across the four countries, have still been focused on more affluent groups. To reduce the housing cost overburden, housing allowance schemes have been introduced. However, these schemes were made less effective due to inefficient targeting and means testing and scarce budgetary resources. Thus, they could not compensate for utility cost and rent increases (FAP/FEANTSA 2022). In addition, mainstream housing policy measures are often combined with family policy measures, economic interventions, and energy policy, which are especially prone to government programme changes. Most programmes support home ownership through capital grants, tax subsidies, interest subsidies, mortgage payment allowances or mortgage guarantee schemes, but eligibility conditions for subsidies are different in terms of which income and demographic groups are targeted, contributing to great variation across the four countries.

3.2 / Barriers to scaling up: The challenge of provision

3.2.1 / How sustainable are current housing-led programmes?

Among the four countries, Housing First and housing-led programmes have been implemented predominantly in Hungary and Slovakia by NGOs that provide a significant proportion of mainstream homelessness services. With only a few exceptions, the mainstream homelessness service organisations are involved in Housing First-led initiatives. In Croatia and Romania, initiatives for providing housing for people experiencing homelessness are very sporadic and small-scale, and they are all bottom-up initiatives carried out by NGOs. In Romania, more importantly, housing-led programmes have predominantly targeted the eradication of illegal Roma settlements.

Funding for Housing First/led interventions is linked with project-based programmes, mainly financed by the ESIF, which means that these interventions are only temporary, and service providers cannot build up and maintain the permanent capacity to provide permanent housing and related support services for their clients. In Hungary, housing-led initiatives have been implemented since the mid-2000s, first from national funding and then also from ESF in both programming periods (2007–2013 and 2014–2020). In Slovakia, the first initiatives were launched by NGOs in the mid-2010s and the ESF-funded housing-first programme was launched only in 2021. In Hungary, programmes supported by the central budget were typically short-term (6–12 months), while the ESF-funded programmes sometimes ran for longer; for two to four years. However, project

implementers typically ran shorter projects, as they judged longer-term commitments as rather risky, mainly because of the large workload and administrative burdens of the projects, the lack of human capacity and general uncertainty about the social provision system. The Slovak ESF-funded housing-first projects are two years long and still under implementation. In both countries, the implementers of ESF-funded housing-first projects do not receive any additional funding after project closure to help clients to sustain their housing. In Slovakia, another round of housing-first calls is planned in the current programming period, but the funding has to be spent on new clients, not on clients who have already benefitted from running projects. In Hungary, after almost two decades of supporting smaller-scale housing-led programmes (from the national budget and/or ESF), the government does not plan further financing for any complex housing-led programmes that specifically target people experiencing homelessness, instead, it aims to expand an 'external service' delivered in regular housing by homeless providers for more stable clients.

The few independent Housing First/led initiatives of NGOs use mixed financing, wherein the role of private donations is crucial. In Slovakia, besides personal resources, registered service providers (e.g. Nota Bene, Vagus and Dedo) can rely on regular public funding (by municipal and regional authorities) to offer services for their clients, and since 2021 these organisations have been involved in the ESF-funded programme. The 'support for independent housing', a type of registered social service, is funded by regional authorities. It is an important resource as it allows organisations to employ two or three social workers who can provide floating social support services after clients are housed. STOPA in Slovakia, on the contrary, does not use public funding for such services but covers such activities

from private donations and runs innovative support and counselling activities. They primarily focus on low-intensity client needs and serve them with rapid rehousing, rent allowance, job market support, debt management support and in-kind donations to bridge critical periods when rehoused. In Romania, one NGO (Casa Iona) supports families to find housing on the private rental market. Seventy-five per cent of their budget comes from personal contributions, and only 25% is public funding. In Hungary, From Streets to Homes Association, a small NGO that has been running housing-led programmes for some years, is not licensed as a homeless service provider, so was not entitled to apply for the ESF-funded Housing First programme. As reported, private contributions amount to 60–80% of From Streets to Homes Association's budget; the remaining part comes from some domestic and directly funded EU grants. In Hungary, some municipalities also have initiatives for housing those without homes, first using some kind of transitory housing and then providing them with low-rent municipal housing. To finance these programmes, municipalities mainly use their own resources.

ESF co-funded projects were typically of a smaller scale than the mainstream programmes of NGOs. So far, all the initiatives have been able to address only a very limited part of the problem of homelessness. In Hungary and Slovakia, the ESF Housing First programmes covered 17 projects each in the last programming period. In Slovakia, ESF projects housed around 200 people, meaning that, on average, 11 people were housed through each project. In Hungary, projects were typically bigger; some even involved 30–40 clients, amounting to approximately 400 people in total. The Slovak NGOs, who started Housing First/led programmes earlier than the ESF-funded projects, were launched to work with more clients (in total,

Nota Bene housed 26, Dedo 27 and Vagus 31 households). Dedo plans to house around 50 families by the end of 2023. In Romania, Casa Iona (working without any EU funding) supports 40-50 families to reintegrate into the mainstream housing sector.

Housing First/led programmes typically target people experiencing homelessness with a wide range of needs, and even in the case of projects that are labelled housing first, they do not exclusively target rough sleepers with severe addictions or psychiatric illnesses. Fidelity to Housing First projects is rather limited in the Central and Eastern European context – e.g., some organisations developed rapid rehousing and homelessness prevention programmes under the housing-first label, mainly because the inspiration for the local adaptations was the Pathways Model from the United States. Core differences concern (for example) the selection of clients: in Slovakia, families experiencing homelessness who are living in shacks and temporary accommodation can be included in the ESF Housing First projects (e.g., Dedo deals only with families), whereas in Hungary, they were fully excluded, because providing temporary accommodation to families is not part of the homelessness provision system but of child welfare provision, and the respective providers were not eligible for funding within the ESIF call. The evaluation of the Hungarian ESF Housing First projects found that around one-third of clients (being long-term rough sleepers with an addiction or psychiatric problems) had the characteristics of the target group of the original Housing First model.

Methodological support and training for housing-first teams are seldom part of the ESIF co-funded Housing First projects. Because of the lack of methodological support, in Hungary and Slovakia, project implementers have very different knowledge of and perception of Housing First

approaches. While the individual projects vary widely in terms of their target groups, the complexity of services and the nature of their organisation, the majority of the projects use the housing-led approach with some elements of the Housing First model. Only a few projects were able to build a multidisciplinary team and separate housing and social support (social and mental health) services entirely, as this would have required the reorganisation of resources and capacities and the acquisition of new staff and skills for which there were no resources. Support need in housing-led programmes can be extensive and needs to be properly resourced, which is a challenge. Only those organisations able to cover the cost from their own revenue (private fundraising) or, like in Slovakia, if they are registered as a social service ('support for independent housing for homeless people'), can sustain floating support for housed clients.

Effective work in multidisciplinary teams is challenged by the low availability of mental health services and the skills gap in professionals working in the field, particularly concerning the application of a harm-reduction approach. Therefore, the results of interventions do not meet expectations. While organisations working with people with addictions could get ESF funding in Slovakia to run Housing First projects, there is a general lack of capacity and funding for such services, as reported by Dedo and Nota Bene (which eventually managed to set up multidisciplinary teams). In Hungary, for similar reasons, only a few projects were able to systematically include psychiatrists and therapists dealing with addictions and mental health problems. Several projects used an external service provision/subcontracting model for providing mental health-related help, which generally did not prove to be efficient as clients were reluctant to trust external professionals, and social workers lacked the knowledge

to effectively motivate them in this respect. The evaluation of Hungarian ESF Housing First projects also found that clients with mental health problems were more likely to drop out or be unable to sustain their housing after the projects ended.

Projects used a mixed housing portfolio and relied primarily on the private rental sector to house individuals and families experiencing homelessness; at the same time, some municipalities provided flats from their own stock, and some used their own dwellings for Housing First interventions. The prevalent use of the private rental sector in housing-led programmes is linked to the small share of municipal housing in Hungary and Slovakia. For example, STOPA in Slovakia worked to build relationships with banks, independent foundations and private benefactors/sympathetic landlords to increase housing supply. Municipalities mainly provided flats that were vacant because of their deteriorated condition, however these are often hard to come by and required significant renovation to bring back into use.

In Slovakia, the city municipalities of Bratislava and Kosice supported the programmes by providing 19 and 10 flats, respectively, which they also renovated. Although the ESIF co-funded the Housing First programme that covered the renovation of municipal units in Hungary, only one project (Budapest City municipality) used the opportunity and renovated 25 flats. The reluctance of municipalities to make use of the funds was connected with the risks of investing in asset management companies. In addition, dramatic increases in construction-related costs and a general lack of developers and construction industry capacity hampered the timely implementation of the projects that were planned using very small budgets and under very strong time pressure. From Streets to Homes Association has been

applying a different rental model for ten years: the organisation agrees with district municipalities in Budapest to renovate flats from the association's own resources, and, in turn, municipalities grant tenant assignment rights to the association. A few organisations also own a limited number of flats (e.g., Dedo has four flats, and From Streets to Homes Association has six flats that are used in their housing-led programmes).

“ In Slovakia, the city municipalities of Bratislava and Kosice supported the programmes by providing 19 and 10 flats, respectively, which they also renovated.

Organisations that run Housing First programmes often use the social rental agency model to create more housing supply for their clients. Organisations need to extend the housing supply for their housing-led programmes, and as their housing portfolios are very limited, they also need to act as intermediaries between tenants and landlords. Thus, they often mediate between tenants and public and private property owners. In the case of municipal housing in Slovakia, municipalities require the NGOs to use the sublet model (the NGO rents flats from the municipality and sublets them to clients), through which they transfer the risk of non-payment to the NGOs. This solution enables NGOs to house clients who do not fully comply with the strict eligibility criteria associated with local municipal housing allocation regulations. From Streets to Homes Association in Hungary uses the sublet model in the private rented sector because of the strong discrimination of private landlords against vulnerable groups. In other ESF projects, both models of subletting and direct contracting between landlords and clients are used, depending on the requirements of the private property owners.

While ESIF Housing First projects covered the complete or majority of the housing costs for clients, once the project ends the retention of housing can become very uncertain for clients, mainly because of the lack of efficient housing allowance systems and high rents in the private rental sector. During project implementation, clients received generous rent support or housing in low-rent public dwellings to facilitate the transition to housing and to sustain independent living. However, although rents in the public housing sector are generally significantly lower than market rent levels, vulnerable clients are more likely to encounter unexpected crises which threaten the long-term security of their housing should they need to move on to private rented housing. The Hungarian evaluation supports this finding: several clients with regular work-based income could find affordable private rentals only in the low-quality end of the market, which often meant substandard housing with unfavourable rental conditions located on the outskirts of cities.

NGOs that run Housing First programmes on a permanent basis in Hungary and Slovakia also provide financial support for clients from their own resources. Because of the very insufficient social benefits system in both countries, organisations need to run additional housing allowance schemes. For example, a guarantee fund serves to bridge the temporary payment difficulties of households, and both Dedo and From Streets to Homes Association are working on how to provide a regular housing allowance to some of their clients who are permanently in vulnerable situations. Moreover, they allocate municipal flats or dwellings in their ownership to the most vulnerable clients and thus provide private rentals for clients in more stable situations. However, the opportunity to allocate different types of flats according to the level of clients' vulnerability can only be leveraged by organisations with mixed portfolios of housing.

3.2.2 / The problem of provider capacity in developing housing-led programmes

Housing-led and Housing First initiatives have played a minimal role in mainstream providers' service portfolios in the Central and Eastern European region. In general, mainstream provision in the region has remained dominated by emergency-response, with few initiatives to house people experiencing homelessness effectively. However, in Croatia, Hungary and Slovakia some licensed services may opt to run supported-housing schemes in stable housing within the framework of institutional services on an ad hoc or temporary basis, using central or regional funding that is provided as regular funding for homelessness service delivery. In addition, it is normally these licensed services that could make use of ESIF funding for small-scale and temporary housing-led projects.

Altogether, however, these initiatives cover a few hundred clients across the whole region compared with the over 15,000 registered service beds in shelters and temporary accommodation places in the four countries and tens of thousands of people in need of support.

Mainstream providers run short of capacity to organise scattered housing-based floating support services, and general funding schemes represent disincentives to extend their service portfolio. In the Central and Eastern European countries, relatively large, shared shelter facilities form the bulk of accommodation-based services, and staffing, quality control, and funding schemes have been adjusted to this service design. More recently, some supported housing schemes (i.e. housing which comes with support) have attempted to move more towards housing-led options. This includes 'external institutional beds' or de-institutionalisation based services for

people with disabilities in Hungary, and halfway housing, or solutions complemented with 'support for independent housing for homeless people' in Slovakia. Short-term housing support schemes for young people leaving institutional care in Croatia also use housing-led options. However, these solutions are reported to be cumbersome because they demand:

- Additional staff that are hardly available and for whom there is no funding
- Real estate management skills that may be missing from the organisations' portfolios
- A shift to complex social work methods that are based on cooperation and integration with other services beyond the social sector, which have not been established in most countries.

Whereas ESIF co-funded initiatives helped leverage the extension or shift to housing-led programmes, the sustainability of the pilots or small-scale programmes is challenged by a general disconnect from mainstream provision and the lack of key social services and benefits for households at risk. To overcome the barriers created by additional costs linked to restructuring service delivery, ESIF could effectively help create momentum to initiate new interventions and activities for which there have been no resources in local or national contexts. However, after the short/mid-term projects end, all stakeholders may face serious challenges. For staff hired for specific additional services, there is no further funding to retain them. For clients in rental housing, support ends after a few months, creating the renewed risk of them losing their homes. As there is a general lack of housing affordability schemes, there

is no mainstream pillar to sustain activities for clients and services to hook onto when programmes end. Whereas some projects were successful at (re)connecting clients with the services they need, complex needs are difficult to address in an effective way with the provisioning system in general. Reportedly, private donations, volunteer-based work and fundraising activities are key to the growth and sustenance of new activities and bridging critical periods. All these potential challenges may prevent organisations from making even the first steps towards creating housing-led programmes. At the same time, in order to shift to a more housing-led service system it is necessary to build capacity within the existing homelessness sector.

Homelessness services possess valuable skills for addressing clients' complex needs and are an imperative support to those that do not succeed in housing programmes. Bridging the gap between providing homelessness services and providing affordable homes to those experiencing homelessness is a huge challenge. The transition to housing can be facilitated by social workers who are best placed to offer services meeting the intense and complex needs of clients. If housing retention support fails, clients need to be readmitted to mainstream services; alternative support packages and pathways may be specifically developed for them to help tackle further traumas.

“ In order to shift to a more housing-led service system it is necessary to build capacity within the existing homelessness sector.

4

Tackling homelessness with housing-led solutions: Lessons from the field

To increase the provision of affordable housing, NGOs and a few municipalities have developed social rental agency schemes. NGOs used varying forms of mediation between homeless households and private and public landlords to increase affordable housing supply and/or mitigate discrimination against vulnerable groups. NGOs like Dedo and From Streets to Homes Association have developed a mixed portfolio using municipal, private rental and their own apartments.

From Streets to Homes Association in Hungary has systematically increased its housing portfolio through agreements with municipalities to provide flats for people experiencing homelessness and has intensively advocated for fundraising and recruiting volunteers to renovate the flats. These NGOs have also intensively used the private rental sector by intermediating between landlords and vulnerable households. Generally, they target socially sensitive property owners (pro-social landlords) willing to lower the rent in turn for risk-mitigating measures provided by the NGOs. All NGOs provide floating support to households in private rentals. Some go further and take over the risk of non-payment. Others even pay financial support to households experiencing temporary difficulties through a guarantee fund generated from private donations. In terms of mediating in the private

rental market, the most successful NGO has been Romanian Casa Iona, which supports 40-50 families yearly to find housing on the private rental market with the help of two social workers.

“ From Streets to Homes Association in Hungary has systematically increased its housing portfolio through agreements with municipalities to provide flats for people experiencing homelessness and has intensively advocated for fundraising and recruiting volunteers to renovate the flats.

To increase scarce social housing stock locally and overcome the lack of capital funding resources, some municipalities have also started to launch social housing agencies in Hungary and Slovakia to involve the private rental market in their provision of affordable housing. In Slovakia, Bratislava launched its pilot at the end of last year. In Hungary, three municipalities (Szombathely and two Budapest districts) have set up their own initiatives. In Croatia, the municipality of Pula plans to launch a Housing First model. It has established an independent NGO (with the expertise of a former branch of the Red Cross) to run the programme. The NGO will identify appropriate private rented accommodation and get funding from the City of Pula for service provision. The city plans to involve some 25 people

in the model who were evicted from a former worker's hostel by the new owner and placed into a building rented by the city. As part of the preparation of the programme, the organisation received training from the Housing First Europe Hub.

Some municipalities regularly allocate social housing to individuals and families without homes and, in doing so, use a transitional or halfway housing model that provides complex support services besides housing. In Hungary, a few municipalities regularly provide flats to those without homes in cooperation with their own homelessness social services or with NGOs that give floating support to clients. For example, Szombathely has operated a model for almost twenty years by which the city links social housing provision with sheltered employment (that is, it offers jobs to clients in a non-competitive/protected environment intended for people with physical or mental health problems); the latter on the one hand ensures a stable income for people experiencing homelessness, and on the other hand, clients are employed to renovate their rental flats. In Budapest, three district municipalities introduced a gradual model by which people or families experiencing homelessness receive intensive social support for skills development, job search, debt management, etc., while they stay in temporary housing. After one or two years, they can enter into a new contractual relationship as regular tenants for a municipal flat if they meet respective income-related and other criteria.

“ Local examples show that halting privatisation and mobilising vacant, dilapidated stock through renovation can effectively increase the supply of social housing for housing-led programmes.

There are a range of regulatory policies that can be adopted by municipalities in order to tackle housing supply. These include reviewing eligibility criteria, setting affordable rents and targeted allocations for those at risk of homelessness. In general, municipalities in the Central and Eastern European region tend to exclude people from access to municipal housing who have no local connections (e.g., no official address in the city), have debts, or have a very low income. Nevertheless, some municipalities have moved to adopt more inclusive regulations. For example, Bratislava City Municipality and District 8 of Budapest have adopted a new decree on municipal housing that creates a rent-setting system adjusted to tenants' income situations. In both cases, there is a flexible allocation system that supports the fairer distribution of housing among different social groups. Moreover, Budapest City Municipality, in addition to the clients of its ESIF housing-first project, placed around 200 people experiencing homelessness into municipal flats in the period 2020-2022 as part of the Covid-19 curfew-related interventions and based on a shift in its mainstream social housing allocation procedure that eventually specifically targeted those without homes. Most tenants have been able to retain their housing.

Local examples show that halting privatisation and mobilising vacant, dilapidated stock through renovation can effectively increase the supply of social housing for housing-led programmes. In the Central and Eastern European countries, a significant part of the municipal housing stock is vacant (around 15-20%) in the long term because of its dilapidated condition. Municipalities have neglected renovation because of the high cost and lack of return from rent. Revenue from the privatisation and selling of plots on which

residential buildings had been demolished has generally been used for purposes other than housing (e.g., covering operating costs), with a few exceptions when the revenue was reinvested and used as a resource for renovation. For example, District 8 Municipality in Budapest, which has a large, disadvantaged population and significant municipal housing, developed a new municipal housing strategy: they practically halted the still ongoing privatisation process and reinvested the revenue from the housing sector (rents and sales of plots) into renovation. Based on its housing strategy, Bratislava also undertook a similar shift and increased its renovation activities, whereas Kosice renovated flats that the city then provided to the NGO Dedo to house families experiencing homelessness.

Densely populated areas can be problematic for implementing high levels of social or supported housing. To avoid issues around segregation from

local communities – a scattered housing approach with targeted community social work should be aimed for. Local examples show that municipalities' vacant units are often concentrated in buildings fully owned by the municipality. Hence, when multi-unit buildings are used to house families and individuals with severe social challenges and poverty backgrounds in a large concentration, the risk of segregation increases. This threat was indicated by several municipalities. In the case of Budapest Municipality, this problem emerged when it placed a larger number of people experiencing homelessness into a single building, as flats were available there. To tackle the emerging segregation, the city municipality employed more social workers from its own homelessness services and cooperated with NGOs who also carry out community development activities and prevention work regarding both the community living in the building and its neighbourhood.

Dispersed housing as a framework for housing-led programmes

The city of Resita in Romania reported that it used dispersed housing to mobilise marginalised households, among them many Roma. The municipality bought 150 flats scattered around the city to improve the living conditions for households living in extreme housing poverty, overcrowded in substandard housing in a block of small flats. A condition of participation was that children had to attend school, while the municipality helped adults to find jobs and finish school (because many of them had become parents as minors and had dropped out of school). Follow-up floating support has also been provided, a significant result of which is that only five families had arrears with housing costs.

More affordable and social housing is needed to scale up housing-led solutions in the Central and Eastern European countries. To increase the supply of affordable and social housing, the municipal housing stock must also be increased by purchasing pre-existing flats or new construction. The limited scale of housing-led programmes is very strongly connected with the lack of capital to invest in social and affordable housing. Strategic developments at city levels show that a variety of interventions need to be combined to increase the supply of housing. For example, Bratislava, in line with its new housing strategy, plans to build 286 municipal flats in the near future in the framework of three projects (one of them is already under construction). In addition, it has started negotiating with private stakeholders to explore initiatives to increase the affordable housing stock. In turn, developers would provide flats for the city. In developing its housing stock, Bratislava can rely on the central government's financial support, which is not available in the other three Central and Eastern European countries examined here.

Without the support of national governments, municipalities cannot increase their housing stock to the extent that will effectively respond to the housing affordability crisis. This support should cover investment and contributions to operating costs to make the maintenance of the sector feasible in the long term. Among the four Central and Eastern European countries, it is Slovakia that has taken the first steps toward creating a more coherent affordable and social housing system, although there are still significant limitations. The central government has been running (grant and repayable) support schemes to develop the municipal housing sector for more than two decades, and in the 2010s, it also incorporated EU funds into the financing of these schemes. However, many bigger cities lack the incentive to use such schemes, partly because central regulations allow them to allocate the stock only at a very low level of rent, which does not cover the cost of the stock. Furthermore, initiatives for modernising the institutional and financing system of the social and affordable housing sector have been launched by two new instruments: social

Drawing on private sector resources for delivering affordable housing

As a single example from among the four countries, Slovak Investment Holding, with its subsidiary, Slovenska Sporitelna, and the Slovenska Sporitelna Foundation, established the joint stock company *Dosupný Domov* to provide affordable housing. The company, using EU-funded financial instruments, buys apartments from the market and rents them out primarily to vulnerable households or households that are discriminated against on the rental market. The company has contracts with fifteen NGOs to provide the needed support services to the households. The proportion of vulnerable households among their tenants is 70%. The rents are set at 20–30% below the market price, and so far, no debts or housing losses have occurred during the three years of its operation. The company has set a target of building a portfolio of 1,500 apartments by 2030.

housing enterprises can be established by non-profit organisations, and limited-profit organisations can draw on funding from the state-owned Slovak Investment Holding, which distributes EU funds in the form of financial instruments, and also finances, among others, social enterprises. These new schemes are intended to motivate private developers to participate in constructing affordable housing. However, as some NGOs have reported, getting funding through these two instruments is still very complicated; therefore, the amendment of related legal regulations has been started, but this may be a lengthy process.

“ There is no effective housing support scheme in any of the four countries, but in Slovakia, as a result of strong advocacy by NGOs and several municipalities, the National Strategy to End Homelessness includes measures for increasing the amount of housing allowance and widening its target groups.

Means-tested housing allowances for low-income households are needed to ensure that households are able to maintain their housing in the mainstream housing sector and prevent their housing marginalisation or becoming homeless. The experience of Housing First-led projects has shown that high market rents make it difficult even for households with a regular income to maintain their housing without further financial support. There is no effective housing support scheme in any of the four countries, but in Slovakia, as a result of strong advocacy by NGOs and several municipalities, the National Strategy to End Homelessness includes measures for increasing the amount of the allowance and widening its target groups.

Fostering institutional cooperation at the local level among social and homelessness

service providers, housing management organisations, local authorities, and the NGO sector is essential for ensuring early intervention and preventing evictions and rough sleeping. There are several good examples of prevention systems that are working effectively. The Hungarian debt management scheme operated between 2004 and 2014 and provided centrally funded financial support, supplemented by local debt-counselling services implemented by trained social workers. A few municipalities (Districts 8 and 14 of Budapest, Budapest City Municipality) in Hungary introduced a ban on eviction from municipal housing without providing alternative accommodation, which in practice requires strong cooperation between temporary accommodation suppliers for those without housing and local social services. District 8 has embedded local cooperation by setting up regular operational and strategic working groups to tackle housing problems. Working groups include social, homelessness and housing stakeholders and relevant departments of local authorities. In Slovakia, Bratislava has already adopted a local housing strategy, and Kosice is in the process of adopting one in which prevention is emphasised. Elaborating national and local housing strategies and strategies to end homelessness can be a practical means of developing a comprehensive approach at every level of government.

Strategies should be evidence-based, revealing the scope of different forms of homelessness based on ETHOS categories. The Slovak national strategy and local strategies in Slovakia and Hungary aim to not only systematically tackle homelessness and prevent housing loss, but are an important means of communicating the actual scope of the problem to politicians and the public.

Many service providers and NGOs highlighted that politicians do not deal with the problem of homelessness and housing exclusion because they claim that it does not exist in their localities or only at a minimal level. Therefore, these organisations advocate for data collection on local and national levels and more effective communication about the scope of homelessness and prevention and inclusive solutions to homelessness. The recently developed Romanian national homelessness strategy follows a similar set of goals.

Creating networks of homelessness service providers, NGOs, and research institutions can be a more effective way to advocate for a shift towards housing-led solutions both on the local and national levels. Networks of homelessness service providers and other interested stakeholders have established a few alliances across Central and Eastern Europe, although these are developing at a very different pace and cover different scopes. In Croatia, the Red Cross unit in Pula, mentioned above, is a key member of the Croatian Network for the Homeless, a network of homelessness service providers which collectively have

already defined a five-year advocacy strategy. In Slovakia, networking and joint advocacy campaigns have evolved around the process of elaborating the National Strategy to End Homelessness. In Hungary, local and national elections provided the opportunity to raise awareness about the housing affordability crisis and advocate collectively for more inclusive policies. Knowledge-building on an international level is also a very important part of advocacy-related capacity building. For example, Slovakian organisations have engaged in intensive communication with the Czech Social Housing Platform, which has been operating for more than a decade and achieved results in mainstreaming the housing-led approach into the domestic housing policy agenda, whereas the Croatian network of homelessness service providers consults with the Housing First Europe Hub.

“ Creating networks of homelessness service providers, NGOs, and research institutions can be a more effective way to advocate for a shift towards housing-led solutions both on the local and national levels.

5

Conclusions: Why housing-led policies are being held back and how this can change

The barriers that limit the introduction and application of more extensive housing-led policies, seem to be rooted in the common historical, institutional, political and structural characteristics of the four countries. The administrative capacity to optimally regulate and tackle issues in general and address homelessness in particular is often rather limited. Policy design is not always sufficiently evidence-based, strategic or participatory, and the different services and levels of the state do not always work well together. Basic descriptive data concerning the extent of homelessness is often lacking, limited, imprecise or out of date. The civil service is often insufficiently able to implement even well-meant regulations. These structural deficiencies have multiple detrimental effects on homelessness: relatively simple regulations and measures that could help prevent homelessness are often missing; municipality-affiliated social services mainly concentrate on emergency responses and are not always well-staffed, prepared or motivated. A lack of proper enforcement may be one of the reasons why (to a varying extent, in all four countries) an underregulated private rental market has emerged in which rental agreements are often informal, and taxes are not always paid – which in turn severely limits the scope for social housing agencies.

While slowly catching up, the countries focused on in this study are still considerably less developed than the EU average. This has multiple adverse effects: there are more people on low incomes who are one crisis away from homelessness; there is very limited availability of nationwide means-tested minimum-income, housing-benefit or other targeted subsidy schemes; there is lack of high-threshold health services; and there are fewer charitable donors and a more limited pool of potential volunteers than in more prosperous EU countries.

State and municipally owned housing stock is scarce. In 1989–1990, as state socialism ended, the prevailing neoliberal ideological orthodoxy, the desire of those who rented from the state to own their homes, and the lack of state resources due to the need to deal with significant new tasks led the state at the national and local level to (re)privatise the majority of its housing stock. In the emerging private rental market, rents have been determined by market forces. Given the low starting point and the economic development and EU integration since then, rents and real estate prices have markedly increased, and social support schemes have not kept up; the effect has been most marked in capital cities and tourist areas. This has caused the number of people experiencing homelessness to soar, and

the very limited, often local housing benefit schemes have proven rather inadequate. 'Turning back' by building or buying up local government-owned housing that can be used for people experiencing homelessness is very expensive and, even if there is the political will, can only happen incrementally.

The political systems of the four countries (ranging from reasonably consolidated new democracies to an electoral autocracy in Hungary), coupled with widespread negative stereotypes, have led to the emergence of political rhetoric and policies that either disregard or vilify people experiencing homelessness. Politicians engaging in such discourse at the national, regional and local levels are prone to either look away from the challenge of widespread homelessness or, even worse, channel prevailing stereotypes to scapegoat those they should be assisting. People experiencing homelessness in these countries often come from discriminated-against social groups (e.g. the Roma minority) – thus, by blaming them or at least targeting scarce communal resources elsewhere, politicians think they can generate more political support than by systematically addressing the causes of homelessness.

A widespread lack of understanding of the causes and potential effective remedies of homelessness by both the public and politicians contributes to the expressly punitive manner of dealing with homelessness.

“ The 2030 agenda for combatting homelessness, to which Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia signed up, may act as a new lever of change.

EU influence on the homelessness policies of these countries is important but remains limited so far. Joining the European Union

should have been a major catalyst for tackling homelessness in Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. It led to EU-wide socially oriented values, pillars and rights (albeit these were mainly codified later), administrative know-how, peer learning opportunities, and especially through the structural funds, additional monetary resources that could be used in this policy area. Indeed, many of the small-scale pilot efforts mentioned in this report were financed with EU funding. Nevertheless, in the last decade and a half, we have learnt that EU membership has generally not produced a sea change in this field. Mitigating homelessness is a part of social policy, a policy area that generally remains under the competence of the Member States, not the EU. EU pressure for change has thus remained somewhat limited. The 2030 agenda for combatting homelessness, to which all four countries signed up, may act as a new lever of change. Thus, references to the work of the EU Platform for Combatting Homelessness and the fact that the agendas of several upcoming EU presidencies stress combatting homelessness could be helpful in this respect.

These structural determinants – a lack of social housing stock, limited administrative capacity, lower-level economic development, stereotypes ripe for exploitation by politicians, and limited EU involvement – will not go away from one day to the next. However, the adverse effects of most of these strategic barriers can be expected to diminish over time. Developments in some countries in the Central and Eastern European region include improvements in advocacy, increasing focus by the EU in the area of homelessness, use of EU funds in meaningful ways, and first attempts to design national strategies. Nevertheless, more robust EU-level framing

is needed as a lever: e.g., ambitious anti-homelessness goals in European Commission annual country-specific recommendations could be the next step. Educating the public as well as decision-makers should also be helpful in the long term: in addition to documenting the merits of the housing-led approach and dispelling negative stereotypes concerning people without housing, enumerating and explaining the several preventable pathways that reproduce homelessness (job loss, arrears in private rentals, mental health crises, divorce, release from institutional care or prison, etc.) should be priorities.

In addition to improving the solidarity of the public and motivating politicians to stand up for people experiencing homelessness, it remains integral to document, evaluate and share successful policies through the development of pilot projects in a format digestible to domestic policymakers. At the same time, the private rental market needs to be properly regulated and taxed, and small-scale subsidised social housing agencies need to be launched that can match at least some of the people experiencing homelessness with private landlords.

A further structural insight we gleaned from our work is the key role that municipal politicians and city management can play.

Even in countries where the national policy is lacking, there is impressive variability in homelessness policies across cities, which suggests that there is room for more and better policies in settlements where little is now being structurally done for people experiencing homelessness.

Municipalities could benefit from horizontal peer-to-peer learning to enable the sharing of more progressive

housing-led practice. This could be achieved through deepening international networks, facilitating association between municipalities or creating 'hubs' to showcase good practice. Additionally, helping them identify (possibly latent) target groups that need housing support and letting them copy housing-led solutions that structurally alleviate homelessness that are also politically feasible.

The fact that homelessness policies (other than some emergency services) in the region are nowhere near as developed as in several countries of Western Europe also presents an opportunity for the advocates of housing-led approaches.

“ Dedicated NGOs with a housing-led focus, as well as church and local government-affiliated outfits that implement small-scale, innovative projects, can move the needle nationwide, despite these structural barriers.

Advocacy should explicitly build on the possibility of taking a shortcut and directly moving to a housing-led approach instead of building up costly and ineffective emergency response capacity. Instead of first expending considerable resources upon institutionalised services built on the staircase principle and emergency-focused responses and then switching to housing-led solutions, as is needed in several more developed countries, with enough convincing evidence and relentless advocacy, actors within the countries covered in this study could possibly opt to build housing-led services first, thereby avoiding a costly policy detour.

Dedicated NGOs with a housing-led focus, as well as church and local government-affiliated outfits that implement small-scale, innovative projects, can move the needle nationwide, despite these structural barriers.

Because of the structural barriers outlined above, NGOs, often in cooperation with local governments that are open and ready to identify new, structurally effective ways to combat homelessness, can play a paramount role in catalysing the social policies of these countries in the longer term. They can show that there is an alternative to only providing emergency services and that housing-led solutions can work.

Alongside a low-capacity, top-down bureaucracy, NGOs can be the agents of

change. They can show that NGOs and local governments can work successfully side by side. In addition to participating in implementation, they can work together, influence policy design, and participate in monitoring. To achieve those goals, however, requires that – in addition to implementing housing-led pilot initiatives – they move out of their comfort zone in several directions. In the next section and in the country-specific recommendations, we spell out what we think that would take.

6

Recommendations



Here we detail our recommendations for international funding and advocacy organisations, EU-level actors and practitioners that are applicable across all four countries and in many other countries across the Central and Eastern European region. For recommendations and priorities tailored to the individual country context, as well as our recommendations for national policymakers, see the four country briefs.



6.1 / Recommendations for international funding and advocacy organisations

To contribute to the scaling up and expansion of housing-led projects as a means of ending homelessness, we recommend the following actions be taken:

- Recognise there are fewer charitable donors than in more prosperous EU countries and prioritise Central and Eastern Europe
- Directly champion programmes which prioritise housing-led approaches to ending homelessness over emergency responses and staircase provision
- Fund pilot projects and document, evaluate and share successful policies with domestic policymakers
- Support knowledge sharing programmes with resources, templates, expert partners and/or know-how, to support NGOs and other organisations
- Provide ongoing support and/or funding for long-term advocacy and effective networking and partnership work
- Provide support and funding to organisations for awareness-raising work, particularly drawing attention to structural barriers which setback progress
- Advocate for the issue at European Union level and to the European Commission's agenda (in consultation with and complementing the work of FEANTSA and other Europe-wide civil organisations).



6.2 / Recommendations for Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) practitioners

Housing-led and Housing First initiatives have played a minimal role in mainstream providers' service portfolios in the Central and Eastern European region. Housing practitioners should aim at transforming their own service delivery to be more housing-led. Through domestic and international partnerships, NGOs have a key role to play in transforming the housing system by:

- Improving their own service provision to move to a housing-led approach through:
 - » Improving training for existing and new staff (to include training on harm reduction approaches, Housing First and trauma informed practice)
 - » Exploring move-on options to support people into permanent housing
 - » Trialling different tenancy and accommodation types to increase housing supply, flexibility and choice
 - » Where applicable deliver services that separate housing management and social support
- Raising public awareness of the extent and routes into homelessness and focus on the dissemination of good practice alongside networks of operational, academic and press partners
- Fostering country-wide cooperation and participate in international networks to advocate for change and tap into international learning and best practice
- Participating in the design of national and regional strategies and ESIF+ programming, implementation and monitoring
- Advocating for housing-led nationwide policy improvements and widespread homelessness prevention policies and a phasing out of homelessness policies that prioritise emergency responses as a way of managing homelessness
- Cooperating with local governments (and, if necessary, channelling subsidies) trialling social rental agency matching schemes between private landlords and people experiencing homelessness
- Advocating for increased regulation of the private rental market to improve standards and affordability.



6.3 / Recommendations for municipal governments and city managers

This research has identified very different attitudes and approaches to homelessness across local governments, often within the same country. This means there is a real opportunity to develop more effective housing policies in towns and cities, especially where little is currently done to end homelessness. We propose the following recommendations:

- Prioritise the development and expansion of the municipal housing sector by:
 - » Supporting and incentivising construction of affordable and accessible social housing
 - » Carrying out renovation work to empty or substandard buildings
 - » Purchasing homes through the private rented sector for use as social housing
 - » Leveraging privately owned housing that is available for rent through a social rented agency model
- Formally support a future transition to housing-led approaches and a move away from emergency/staircase provision
- Identify and engage with local service delivery partners that prioritise housing-led approaches
- Introduce or expand local welfare benefit programs targeted at people experiencing homelessness
- Actively participate in the design of national and regional strategies and the programming, implementation and monitoring of dedicated EU funds
- Municipalities could benefit from horizontal peer-to-peer learning to enable the sharing of more progressive housing-led practice. This could be achieved through deepening international networks, facilitating association between municipalities or creating 'hubs' to showcase good practice.



6.4 / Recommendations for national governments

Strategic leadership from national governments is key to ending homelessness. Effective leadership will be critical to underpin a national programme and to help overcome some of the barriers to delivery outlined above. This should be in collaboration with local delivery partnerships, a genuinely cross departmental approach at national level, multi-agency working at local level and a commitment to co-production with people with lived experience.

National governments should:

- Act on the Lisbon Agreement, and produce an evidenced based action plan that will get everybody who is homeless into a safe and secure home by 2030
- Take responsibility in tackling homelessness and work on prevention and early intervention
- Where applicable, decriminalise homelessness
- Provide equal access to public services such as health care, education, and social services
- Improve measures to gather relevant and comparable data to help assess the extent of homelessness
- Implement long-term, community-based, housing-led, integrated national homelessness strategies
- Provide funding to municipalities to purchase and maintain public housing and to enable means-tested housing allowances
- Provide robust regulation of the private rental market.

3. <https://www.2021portugal.eu/en/news/lisbon-declaration-on-the-european-platform-on-combatting-homelessness>



6.5 / Recommendations for EU agencies and units

Given the structural barriers that inhibit effectively addressing the challenge of homelessness in these countries, bottom-up policy improvement, has limitations. The one external actor that could achieve a breakthrough is the EU. The agenda has been set with Principle 19 of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the Lisbon Declaration, and the launch of the European Platform on Combating Homelessness, and as this research shows more could be done.

Our recommendations are to:

- Ensure that European Commission country-specific recommendations stress the importance of reinforcing and prioritising preventative and integrated housing-led approaches that seek to end, not simply manage, homelessness
- Monitor the implementation of national anti-homelessness strategies with the Lisbon Declaration in mind; the EU could even set up a shadow reporting framework of independent experts and civil organisations (as it did with respect to the systemic exclusion of the Roma)
- Monitor the ESIF+ financing channelled to Central and Eastern European Countries, in particular checking whether resources are being adequately used to achieve the goals associated with the jointly formulated Lisbon Declaration targets
- European Commission-affiliated units with homelessness or overlapping issues within their remit should contribute to the generation of reliable data and evidence that will increase the chance of policy change and future funding.

7

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