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Escaping precariousness? Trajectories of citizens from Eastern and Central Europe living in Switzerland

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Despite the increase in migration of people from Eastern and Central Europe since the gradual implementation of a free movement regime with the European Union (EU) in the 2000s (Scholten & Van Ostaijen, 2018), there is little research documenting the trajectories of people from this region living in very precarious situations in Switzerland. Yet a quarter of homeless people are from Eastern Europe (Dittmann et al., 2022). They combine vulnerability factors such as difficulty in finding a job in Switzerland, low levels of education and ethnic discrimination (Drilling et al., 2021; Martin & Bertho, 2020). The research, which was conducted at the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland from 2021 to 2023 with funding from the National Centre of Competence in Research LIVES, aims to fill this gap by identifying the vulnerabilities and resources of poor people from Eastern Europe in Switzerland in the areas of work, housing, health and social relations (for the full report, see Temesvary et al., 2023). Our theoretical framework was the concept of destitution, ◆

defined as a process of accumulation of vulnerabilities characterised by a systemic context of lack of social rights, exclusion from social protection systems and restricted access to services. The aim was to understand the trajectories of people in destitution and the factors that enabled or prevented them from escaping. This research was conducted in the cities of Zurich and Geneva, which are particularly attractive from an economic point of view and have a high proportion of illegal immigrants (estimated at 28,000 for Zurich and 13,000 for Geneva, according to Morlok et al., 2015).

The study is based on three types of data:

1. biographical interviews using a life calendar (Morselli & Berchtold 2023), conducted with citizens from Eastern and Central Europe in precarious situations (n=38);
2. a questionnaire survey measuring multidimensional vulnerability among this population (n=126);
3. informative interviews with professionals in the social work field (n=16).

Young, mobile people with no legal status, most of them from Romania

The vast majority (63%) of participants in the study are Romanian (fig.1).

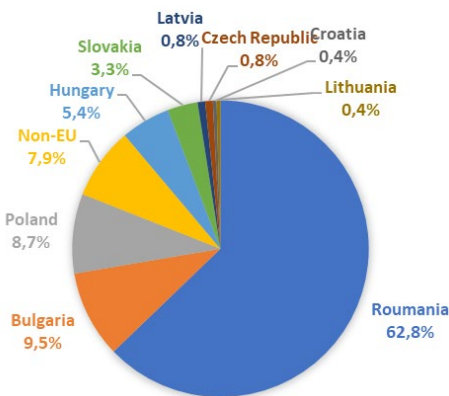


Fig. 1: Country of origin of all participants (n=164)

Eight out of ten people have not studied beyond compulsory education. The Roma community is particularly well represented (two out of three participants). Four out of five people (82%) have no legal status in Switzerland and the same number have no health insurance. Over half (58%) are single. Most of them have been coming to Switzerland for several years, mainly to find work to help support their families and improve living conditions. Highly mobile, the majority of participants travel back and forth to their country of origin for several months at a time (circular migration, see Triandafyllidou, 2013). Compared to the homeless population in Switzerland, the participants are younger (85% aged between 18 and 45) and there are more women (30% of respondents), especially in Geneva, where families also come.

As EU citizens, these people can enter Switzerland freely and stay for three months. After this period, they must apply for a permit. However,

without an employment or housing contract, the application is rejected. Most social and medical services then become inaccessible or very limited, leading to situations of destitution.

Multiple vulnerabilities, with employment at the heart of the issue

Respondents perceive access to employment as a major problem, followed by:

- housing
- access to healthcare
- opportunities for integration (fig. 2).

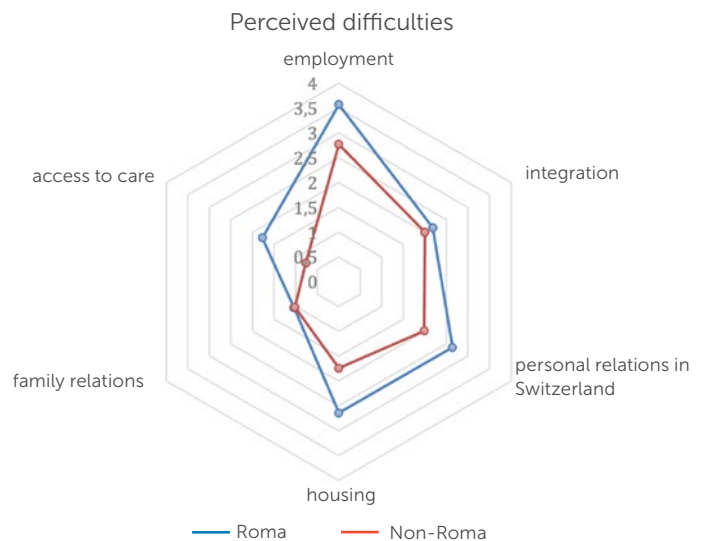


Fig. 2: Perception of the difficulties experienced by respondents in different areas (0 = not a problem, 4 = major problem)

Members of the Roma community report significantly greater difficulties than others in accessing housing, employment and the quality of social relations in Switzerland¹. These people are also more likely to experience repression and discrimination (Battaglini & Hasdeu, 2017; Martin & Bertho, 2020). There are significant differences between cities² : it is more difficult to find housing and access health care in Zurich than in Geneva, where the cantonal immigration policy is more restrictive (Roudit et al., 2022).

Precarious jobs in the informal economy against the backdrop of begging

Faced with poor socio-economic conditions and low wages in their countries of origin, the study participants migrate primarily to find

1 Average comparison by ANOVA: housing p=0.002; employment p=0.009; relationships p=0.048
 2 Housing p=0.001; access to care p=0.029

work in Switzerland, mostly from Romania and Bulgaria, the poorest countries in Europe (Hugree et al., 2017). However, hopes of better conditions in Switzerland are soon dashed. People with very low levels of education, or who cannot make the most of their qualifications, work only in low-skilled sectors or in the informal market. They very rarely get a declared job because employers refuse to take the necessary steps. This practice helps to keep undeclared workers in a situation of dependency, low pay and insecurity (Amarelle, 2010). There are gendered patterns: women are more likely to be employed in the domestic economy, sometimes living with their employers in conditions of insecurity, dependency and even abuse; men have short-term contracts in construction and agriculture. Begging and sex work, which is rarely declared, are common means of subsistence.

The making of homelessness

The biographical interviews show that respondents rarely lived without housing in their country of origin (a third still have housing there). Upon their arrival in Switzerland, they find themselves in a precarious housing situation (fig. 3). Employment difficulties and the lack of residence permits create a vicious circle that prevents decent housing.

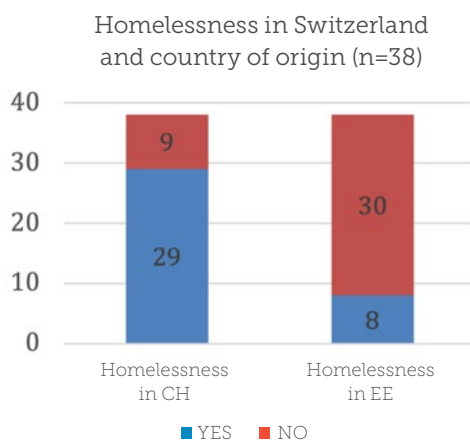


Fig. 3 : Homelessness situation in Switzerland, compared to home country

Of the 38 respondents, fourteen were sleeping rough or in emergency accommodation in Geneva (n=18) and eleven in Zurich (n=20). There is a difference in policy: in Zurich, it is virtually impossible to stay in a shelter for more than two weeks. Geneva has developed more facilities, but the structures are often overstretched and unsuitable for medium-term accommodation. In Geneva, 10% of respondents sleep in France, just a stone's throw from the border.

Deterioration, stagnation or escape: three types of trajectories

A longitudinal analysis of professional, residential and relational situations allows us to identify three types of trajectory:

1. Deterioration of the situation after arrival in Switzerland: this is the case for the majority of the respondents and particularly affects those who had a qualified job in their country of origin;
2. Stagnation of precariousness: this is particularly the case for the Roma, whose living conditions were already very difficult before migration;
3. Escape from destitution: after obtaining a stable job, a residence permit and housing, the living conditions of a minority of people improved. This primarily concerns young women who want to stay in Switzerland and have received support to help them integrate.

Four main factors influenced these trajectories:

1. career transitions (loss or acquisition of a stable job);
2. a change in legal status (remaining without rights on the territory or obtaining a residence permit);
3. health (in the absence of health insurance and adequate care, physical or mental health problems have a lasting impact on the trajectory);
4. social relations (caring, long-term support from professionals in the social work or voluntary sector may have been a crucial factor in successful integration).

While most of the cases studied show a deterioration or stagnation of the situation after migration to Switzerland, genuine support policies tailored to the aspirations of the individuals concerned sometimes enable them to emerge from destitution. This research illustrates the complexity of situations and the multiple needs of people from Eastern Europe who have come to Switzerland. Appropriate, non-discriminatory policy responses, with effective coordination in the social work sector, are needed to improve the integration of people from this type of migration.

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