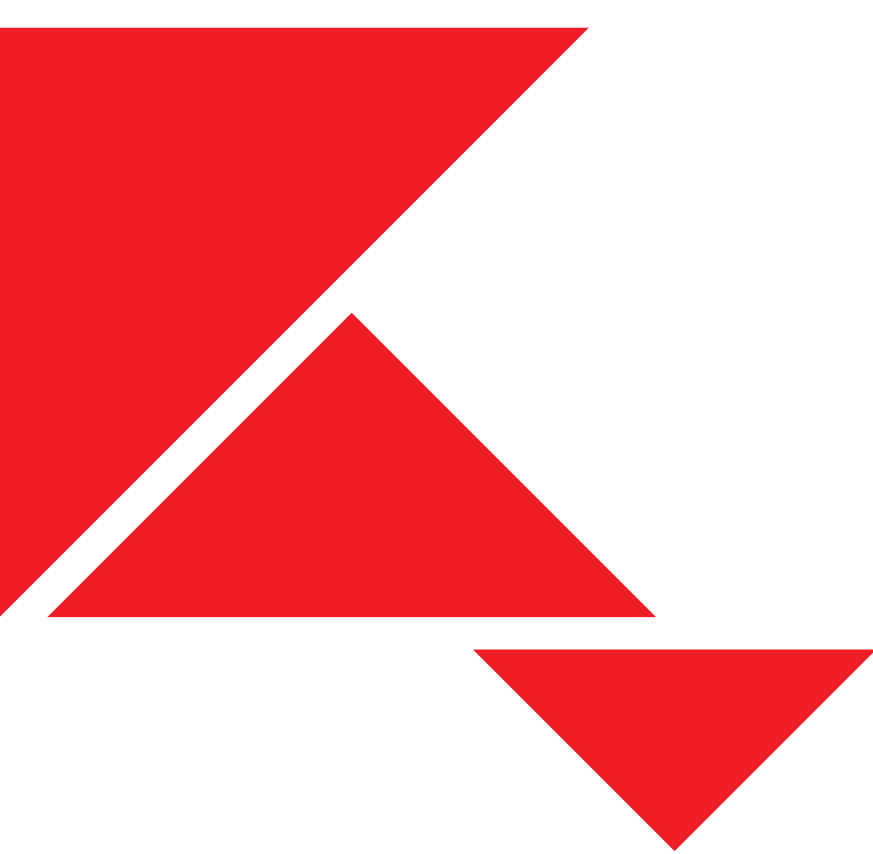


LIVES Working Paper 92/2022

# Conceptualising destitution with focus on Central and Eastern European citizens living in Switzerland

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## RESEARCH PAPER

<http://dx.doi.org/10.12682/lives.2296-1658.2022.92>

ISSN 2296-1658

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## Abstract

Destitution can be understood as a severe form of systemic social deprivation in which people are unable to sustain themselves and their families through their own work activities because they encounter various administrative and legal obstacles. Destitute people are therefore excluded from most state-run social and medical services and their access to public resources and institutions is very limited. This new form of extreme poverty and social exclusion has posed several novel challenges to the Swiss welfare state, in which traditional, residence-based institutions are only moderately able to handle the issues.

In the first chapter, we depict the theoretical development of destitution from the early studies on absolute poverty to the modern, multifaceted thinking on relative poverty and social exclusion. In this chapter we primarily focus on the vulnerable situation of undocumented migrants and homeless people to exemplify the most precarious forms of destitution in Western societies. In the second chapter, we scrutinise the precarious living circumstances of destitute European migrants both in their home countries and Switzerland. We explore the role of penalising social policies and the increasing social exclusion of the Roma and/or poor people in the CEE region. After that, we analyse their living conditions in Switzerland from the viewpoint of the availability and accessibility of social institutions. The chapter concludes that destitute CEE migrants encounter substantial difficulties in living in Switzerland, are invisible to the institutions of the Swiss welfare state, and their fundamental human rights are often questioned in the areas of housing, healthcare, and the labour market.

## Title

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### Keywords

- > Destitution
- > Migration
- > Central and Eastern Europe
- > Social policies
- > Life course

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\*\* A revised version of the first part of this Working Paper has been published as a journal article and is available under <https://ojs.lib.unideb.hu/parbeszed/article/view/10517>

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to examine the concept of destitution through the experiences of mobile Central and Eastern European (CEE) citizens living without residence permit in Switzerland. Destitution can be understood as a severe form of systemic social deprivation in which people are unable to sustain themselves and their families through their own work activities because they encounter various administrative and legal obstacles. Destitute people are therefore excluded from most state-run social and medical services and their general access to public resources and institutions is very limited. This new form of extreme poverty and social exclusion has posed several novel challenges to the Swiss welfare state, in which traditional, residence-based institutions are only moderately able to handle the issues. In the two chapters of this working paper, we would like to 1) conceptualise the notion of destitution and 2) discuss the living conditions of destitute CEE citizens living in Switzerland.

In the first chapter, we introduce and analyse the concept of destitution from a historical and theoretical point of view up to the current understanding of the phenomenon. In doing so, we depict the theoretical development of destitution from the early studies on absolute poverty to the modern, multifaceted thinking on relative poverty and social exclusion. In this chapter we primarily focus on the vulnerable situation of undocumented migrants and homeless people to exemplify the most precarious forms of destitution in Western societies. The second chapter of the paper explores the precarious living conditions of Central and Eastern European EU citizens living in Switzerland. Within this chapter, we scrutinise the precarious living circumstances of destitute European migrants both in their home countries and Switzerland. We explore the role of penalising social policies and the increasing social exclusion of the Roma and/or poor people in the CEE region. After that, we analyse their living conditions in Switzerland from the viewpoint of the availability and accessibility of social institutions. The chapter concludes that destitute CEE migrants encounter substantial difficulties in living in Switzerland, are invisible to the institutions of the Swiss welfare state, and their fundamental human rights are often questioned in the areas of housing, healthcare, and the labour market.

The novelty of the current study is that the life situation of destitute EU migrants is only rarely examined in Swiss sociology, social policy, and social work. The few available studies tend to analyse their living conditions in Switzerland and do not explore the vulnerabilities that mobile destitute people amassed in their home countries and during their migration. The practical relevance of the working paper is that the growing number of destitute EU citizens is leading to brand-new challenges for Swiss social institutions. The plight of migrating Roma in

Geneva, the hardships of Eastern European street sex workers in Zürich and the new begging crisis in Basel clearly show these demanding challenges for both Swiss society and social policy. These crucial social problems may be exacerbated in the future - related to the COVID crisis – in the absence of effective socio-political responses. During the past ten years, with the open border policy within the EU/EFTA region, an increasing immigration of the poor from CEE countries have been observed. Unfortunately, in the absence of targeted projects and available statistical data, researchers have only limited knowledge of the extent and depth of this phenomenon.

This current working paper is related to an empirical mixed-method research project called “*Routes into Destitution: Identifying vulnerabilities and coping strategies in the life course of undocumented Central and Eastern European citizens in Switzerland*”, and supported by the Swiss Centre of Expertise in Life Course Research LIVES. This research project is conducted by the research group HomeS within the Institute Social Planning, Organisational Change and Urban Development ISOS, School of Social Work at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland. Through this study, the Swiss and Eastern European researchers and other experts involved attempted to fill the empirical void in destitution studies regarding the context of destitution and economic migration, and explored the core of the problem by collecting data directly from the destitute people at low-threshold homelessness services in Zurich and Geneva.

Our first interim working paper offers a theoretical understanding on destitution and a first insight into the social vulnerabilities and resources of destitute Central and Eastern European migrants living in Switzerland. In doing so, we process the available resources written in this topic to prepare the theoretical and methodological basis of the upcoming empirical data collection that will be carried out at social services with the target group in the second period of the project. Accordingly, the goal of this current paper is to provide a comprehensive overview about the vulnerabilities of undocumented CEE immigrants living in Switzerland, by using and synthesizing the available literature and statistical data.

## **I. CONCEPTUALISING DESTITUTION: THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICAL RELEVANCE**

### **1. Introduction**

This chapter analyses destitution as a new and expressive notion in describing the multifaceted nature of essential poverty and severe social exclusion. The novel concept of destitution emerged in the social sciences to challenge the dominant neoliberal, income-based approach of poverty studies and to scrutinise poverty and social deprivation in a multi-layered dimension considering the lack of resources in the areas of the housing market, employment, and family relationships, as well as in mental and physical health. Although destitution can also be described as the lack of individual biological and psychological resources, our paper primarily examines the socio-political, structural reasons lying behind the notion, focusing on two areas: social rights and entitlements for homeless people and undocumented migrants. Although the term ‘destitution’ incorporates multiple sociological, philosophical, economic, and political dimensions, the current paper primarily applies the theoretical and practical approach of social work and social policy in conceptualising the notion.

### **2. The theoretical development of destitution**

The notion of destitution was first applied in the poverty studies conducted in Victorian England at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to describe the immense misery of urban poor households. As the thriving Western welfare states successfully eliminated absolute poverty for decades in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the relative approach to poverty became dominant in both social sciences and state-run welfare policies. Nevertheless, the new social problems characterising modern risk societies (Beck, 1992) require a novel understanding of poverty which considers poverty not only in terms of financial and material deprivation, but recognises its multifaceted features as well.

#### *2.1 From absolute poverty to destitution*

People live in absolute poverty when they are deprived of even the most essential goods and other resources needed to live as a human being in society. Thus, the notion of absolute poverty refers to a certain state of living in which the satisfaction of biological needs for food and shelter is seriously hindered by one’s unfavourable living conditions. These threatening social circumstances can be widespread over a whole geographical area (horizontal approach) or can be sporadic, affecting only certain individuals and groups whose social status steadily falls

behind the others' in a given community (vertical approach). According to Dominelli (2019), absolute poverty has two dimensions that influence the social status of affected people. These dimensions are the *domestic relational space* and the *public relational space*. Domestic relational space refers to “*the individual managing to meet daily needs and routines*” while public relational space shows the governmental responses and policies aimed at managing poverty. Dominelli states that poverty must be contemplated and handled in a geographical context. This means that both individual actions and strategies (coping strategies), and state-induced reactions (measures and legislation) should basically be observed in the framework of the nation-state (particularly in the absence of a unified European social policy), applying within its geographic and administrative borders.

Although early Malthusian approaches mostly considered poverty as a personal failure that originated from the inappropriate behaviour and poor morals of individuals (Daly, 1971), later studies revealed the inevitable importance and effect of broader social structures (Lepénies, 2017). In particular, the early urban studies of Booth and Rowntree, carried out among destitute industrial workers in the cities of York and London, discovered that the low wages paid to the workers were the primary reason for financial poverty, and that proper political measures might reduce financial needs. However, even in Booth's work the moral description of poverty, namely that poverty degrades human morals, had a relatively large impact (Spicker, 1990).

Nevertheless, Booth considered poverty a threatening factor in the eradication of human morals and did not refer to moral deficiencies as explanatory reasons lying behind poverty. Booth differentiated extreme poverty from other forms of poverty and characterised it as “*very poor*” people “*living in chronic want*” (Booth, 1902: 33), whose life is “*unending struggle and lack of comfort*” (Booth, 1902: 131). Booth realised that even poverty is stratified and thus detached destitute people from the *regular poor* in his analysis: “*I made an estimate of the total proportion of the people visibly living in poverty, and from amongst these separated the cases in which the poverty appeared to be extreme and amounted to destitution.*” (Booth, 1902; see Rowntree, 1922; Keating, 1976). This early stratification of poverty had a large impact on later poverty studies, particularly in the analysis of absolute poverty and its connected notions such as destitution, extreme poverty, ultra-poverty, and existential poverty. In the area of social work, Jane Addams' (1912) settlement movement of social care opened new dimensions in understanding the multi-layered nature of poverty, considering the housing, medical and employment-related factors behind the notion.

Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the dominant neoconservative and neoliberal approaches to social policy explained poverty as the direct consequence of financial shortages, and this argumentation lasted for decades. In modern social sciences the term destitution was applied almost exclusively by poverty studies carried out in low-income countries with developing economies like Bangladesh and India (Banerjee and Duflo, 2011; Yunus, 2017). The modern neoliberal approach to income-based poverty and material deprivation was often reflected in the global development programmes and strategies of large international organisations. In its report on global poverty, the World Bank considers people to be living in extreme poverty if they live on less than 1.9 USD a day, and in moderate poverty if their daily income is less than 3.1 USD. According to the World Bank's report on global poverty (2013) there are still more than 1 billion people worldwide living in destitution and despite the improvement in eradicating global poverty, there are regions where this is not achievable through international development policies and actions (e.g., the sub-Sahara region).

Furthermore, the Eurostat conceptualised poverty as the manifestation of financial needs for a long period of time and considered people to be relatively poor if their income sank under 60% of the national median income per-capita, and extremely poor if this proportion was under 40% (see EU-SILC). This materialistic-economic statistical approach to poverty fits perfectly with the evidence-based social policies of the neoliberal and neoconservative market-economies which focus on providing social assistance to needy households based on their means-tested income rather than developing comprehensive and preventive anti-poverty programmes (Spolander et al., 2014; Strier, 2019). However, it is worthwhile to mention that national social policies always rather applied their own indicators (like the subsistence minimum in Switzerland) to assess eligibilities on social supports than using the poverty lines of international organisations like the OECD, the World Bank, or the Eurostat.

Townsend (1993) was one of the first modern social scientists to state that poverty was much more than material deprivation, and that in addition to the economic aspects, multiple psychological, social, and biological factors could also lay behind it. Thus, Townsend developed a basic list of material (e.g., income and housing) and nonmaterial (e.g., leisure activities, good education, and quality healthcare) items whose absence could lead to poverty. This new approach on fundamental *welfare packages* raised attention to the multi-layered understanding of poverty. Amartya Sen (1983) developed this novel multifaceted and relational approach to poverty even further and confirmed that poverty is much more than the absence of economic resources. In doing so, instead of focusing solely on material deprivation, Sen

scrutinised the capabilities necessary to social inclusion and participation. Sen's capability approach applies Bourdieu's theory of human capital (particularly its social-relational nature) and takes into account what people can or cannot do with the available resources they have. According to the capability approach, the absence of possibilities or rights to exchange proper social, psychological, and biological resources hinders individuals from living the life they want (and deserve), and from unfolding their real and often hidden skills and abilities (Drilling, 2008). Similar to Sen, Marx et al. (2014) also emphasise that poverty has two core elements "*the inability to participate and that this inability to participate is attributable to inadequate resources*".

In extreme cases the severe lack of social and other resources can lead to the state of *social suffering* (Bourdieu, 1993) in which people cannot break out of the circle of deprivation and permanently suffer from precarious living, working, and housing conditions. In the state of *social suffering* people are not only excluded from social and other services, but they are "*expulsed from moral and political society*" (Harris-White, 2005). This means that although destitute people are part of society due to their physical existence, they no longer belong to society in moral, legal, and political terms.

Although absolute poverty seemed to have disappeared from the economically developed European countries during the golden age of the welfare state (McNicoll and Esping-Andersen, 1997), and the international understanding of poverty had been redirected to relative poverty, a spectacular re-institutionalisation of absolute poverty has taken place in Europe since the early 2010s (Gaisbauer et al., 2019). Dominelli calls this new form of absolute poverty *existential poverty*, referring to the daily struggles of people to acquire food and shelter. The term *existential poverty* differentiates the novel forms of absolute poverty experienced in wealthy Western countries from the universal and horizontal poverty of the Global South (real absolute poverty). Although the notion *existential poverty* is still based on material approaches, its meaning is quite close to *destitution*, since it clearly expresses the vertical-structural character of poverty focusing on the poorest among the poor. Undocumented migration and homelessness, and particularly their precarious combination (homeless undocumented migrants), are two main causes of existential poverty and destitution in the postmodern Western welfare states (Allen et al., 2020; Isaac, 2016; Freeman and Mirilovic, 2016).

## 2.2 Conceptualising destitution

As the direct consequence of increasing economic deprivation and social exclusion in European welfare states, the term destitution has re-appeared in contemporary social sciences



(Dominelli, 2019; Bradshaw and Movshuk, 2019) in the last couple of years. In its original (Latin) sense destitution means to abandon or desert someone (JRS, 2010). Harris-White (2005) describes destitution as a severe form of poverty that is “*institutionalised within state practice and law*”. Dasgupta (1993) describes destitution as a “*fatal and sharp form of deprivation*” that affects people’s working and housing conditions as well as their health and social networks. The Oxford English Dictionary gives *destitution* as a synonym of *poverty* and *indigence* (Walker, 2019), however the notion has a much more meaningful and deeper expression in postmodern social sciences.

In the field of critical social sciences, destitution refers to a “*material and discursive configuration that is constituted of extreme impoverishment and dependency on others for the means of survival*” (Coddington et al., 2020). Furthermore, based on the political concept of the European Commission a destitute person “*is left without assistance in a precarious situation*” or “*left alone by society*” (European Commission, 2014). Destitution is thus a scientific as well as a political and a heuristic concept that aims to sensitise for the interwovenness of material deprivation, social exclusion, and the loss of control over one’s life (JRS, 2010). Destitute people are largely dependent on the goodwill of others in a relationship that can be described as “*rather permanent*” (European Commission, 2014). Crawley et al. (2011) refer to the destitute as people “*whose access to resources is prohibited through legislation and policy*”. According to Fitzpatrick et al. (2016) destitution is “*usually viewed as the extreme end of a spectrum of material hardship*”. Lipton (1988) referred to destitution as *ultra-poverty*, which phrase was later further developed by Alkire et al. (2014) as *multi-dimensional ultra-poverty*, highlighting the multiple housing, employment, education, health, and nutrition-related factors behind destitution.

All the approaches illustrating the state of destitution conclude that destitute people are the poorest among the poor (Sen, 1976), the lowest layer of the society, and they form a so-called *underclass* within society (Avenel, 1997). They suffer not only from serious social exclusion and material deprivation, but also have particular so-called “cultural” characteristics that differentiate them from other social groups. These distinguishing cultural features can be seen for instance in the language, food consumption, dress, or the forms of housing of vulnerable social groups. Oscar Lewis (1966) described these particular marks as the “*culture of poverty*” referring to the special living and consumption patterns of poor people.

In the area of modern statistics, due to its horizontal and structural nature, destitution cannot be expressed solely through traditional income-based poverty rates. Other indicators from

housing, employment and health are also important to express people's objective or subjective wellbeing. Apart from the national offices of statistics, international organisations and agencies have also recognised the impact of thus far neglected human and environmental factors in the context of wellbeing. The UN's 2019 *Multidimensional Poverty Index* (MPI) takes into account not only the financial situation of individuals, but their access to appropriate healthcare and education, too (UNDP, 2020). Through the analysis of 101 developing countries, in which 76% the world's population live (5.7 billion people), the MPI shows that almost a quarter (23.1%) of people live in multidimensional poverty and suffer from severe deprivation.

The EU's statistical office has also recognised that a multi-level examination of poverty and social exclusion now takes priority over the former income-based estimations. In pursuit of this, Eurostat's *At Risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion* (AROPE) indicators (2020) measure the complex dimension of poverty and include indicators that cover not only financial poverty, but also severe material deprivation and in-work poverty. These new statistical responses to poverty, social exclusion and deprivation are already much closer to the core concept of destitution, although even these newly developed indicators focus on analysing personal living conditions rather than structural dimensions.

The multidimensional approach to destitution is particularly important – compared to the earlier perspectives on extreme poverty – in assessing the role of low work intensity (see AROPE indicators on in-work poverty) in impoverishment. This labour-based approach has a huge relevance in modern risk societies where labour markets cannot provide guarantees against financial poverty and destitution anymore. In contemporary risk societies not only low-paid jobs, but also precarious working conditions can lead to severe in-work poverty (McCann and McKittrick, 2012; Gangopadhyay et al., 2014). The participation of destitute people in Western labour markets often takes the form of an impossible separation between personal life and labour activities, whereby their efforts are purely limited to the satisfaction of individual biological needs like food and shelter for simple survival. These activities are – for instance – begging, street music, street prostitution and the collection of garbage. Hannah Arendt (1998) applied three categories of “human activities” to illustrate the so-called active life (*vita activa*) of people and differentiated this kind of “labour” from the higher-level categories of “work” and “activities”. In her typology “work” is time limited and separated from people's private life, and “activities” are the area of personally preferred actions that people choose to do in their spare time. This system of labour, work and activity depicts the stratification of a society and

the distance between labour and activities demonstrates people's increased social position and life possibilities.

According to Dominelli's approach to *public relational spaces* and Harris-White's concept of the responsibility of state actors and legislation, destitution is the direct consequence of the institutional or structural exclusion of vulnerable groups. This means that besides the individual, primary biological and psychological factors of destitution, welfare structures have a growing importance not only in the alleviation of destitution, but even in its evolution and exacerbation. Consequently, besides the previously dominant psychological and sociological approaches, the science of social work and social policy also have growing importance in the examination of destitution as these principles are able to provide system-oriented perspectives to reveal the structural characteristics of the problem. In particular, macro social work can deliver first-hand information about and knowledge of threatening factors (e.g., in the area of housing and employment) regarding various social systems (Brueggemann, 2014). This systemic approach of social work to destitution is particularly important as community-based resources are essential to improving individual wellbeing (Delgado, 1999), and the exclusion from public (welfare) services can significantly hinder the successful social integration of vulnerable groups (Sen, 1999). Direct institutional discrimination emerges when the entire socio-political system (institutions of education, healthcare, and social policy) is involved in the structural exclusion of vulnerable social groups on a legal basis (McCrudden, 1982; Hodge et al., 1993).

In her systemic approach, Harris-White refers to destitute people as *non-people* from the institution-based perspective of the state. Based on this concept, it is not only the basic needs of destitute people that are neglected by state actors, but their very existence is ignored within the system. Accordingly, destitution can be illustrated through a threefold model in which (1) people are unable to acquire any assets, (2) they are excluded from insurance mechanisms (particularly from the system of social security) and finally (3) they are unable to access the primary labour market (Harris-White, 2005). These dimensions can be supplemented by a fourth factor, namely that the state turns a blind eye to the plight of destitute people (who are often labelled as social tourists or migrant workers) instead of addressing the real nature of their problems. One can see such system-induced destitution, for instance, in the plight of Central and Eastern European Roma, whose access to the systems of housing, labour, education and health is significantly worse compared to other social groups (Bernát, 2016). The severe ethnic-based and spatial marginalisation of Roma communities in the Central and Eastern European

countries (Virág, 2010; Rusnáková et al., 2015) is still an unresolved problem for the European Union.

Based on the report of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS, 2010), destitution can be traced back to at least three fundamental factors: (1) the lack of basic resources like shelter, warm food or fresh water, (2) the measures of state policy that systematically exclude vulnerable groups (e.g., migrants and homeless people) from the usage of state-run welfare services, and finally (3) the lack of opportunity to break out of the vicious cycle of deprivations. This JRS model is fairly similar to Harris-White's dimensions and identifies the origin of destitution in material needs, social exclusion, and systemic deprivation alike. The lack of basic resources corresponds to the traditional approach of absolute poverty (Gaisbauer, 2019; Lepenies, 2017) and shows the missing resources whose lack endangers the biological existence of individuals. The role and responsibility of state-run social policy in the exacerbation of destitution is reflected through Dominelli's approach to *public relational spaces*, and refers to the socio-political measures that handle destitution politically, showing the willingness of decision makers to solve the problem. Finally, the third concept covering peoples' inability to break out of deprivation is close to Sen's *capability approach*, and supposes that destitute people are deprived of the financial, relational, and cultural resources which are necessary to live in the way they want and unfold their skills and abilities.

### *2.3 Destitution in the life course: a dynamic perspective on destitution*

From a life-course perspective, destitution corresponds to the concept of cumulative disadvantages in the life trajectory (Dannefer, 2003). People in a destitute situation can encounter simultaneous difficulties in multidimensional ways and accumulate multiple factors of vulnerability during their life course in the areas of housing, employment, family life and health (Bilger et al., 2011; Temesvary, 2019; Roduit, 2020). They may have some resources, but in the case of destitution these resources are often inefficient to overcome adverse life events like unemployment, the lack of financial resources or the lack of legal residence status. Therefore, an accumulation of vulnerabilities during the life course can be observed from several aspects, including sociological, psychological, economic, and geographical perspectives. Destitution – for instance – can begin with poor education that leads to missing skills in finding a job and obliges people to live in very precarious situations.

Vulnerabilities can be traced back to social (and psychological) insecurity and uncertainty that endanger the individual's social security and psychological stability and disrupt social cohesion at the community level. These endangering political, economic, social, and mental

effects on individual and social wellbeing accompany people during their life course and significantly influence their behaviours, actions, social relationships, and emotional balance. The perception of these negative effects and the intensity of threatening factors can deviate between different people and social groups; therefore, the personal (subjective) perception of problems is always more important from the viewpoint of individual crisis development than the objective perception (Thompson, 2011). The loss of a job or housing would probably mean an extraordinary challenge for anyone, however, most people are able to handle the hardships and find a new employment or apartment using their available social and mental resources (coping strategies). Threatening vulnerability factors can be particularly intense in the transition between various age-specific institutional structures (for example at entering the labour market after finishing school). Deprived groups (e.g., homeless people, undocumented migrants, and people with disabilities) may have less resources to apply for effective problem-solving techniques and methods. However, these groups have agency in the sense that they develop and activate particular skills to cope with difficulties, as can be observed among people in irregular situations or in the sex work. This phenomenon is theorised through the concept of “*weak acting*” (*agir faible* in French) (Châtel and Soulet, 2003; Bassolé, 2011). Based on this concept, the articulation between vulnerabilities in the life course and the capacity of activating social and cognitive resources is important to focus on. Nonetheless, structural patterns, like the lack of legal status or education, represent strong determinants in accumulating several vulnerabilities.

Crises and other stressors in the life course and the lack of cognitive or relational resources to handle crisis situations lead to vulnerability (Spini et al., 2013). Thompson (2011) differentiated three possible stages of the crisis process. The first phase is the so-called *steady state* which characterises people’s mental and social conditions before the crisis situation. The second stage is the *hazardous event* that endangers the former steady state, when people are unable to handle or resolve the situation with their usual problem-solving techniques and strategies. The third phase is the *outcome* of the crisis situation. Thompson goes on to distinguish three different outcomes. *Improved steady state* means that people not only overcome the crisis situation, but are able to improve former problem solving strategies. In doing so, they learn new skills which can be applied when solving similar problems in the future. The second possible outcome of the crisis situation is the *resumed steady state*, when people are able to cope with the crisis situation (mostly with external support), but they cannot improve their own skills or develop their resources to overcome the problem in the future. The

*decreased steady state* refers to the life condition when individuals cannot overcome the given crisis situation, and problems become permanent and seriously affect the daily life of affected people in the long run.

The state of vulnerability “refers to individuals or groups that are in a zone in which functionality is secured but at the limits of available resources” (Spini et al., 2013). According to Thompson’s crisis model, this running-down of resources is a consequence of hazardous events that threaten the steady state. Stress and crisis situations mean permanent danger for the social wellbeing and mental health of people living on the edge. The literature on vulnerabilities differentiates between *manifest and latent vulnerabilities*. Manifest vulnerability incorporates the lack of physical resources (e.g., housing or income) that causes precarious living conditions in a direct and visible way. Latent vulnerabilities, such as the lack of social relationships or institutional support, appear in less visible forms, but they can have as big an effect on precarity as in the case of manifest vulnerabilities (McCrory and Viding, 2015).

Through his theory on the relational nature of deprivations, Amartya Sen (2000) highlights how various forms of vulnerabilities (missing resources) can lead to severe social exclusion (or unfair inclusion). For example, hunger can originate from a crop failure caused by drought. Hunger also can occur because of the lack of income that leads to low purchasing power of people. The co-existence of increasing prices and low income can also result in hunger. And finally, hunger can be the result of the withdrawal of food subsidies from the neediest groups. Thus, hunger can be traced back to multiple deprivations: “*being excluded from enjoying a normal crop, being excluded from employment, exclusion from the food market and exclusion from food subsidy arrangements*” (Sen, 2000).

Destitution is the result of the accumulation of multiple (individual and systemic) vulnerabilities during the life course, when the individual and group-based coping strategies, as well as the institutional mechanisms of prevention fail. This accumulation of vulnerabilities (Ferraro, 2011) embedded in a specific political context leads to life situations where people are not able to cope with problems using their available material and non-material resources. The multidisciplinary analysis of diverse vulnerabilities – including their pathways to destitution – is unavoidable. Such an examination can reveal the sophisticated biological, social and psychological components (Baltes et al., 1998) behind destitution by focusing on the combination and accumulation of vulnerabilities during the life course.

According to the European Commission's 2014 report on destitution and migration as well as the study of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS, 2010), destitution can be differentiated from poverty and social exclusion based on the accumulation of multiple vulnerabilities that characterise the condition. According to this approach, poverty primarily expresses material deprivation and social exclusion means a kind of social non-participation. Besides these forms of vulnerabilities, destitution also includes the inability of individuals to improve their own situation and change their life in the way they would like to. Both reports considered homelessness as the final destination of accumulated vulnerabilities, and this comprises – among other vulnerabilities – the acute need for appropriate housing, too.

If destitution and homelessness are accompanied by the status as an undocumented migrant, then other, mostly system-level problems emerge that further exacerbate vulnerabilities (Barbu et al., 2020). In this case, destitution appears as a severe form of systemic social deprivation in which people are unable to sustain themselves and their families through their own work activities because they face various administrative and legal obstacles to entering the labour market. Destitute *sans-papiers* are thus excluded from most state-run social and medical services and their general access to public goods and institutions is very limited. The study of O'Connell and Brannen (2019) – in which the authors examined the food insecurity of undocumented asylum seekers registered with the British Red Cross – clearly showed that people living in rich countries can also be threatened by severe destitution. Their report revealed that two thirds of asylum seekers who turned to the British Red Cross experienced hunger at least once a week and almost a quarter of the “*penniless*” refugees, who had not received any support from the state, suffered from hunger on a daily basis (pp.175).

### **3. Pathways to destitution**

Although the notion of destitution has a considerable history in social sciences, its modern interpretation in developed countries is mostly applied when describing the plight of undocumented migrants and homeless people living in shelters or on the street (rough sleepers). These disadvantaged social groups are the primary victims of global social changes occurring in the labour market and housing sector, and state-run services have only managed to alleviate but not eradicate their destitution.

#### *3.1 Undocumented migrants*

Migration from poor countries to wealthier ones is one of the most important causes of vulnerability and destitution (Striano and Young, 2018; Dominelli, 2019). Migration is always a stressful procedure for the mobile people; however, it does not automatically lead to crisis, increased vulnerability, or destitution, even in the case of vulnerable people. Stillman et al. (2009) analysed the possible outcomes of migration on the mental health and well-being of poor people and concluded that besides the stressors, migration can also have several positive effects on the mental and economic status of migrants. This improvement is particularly true for migrating people leaving behind threatening living circumstances like war and famine in their home countries and finding better conditions in the host countries.

If people cross borders without papers or remain in the host country even after the expiry of their travel documents, and thus have to live without a residence permit in the target countries, they are mostly deprived of the support of *public relational spaces*, which means that they experience not only the personal aspects but the systemic forms of vulnerability and destitution. Sedmak (2019) states that the primary reason behind the destitution of undocumented migrants can be traced back to the lack of access to legal systems, the labour market, healthcare facilities, education, and the housing market.

According to the UN's World Migration Report, globally there are approximately 272 million people living as migrants, of which 20-30 million are undocumented migrants. Although the vast majority of undocumented migrants live in developing countries, the economically developed wealthy countries also have a considerable undocumented migrant population. In the USA more than 10 million people live without a clear migration status, and in the EU the estimated number of people without residence permit is 1.9 - 3.8 million (IOM, 2020). The number of undocumented migrants in Switzerland ranges between 50,000 and 180,000 according to various estimations (Epple and Schär, 2015). In the city of Zürich there are approximately 28,000 undocumented people, in Geneva this number is 13,000, in Basel 4,000, and 3,000 in Bern (Morlok et al., 2015). Although the vast majority of undocumented migrants originate from so-called third countries (outside the EU/EFTA region), the number of inter-EU migrants is steadily growing (Epple and Schär, 2015). For these mobile people, the lack of organised residency status leads to multidimensional vulnerability factors that incorporate various housing, employment, and health-related components.

In the area of the labour market, destitute migrants are often employed under precarious conditions in so-called 3D (dangerous, dirty, and degrading) positions (Benach et al., 2011). In particular, the economic sectors of care, construction and agriculture employ destitute mobile



people, often under unpredictable, low-paid working conditions with no labour contract. For instance, currently approximately 30,000 Eastern European female caregivers work in Switzerland (Merçay and Grünig, 2016), 82,000 in Austria (Benz, 2018) and 150,000 in Germany (Caritas, 2020), often under very precarious conditions with low-wage and low-hour contracts (Schilliger, 2017). In the city of Zürich, 30% of all household-related jobs (performed by non-household members) are conducted by immigrant women, often *sans papiers*.

Destitute people mostly leave their homes for economic reasons and due to social insecurity (Evans et al., 2018). However, the lack of economic and other resources, such as poor education, lack of qualifications, shortage of language skills, or a low level of self-sufficiency increase their vulnerability in the host countries as well (Cox and Pawar, 2006; Zelano et al., 2015). Because of their vulnerability and precarious working conditions, destitute undocumented migrants often fall into a poverty trap in the target countries (Striano and Young, 2018). Their position in the labour market becomes very weak, as they can only apply for jobs that require basic qualifications. Consequently, they are often victims of mental and physical exploitation (Scholten and Ostaijen, 2018).

Welfare states occasionally apply hostile socio-political measures (instead of mitigating the poverty trap) to prevent *welfare tourism* and deter poor migrants from accessing welfare services, although the notion of welfare support as a magnet for migrants has not thus far been confirmed by empirical studies (Reeger, 2018). Restrictive and punishing political actions (like forced deportations, or exclusion from basic social and medical services) against the mobile destitute can significantly decrease their well-being and subjective security in the host countries (Mostowska, 2014; Hansson and Mitchell, 2018; Temesváry, 2019).

In the case of destitute Central and Eastern European citizens moving to the West, after the expiry of temporary residence permits, they find themselves in a very particular legal situation and enter a legal limbo: they remain in the wealthy Western European countries without registration and thus they lose eligibility for most residency-based social transfers and services (Freeman and Mirilovic, 2016; Gaisbauer et al., 2019). As a result, destitute undocumented migrants experience structural social exclusion not only in their home countries, but even in the host countries: in their home countries, penalising social policies often disqualify them from social services, while in Western Europe protectionist welfare measures hamper their access to social and health services (Wang and Aspalter, 2006; O’Sullivan, 2020). This dual form of structural exclusion significantly exacerbates destitution and hinders the social integration of migrating people (Estévez, 2012; Pilati, 2016).

Despite the difficult legal status of destitute undocumented EU migrants, there exist international legal forums that attempt to guarantee their fundamental rights in a transnational context. The European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR, 2010) – for instance – openly and directly calls on EU/EFTA states to protect the rights of and to stop discrimination against destitute migrants. Referring to the Treaty of Rome, the Convention prohibits any form of discrimination based on social origin, national minority, gender, and race in the area of the EU/EFTA. The sporadic forced deportation of destitute CEE people is contrary to the EU’s 2004/38 directive on the free movement of people. The European Social Charter (Council of Europe, 1961) calls for member states to respect the social rights of EU migrants and provide for their emerging social needs through local social services in cooperation with “*emigration and immigration states*”. The Charter also declares a ban on deportation and the right to family (re)union in the case of migrant workers. The declarations of the Charter were reinforced by the European Platform of Social Cohesion (2017). The European Pillar of Social Rights (2017) strengthens the EU’s commitment towards the rights of European citizens in the area of inter-European social protection, inclusion, and housing assistance.

The OECD’s 2018 Social Protection Agenda also calls for the protection of the social rights of destitute migrants in the economically developed member states. The Directorate of Employment, Labour and Social Affairs regularly reviews the housing conditions, migration, and homelessness of destitute people. The EEA/EFTA agreement (1994) declares a ban on discrimination against European migrants based on their nationality and this principle was reinforced in the 2019 amendment to the agreement. The ILO’s 2012 Social Protection Floor Strategy motivates developed countries to provide minimum access to their medical and social services for all people (even for destitute migrants) living in the given country by giving them essential social rights (according to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, right to housing, employment, healthcare, etc.).

Despite the promising strategic efforts of international organisations to handle the situation of mobile destitute EU citizens arriving in economically highly developed countries, there are still hundreds of thousands of inter-EU migrants living in Western Europe under precarious living conditions characterised by material deprivation, low income, and low work intensity.

### 3.2 Homeless people

In addition to the plight of undocumented migrants, urban homelessness (particularly street homelessness) is another primary factor behind destitution (Dominelli, 2019). Homelessness is a very severe form of poverty, social exclusion and destitution, a state of living where people

cannot slip any lower and from where returning to take a place in society is extremely difficult. Homelessness is the most precarious station in the life trajectory of destitute people and is characterised with multiple vulnerabilities and structural disadvantages. However, even homelessness can be further stratified and *rough sleepers* can be differentiated from those living in insecure or inadequate housing conditions. According to the FEANTSA ETHOS typology on homelessness, the *roofless* are people sleeping in public places or at night shelters (Amore et al., 2011). *Roofless* people (also called *absolute homeless*) are excluded even from the system of homeless care, and are eligible only for the simplest low-threshold services like soup kitchens and day-care facilities (Cooper, 1995). *Roofless* people are the most vulnerable group even among the homeless as they are deprived of any housing possibilities.

Edgar (2009) describes homelessness as a state of multiple deprivations which can be seen in three main domains: “*having a decent dwelling (or space) adequate to meet the needs of the person and his/her family (physical domain); being able to maintain privacy and enjoy social relations (social domain); and having exclusive possession, security of occupation and legal title (legal domain)*”. Based on Edgar’s approach, homelessness is a severe form of absent resources in the area of (1) housing and family life, (2) privacy and social relations and (3) structural and legal protection, which together cause multiple vulnerabilities and lead to the state of ultimate destitution. O’Sullivan (2020) also highlights the importance of spatial deprivation in analysing homelessness and refers to rough sleeping as a “*wicked social problem*” that is often caused by punitive political reactions in which political actors “*annihilate public space*” excluding the most vulnerable groups from the only place they can stay. Extreme forms of political interventions that exacerbate the vulnerability of rough sleepers can be seen – for instance – in Hungary, where the right-wing populist government incorporated a prohibition on homeless people from sleeping on the street in the country’s constitution (Evangelista, 2019). This reaction pushed those people on the verge of destitution over the edge – people who had until then been able to manage their life with the combination of using homeless services, begging, and collecting items on the streets (Udvarhelyi, 2014).

The intersectional analysis of homelessness reveals the relationship between severe housing needs and other vulnerability factors like gender and race, which in combination lead to destitution. Studies on homelessness from the USA (see Marr, 2015; Zufferey, 2017) show that people of colour are in a particularly vulnerable situation compared to other homeless people, and this vulnerability can be identified (among others) in their difficult access to night-shelters and other low-threshold services.

In his study on ethnicity and homelessness, Győri (2017) scrutinised the living conditions of Hungarian Roma homeless people moving from the countryside to the cities. The study concluded that the Roma suffer from extreme vulnerability compared to the non-Roma homeless as they have to face not solely severe financial, employment-related and housing hardships, but wider ethnic prejudices. Although the proportion of Roma in Hungarian society is approximately 5%, their proportion among the homeless is 33%. Győri concludes that the steadily growing number of Roma in the homeless population (and particularly among rough sleepers) can be traced back to the extreme vulnerabilities they experience in their ghettoised villages. Győri also states that shelters in cities provide the destitute Roma slightly better living conditions than their unheated and ruined shanties in the countryside.

Of course, it is not only the CEE region that is affected by system-based discrimination against the homeless Roma. O’Sullivan (2020) identified social prejudices and ethnicity-based discrimination against homeless gypsy travellers in Ireland, particularly in the area of housing policy. Ethnic-based destitution in developed countries was scrutinised among others by Hansson and Mitchell (2018) when examining the plight of Roma rough sleepers in Stockholm as well as by Colombo et al. (2016) through the analysis of deprived Roma beggars in Geneva. This latter study also highlighted the relationship between destitution and the deprivation of basic social rights (due to the city’s anti-beggar initiatives) that pushes impoverished Roma migrants into precarious living conditions.

Zufferey (2017) raised attention of the holistic nature of destitution when analysing homelessness from an intersectional perspective. She concluded that the destitution of the homeless can be traced back to multiple reasons besides financial and housing poverty. Factors like age, gender and ethnicity play a considerable role in the evolution of destitution and severe social exclusion. The importance of gender inequalities in the destitution of homeless women was thoroughly analysed by Mostowska and Dębska (2020) in Poland, Lengyel (2019) in Hungary and Lutz et al. (2017) in Germany. All of these studies concluded that the traditional social expectations and gender-based biases focused on women can contribute to special, precarious forms of women’s homelessness (Barbu et al., 2020).

### *3.3 Consequences for the welfare state*

The increased migration and homelessness of destitute people with multiple vulnerabilities means brand new challenges for the continuously changing Western welfare states (see Gaisbauer et al., 2019). Conventional state-run welfare services, originally designed to handle traditional forms of social needs, tend to be less effective in fighting novel forms of destitution

and handling the needs of the “new poor” (Scholten and van Ostaïjen, 2018; Allen et al., 2020). Multidisciplinary studies on poverty show that destitution is the most precarious manifestation of accumulated social and mental vulnerabilities, and it can be traced back to complex family, housing, employment, and mental-health-related issues. Novel analyses of the role and functions of the postmodern welfare state underscore the responsibility of state-run social services for eradicating the vicious forms of poverty in the areas of the housing and labour markets, medical care, mental health support and other fields of welfare (see Leibfried, 2015).

Despite the widespread national and international anti-poverty strategies, prevailing neoliberal and neoconservative welfare policies accept or at least tolerate destitution and even street homelessness as intrinsic characteristics of contemporary Western societies (Spolander et al., 2014; Strier, 2019). Based on this dominant neoliberal socio-political point of view and the paradigm of the social investment state (Wagaw et al., 2020), destitute people are the victims (or rather losers) of global social and economic changes, and they are unable to catch up with others in the competition for narrowing social and economic resources. Destitute people are not always intentionally excluded from the redistribution arising from the increasing privatisation of community goods and public spaces, but they are the people who do not possess enough material and relational resources to get access to (formerly) public resources (Tosi, 2007).

Besides these neoliberal socio-political tendencies also political nationalism contributes to the exclusion of destitute people arrived from poorer countries. Protective social policies often close homelessness and other services from the newcomers excluding people even from the most essential supports like food and shelter. A typical such technique is when only people with residence permits are allowed to use soup kitchens or night shelters. Other measures deter people from the labour markets of host countries or orient them toward precarious (low-wage and low-hour) positions as various examples from Germany, Belgium and Denmark highlight the issue (Valcke et al., 2019).

As mentioned above, social institutions occasionally not only neglect the social needs of vulnerable groups, but appear as conductors of neoliberal or nationalist political agendas applying restrictive, protectionist measures against destitute people. The UN’s report on extreme poverty calls these actions “*penalisation measures*” that aim at maintaining public order and restoring security in the community (UNDP, 2020). Wacquant (2007) analysed the role of penalising measures in handling urban poverty in Western Europe and the US. He concluded that the primary reason behind the formation of a new urban underclass is not necessarily the social marginalisation of disadvantaged social groups, but the deliberate

withdrawal of neoliberal state services and policies that once supported the poor. As a result, state social policies shift from a social to a penal position. According to Evangelista (2019) penalising social policies generally appear in three stages to regulate destitution and homelessness: (1) criminalisation, (2) hindering access to services, and finally (3) detention and expulsion. As already described, Hungary – for instance – first prohibited sleeping in public places for homeless people in the city centres often visited by tourists (Bence and Udvarhelyi, 2013), and after the 2018 amendment of the constitution this ban was spread to the whole country and to all public spaces (Győri, 2018). Street homelessness is now considered petty crime and homeless people risk being arrested and fined if they sleep rough. As an example for the nationalist tendencies in reshaping social policies, in Switzerland, the cities of Basel (and Lausanne before the COVID crisis) demand practically unaffordable fees for using the city's only night shelter from homeless people without a residence permit, therefore the undocumented are basically excluded from these services (Temesváry, 2019; Martin and Bertho, 2020). In the larger cities of Germany mobile destitute EU citizens are threatened with expulsion, which is actually against EU law, but German authorities still carry out inter-EU deportations (PRODEC, 2018).

These examples show that Western welfare regimes are not yet prepared to handle destitution and instead governments at both local and national levels are tending to apply restrictive, punishing measures to deter destitute people from using public spaces. By doing so, the role of social policy is devaluated and very simplistic, order-based, penalising measures are applied by governments when handling difficult social problems. In Central and Eastern Europe, *emergency welfare states* (Inglot, 2008) regularly apply penalising measures instead of comprehensive socio-political strategies to handle destitution (see – for instance – the deployment of police forces during the hunger riots by the Roma in Slovakia). In Western European welfare states the unpreparedness of the state (supplemented by augmented nationalist influences) can be identified in the organisational and methodological deficiencies of social services when managing the problem. The lack of comprehensive socio-political strategies to handle destitution also can be seen at EU-level. EU decrees and other regulations and strategies still do not discuss the concept of destitution nor its twin notions of absolute and extreme poverty (Gaisbauer, 2019). Since the 1993 Amsterdam Treaty (and later the Lisbon Treaty and the EU 2020 Strategy), the EU only considers poverty and social exclusion in a relative context and applies strategies to alleviate relative poverty.

The persistent focus of wealthy welfare states on eradicating relative poverty (and their ignoring of absolute poverty) can be seen in the statistics, too. Jenkins et al. (2013) showed that while relative poverty is typically falling in both the USA and the economically developed European countries, absolute poverty is stagnating or slightly growing. The data reveal that while welfare states were successful in improving the living conditions of people living in moderate poverty, they lost ground in raising and supporting the poorest layers of the society (absolute poor) through effective welfare services and transfers. The statistics also show the stubborn and sticky nature of destitution, namely that in Western societies there is a considerable and constant layer of people who are unable to break out of the vicious cycle of destitution and social marginalisation, and who are not supported by state-run services.

In the absence of comprehensive state-run social policies, it is nongovernmental organisations that develop effective services for supporting the destitute (even though these services often have to work under hostile governmental pressure). In some Central and Eastern European countries where governments limit their efforts to establishing refugee camps for undocumented destitute migrants, NGOs provide important support for mobile people through counselling, food distribution programmes and many other ways. And even in Western Europe, NGOs are often the only organisations to provide support for undocumented migrants and rough sleepers who are neglected by state-run social services.

#### **4. Drafting destitution: a guiding model for research**

The previous explanations highlight that in terms of knowledge it would be of benefit to include "destitution" as a theory-based specialised concept in poverty research and policy. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, in modern states "poverty" has become an increasingly differentiated phenomenon, which means that the term "poverty" can serve as an umbrella concept, but can no longer serve to capture the nuances of the differences and thus to combat "poverty" in all its various challenges. Destitution describes a situation that does not arise from the equal interaction of individual resources and structural conditions, as many other concepts of poverty do. Destitution is rather caused by a structural absence of regard for people, which is mainly due to migration and socio-political reasons and which the people affected cannot confront with any options for action to improve their own lives. Destitution must therefore be thought of in terms of the life chances that a state enables or does not enable through its welfare state.

Secondly, "destitution" outlines a dynamic process affecting people that usually leads to a dead end. No longer having control over one's own life and being dependent on the goodwill of others, means no longer being able to take advantage of existing options. Changes that have a positive effect on life chances can then only be initiated to a very limited extent by those affected. They depend much more on the context and thus on the national and regional conditions of the respective welfare state.

Thirdly, the perspective of "destitution" leads to a re-sorting of concepts in poverty research in order to clarify the target scenario of the connection between situation, structure, and process. In this paper, it has become clear that this involves "objectively measurable" concepts such as "existential poverty", "vulnerability" or "entitlements", but also "subjectively hermeneutic" concepts such as "embeddedness" or "exclusion" and legal conditions such as "social rights". It is thus clear that "destitution" is nourished by various concepts and theoretical positions and can thus be connected to previous research traditions.

Figure 1 aims to clarify our understanding that it is the socio-political structural conditions that have been identified as causes in the concept of "destitution". We call them the "status structuring domains". The first domain, "welfare", includes the "rules of the game" of the welfare state, which in the current paradigm of investment in human capital when there is a benefit for the state. Destitute citizens do not belong to this target group; here, offers (e.g., of emergency aid) are granted for purely compensatory motives (to prevent an even more serious living situation from arising).

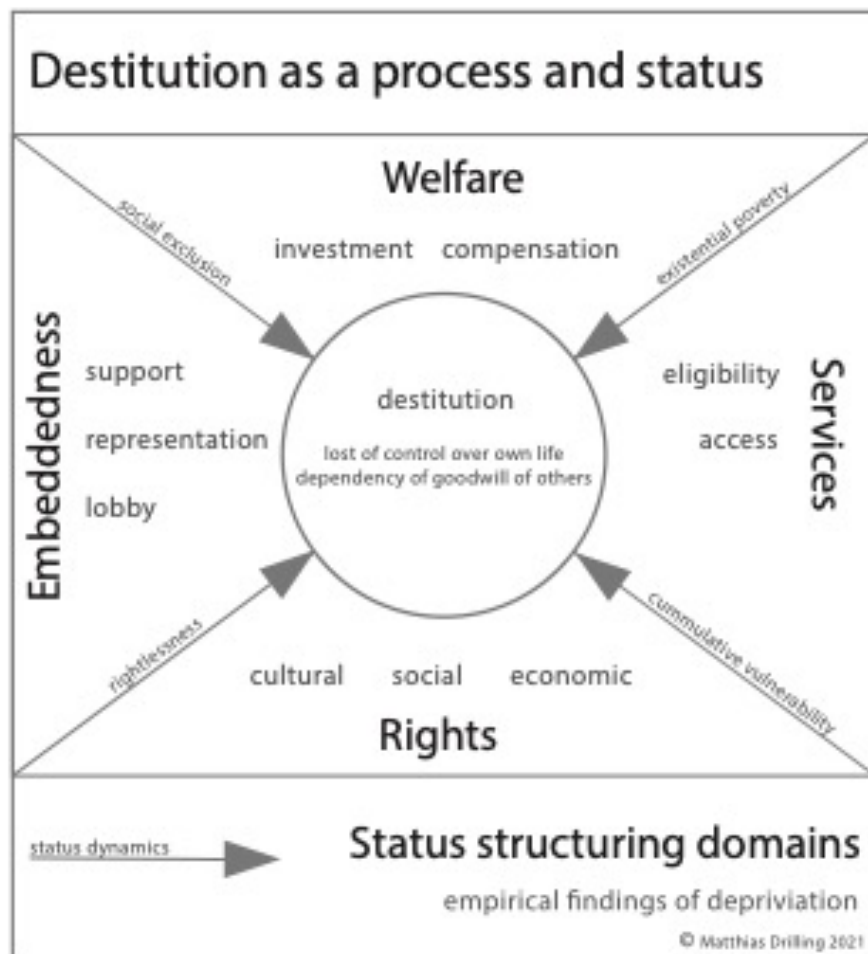
The second domain, "services", also usually denies access to the people affected. Providers of services often operate with a citizenship requirement that a priori excludes the destitute people. It is worth mentioning that this principle runs through the entire service landscape, i.e., it is applied by both state actors and non-state actors.

The third status structuring domain of destitution covers objectively enforceable rights. They are stipulated, for example, in the UN Covenants or the General Declaration of Human Rights and apply to individuals only to a very limited extent. Often they are actively denied because, according to the territorial principle, the destitute individuals are not included by the decision-makers.

And the fourth domain identified is the embeddedness in any political, economic, and social processes. Destitute people are not seen and not represented, there is no lobby – they are politically concealed and thus they simply do not appear in the problem description of the



welfare state. This ontological ignorance leads to an absence of statistics regarding the problem, and thus to the inability to act to create a policy that aims at embeddedness.



*Figure 1: Destitution as a process and status*

These status structuring domains result in the processes of rightlessness, social exclusion, accumulated vulnerability, and existential poverty highlighted in the literature. The overlapping of these processes is particularly noteworthy. The current state of knowledge shows that this process is irreversible and ends with the loss of all control by the individual over his or her life, the non-existence of decision-making alternatives and the dependence on the goodwill of others (because of the absence of structural measures, it is goodwill that provides support, and not social policy or rights).

## **II. MIGRATION OF DESTITUTE CEE CITIZENS TO SWITZERLAND**

### **1. Introduction**

Based on the available literature and databases, the following chapter aims to introduce the migration and living conditions of destitute Central and Eastern European citizens living in Switzerland, with a special focus on the examples of Geneva and Zurich. After CEE countries became members of the EU and due to the open border policy based on the agreement on the free movement of people between Switzerland and the EU, tens of thousands of new CEE migrants arrived in Switzerland. The vast majority of these immigrating “new Europeans” (see Scholten and van Ostaijen, 2018) have been successfully integrated into several thriving economic sectors of the country. However, a lot of destitute CEE citizens also arrived in Switzerland, whose social integration was less successful and who experienced poverty and social exclusion.

In the following chapter, which represents a “state of the art” preceding the empirical data collection, we attempt to explore and summarise the available written resources regarding the topic. To do so, we collected the relevant journal articles, book chapters, research papers, institutional reports, databases, and other documents to acquire a preliminary overview of the nature and extent of destitution regarding the mobile destitute CEE people. As the number of scientific publications is rather limited in this area and we expect specific information primarily from our own data collection, we use plenty of so-called “grey literature” sources in the form of non-scientific articles, reports from the police and other authorities, and reports from social services and NGOs. We gathered such resources in the English, German, French and Hungarian languages.

In the first half of this chapter, we describe the reasons behind the migration of destitute CEE citizens, taking a look at the push factors like poverty, social exclusion, ethnic-based discrimination, and restrictions in social policy in Central and Eastern European countries. We then illustrate the living conditions and social rights of the destitute CEE citizens in Switzerland based on the available information.

### **2. Push factors experienced in the home countries and the patterns of migration**

According to the geographical limitations stated by Inglot (2008), Haggard and Kaufman (2009) and Hankiss (1989), the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region incorporates the so-called *Visegrád group* (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic), the former

Yugoslavian member states and some Balkan countries like Romania and Bulgaria. After some of these the CEE countries joined the EU, the EFTA and the Schengen Area, emigration became a real alternative for millions of CEE citizens to improve their general living conditions (Dominelli, 2012; European Commission, 2014; Geddes and Hadj-Abdou, 2016). As a consequence of the increasing social and economic uncertainties and inequalities that arose after the social and political transition of CEE countries (Cerami and Vanhuyse, 2009; Brzezinski, 2018), approximately six million people left their homes to seek better living conditions in Western Europe, and one to 3.5 million of them belonged to vulnerable, disadvantaged social groups (estimates from Gorynska-Bittner, 2013; Váradi, 2018). The primary target countries of mobile CEE citizens were the United Kingdom, Germany, and Austria (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2013; Kováts and Soltész, 2018). Engbersen et al. (2013) calls the migration of the “new Europeans” fluid migration, in reference to their gradually eroding relationships to their home countries and the also weak relationships in the host countries. Others describe the migration of destitute CEE people as circular migration (Chau et al., 2018), referring to its temporary, back-and-forth nature, and the strong family and economic ties with the home countries.

Although the vast majority of mobile CEE migrants are skilled young workers, one can see a steadily growing number of poor, vulnerable, low-skilled, or elderly people moving to the West. Destitute people mostly leave their homes for economic reasons and due to social insecurity (Evans et al., 2018; Reeger, 2018). Their economic and other problems, such as poor education, absence of qualifications, lack of language skills, or their low level of self-sufficiency make these people extraordinarily vulnerable in the foreign environments into which they arrive (Cox and Pawar, 2006; Zelano et al., 2015; Reeger, 2018). Because of their vulnerability and precarious working conditions, destitute EU migrants often sink into a poverty trap in the host countries (Striano and Young, 2018). Their position in the labour market is very weak, as they can only apply for jobs that require basic qualifications, and they are often victims of exploitation and forced begging (Scholten and van Ostaïjen, 2018; Schilliger, 2017).

Unfortunately, exact statistical data are not available on the number of destitute undocumented Central and Eastern European migrants living in Switzerland and the other Western European countries. The reason behind the missing statistical data is that destitute CEE migrants are considered as “EU tourists” (at least in the first three months of staying) who are under the effect of the EU law on the free movement of persons<sup>1</sup>, and they are not counted into the official migration statistics until they have a work contract and/or register their residence

status in the host country. If they do not register themselves after three months of staying, they remain furthermore invisible for national statistical data collections. However, these overstayers are not counted as *sans-papiers* or undocumented migrants (unlike people from so-called third countries) as they are still under the EU law on the free movement of people and their staying in the host country is not entirely illegal, but belongs to a “grey zone”. This situation leads to a legal limbo regarding the rights and responsibilities of undocumented CEE people in the host countries.

In the absence of statistical data collection on the living conditions of destitute CEE citizens in Switzerland, we primarily process secondary information from qualitative studies applying the methods of narrative interviews, case studies and field observation to receive some soft-data about the target group.

Most of these previous studies show that Swiss cities gradually became popular among mobile destitute CEE citizens due to their easy accessibility and favourable living conditions (see Colombo et al., 2016; Drilling et al., 2019; Temesváry, 2019). These “favourable living conditions” are of course subjective and only comparable with the absolute misery that destitute people experience in the home countries. The heated homeless shelters, the occasional food and cloth distributions of charity organisations, the donations of local residents and the temporary work possibilities in Swiss cities can be even more attractive than the life in windowless wooden bungalows, the cold, the hunger, and the toxic smog of garbage burning in the Central and Eastern European rural slums (Győri, 2017).

### *2.1 Social marginalisation and systemic exclusion in CEE countries*

After the economic and political transitions seen in the beginning of the 1990s, Central and Eastern European countries started to develop Western-type social welfare institutions and were keen to copy Western European social service models alongside their state-socialist welfare heritage (Ferge, 2000, 2017; Tomka, 2015). CEE countries were supported by the IMF and the World Bank to conduct the necessary reforms in public services to achieve this (Andor, 2017). Due to these early efforts, CEE countries developed the systems of social assistance, homeless care, child welfare and family support services which characterise their social service systems still today (Krémer, 2009; Haggard and Kaufman, 2009). New, democratic political actors were mostly partners in these reforms as they saw the possibility of catching up with the West through the implementation of modern and comprehensive welfare services. Besides these steps toward modernisation, the old welfare structures, particularly in the area of long-term residential

services, survived the transition and still determine the system of social care today (Kornai, 2012).

Despite the promising development of social services, CEE countries suffered from high state debt, soaring unemployment, inflation, and the mass impoverishment of whole social groups (Ferge, 2000; Szalai, 2007). In particular, the Roma and/or poor people in rural areas and former industrial workers found themselves in hopeless situations after the collapse of the socialist industrial economies (Virág, 2010; Ladányi, 2012). The negative effects of spatial inequalities, the deepening horizontal and vertical poverty and the social marginalisation of the Roma led to threatening social tensions that governments are still unable to handle.

After the CEE countries joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 (and Croatia in 2013), the new political and economic perspectives, and particularly the generous financial support of the European Social Fund, was able to temporarily ameliorate economic and social tensions (Krémer, 2009). As a result, the region came the closest it had to Western European welfare states since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in social, economic, and political terms alike. Trends in the area of employment, state debt and poverty had been improved, however the CEE region's disadvantages compared to Western countries still remained significant. Detailing these social tensions and issues is important to understanding the huge trend towards migration a few years after EU membership.

Hostile political measures, economic insecurity and general social tensions all contribute to the growing emigration from CEE countries. Of course, although post-transitional political trajectories, economic development and social trends are quite similar across the CEE countries, one cannot consider the whole region as a homogeneous entity, as the different states have followed partially deviating directions in social, economic, and political development over the last three decades. When exploring the push factors for migration, in general the following main conditions were mentioned in the various interviews conducted with destitute CEE migrants living in Western Europe (Mostowska, 2014; Colombo et al., 2016; Temesvary, 2019; Striano and Young, 2018).

### Penalising socio-political measures

Penalising social policy measures are mostly rooted in Anglo-Saxon countries, primarily in the US, where the regulation of the poor and so called “order-based” policies became

widespread under neoconservative governments (Evangelista, 2019). The order-based measures of Rudy Giuliani in New York in the late 1990s designed to clear the city of street sex workers, rough sleepers and drug dealers opened a new way of thinking about the poor and marginalised groups. This approach was also applied by the Clinton administration, when most social allowances (in the Personal Assistance and Work Opportunity Act) were tied to behavioural conditions or were simply transferred to in-kind support instead of direct cash payments (e.g., the Food Stamp Program) (Rogers-Dillon, 2004).

After 2010 a considerable populist, right-wing upturn occurred in most CEE countries and particularly in the so-called Visegrád Group that incorporates Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and the Czech Republic (Schierig, 2020). These governments often blamed poor people and other vulnerable social groups for social, political, and even economic problems. State-supported media, with the formal and informal communication of local and central governments, were the primary mediators of this targeted smear campaign against the poor.

Particularly in Hungary and Poland, governments introduced fairly generous family and housing policy programmes for the middle class, and poor individuals and households could only rarely benefit from these measures (Szikra and Szelewa, 2010). In Hungary, family-policy related expenditures have been raised from two to five percent of GDP in the last ten years, however the vast majority of this support was realised in the form of tax credits for higher-income working parents, housing subsidies for larger, wealthier families or car-purchasing programmes for families with at least three children (Rat and Szikra, 2018). In Poland, the *Family 500* programme originally targeted families with more than two children, thus excluding a lot of poor, one-parent-one-child households from the programme. Later *Family 500* was extended to low-income one-child families too (Sowa, 2016).

These very selective welfare policies do not trickle down to the lowest layers of the society, and people living in extreme poverty often feel abandoned by the state. In Hungary, after the 2014 reform of social allowances, hundreds of thousands lost their eligibility for disability pensions, and also the value of the general social allowance was halved. All major social allowances are tied to the minimum pension, and this was not increased for decades, leaving poor pensioners on the periphery, and the general child allowance (the only universal child support which is sometimes the only source of income for destitute families) has also not been increased since 2006 (Mózer et al., 2015).

Perhaps the most spectacular penalising measure against destitute people was the 2018 constitutional reform in Hungary that prohibited homeless people from sleeping and remaining in public places for any lengthy periods of time. This measure led to hundreds of rough sleepers being fined and sometimes also arrested by the police, and dozens have been taken to court (Győri, 2018). After the local elections in 2019, when the majority of larger cities were regained by the social-democratic opposition, local authorities have tended to turn a blind eye to this constitutional duty and allow the homeless people to live on the streets.

While big CEE cities like Warsaw, Bucharest and Budapest came quite close to Western European levels of prosperity in terms of their GDPs, spatial inequalities in Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania pushed the population of impoverished rural villages to the brink of total destitution and social exclusion (Virág, 2010; Ladányi, 2012). In particular, Roma people, impoverished pensioners, and former industrial workers of the once thriving heavy industry form the basis of a new and growing underclass (*lumpen* proletariat) who are abandoned by the state and its institutions (Szalai, 2007; Ferge, 2017). Basic services of healthcare, early childhood development and social assistance are absent or scarcely available in these disadvantaged rural regions, where both morbidity and mortality rates are significantly higher than the national average (Orosz and Kollányi, 2016).

The new workfare programs introduced in several CEE countries are a perfect fit to the work-based society concept that CEE governments articulate in their political agendas (Rat and Szikra, 2018). This political and ideological shift from welfare to workfare societies incorporates the limitation of social allowances and the development of widespread public work programmes for the poor and the unemployed. According to some critical publications (see Bass, 2010), these programmes are not only rather expensive, but often offer redundant, dirty, and precarious jobs to the poor. For example, both the Hungarian and the Slovakian workfare programmes are mostly maintained by local municipalities, workers are particularly vulnerable as their income depends on the goodwill of local political leaders (mostly the mayors), and they often have to do menial and humiliating activities (like sweeping streets and cleaning ditches) for a small amount of money. According to interviews with homeless CEE people living in Switzerland (see Temesvary, 2019), several homeless people mentioned their forced participation in humiliating public work programmes as the final reason for leaving their home countries.

#### Ethnic-based deprivation and segregation

The Roma is the largest, the most vulnerable and most severely disadvantaged ethnic group, not only in CEE countries, but in the whole EU. There are approximately 10-12 million Roma people living in the EU, of which the vast majority live in CEE countries, particularly in Romania and Bulgaria (Balogh and Andrónyi, 2012). The exclusion of the Roma has considerable historic roots, and although their general living conditions in the areas of housing, employment and health had been improving during the decades of state socialism, their relative quality of life decreased a lot after the transition compared to other social groups (Bernát, 2016).

Political slogans against “Roma criminality” in Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia from extreme right parties, like the *Mi Hazánk* (Our Home) movement in Hungary or the Slovakian National Party, led to hostile social reactions against the Roma minority. In 2008 and 2009 paramilitary groups on the extreme right murdered Roma people (even children among them) in their homes, and extreme right parties regularly held marches in Roma villages in the impoverished Hungarian countryside to terrorise inhabitants (Tódor, 2017).

In Slovakia and Romania some local governments built concrete walls to separate Roma slums from the living environment of the majority society. The water and electricity supplies to these ghettoised areas are often interrupted (not always intentionally, but due to the poor infrastructure), leaving destitute people without basic services (Rusnáková et al., 2015). In one of the poorest cities in Hungary called *Ózd*, for instance, the local mayor stopped the water supply to the Roma slum, leaving thousands of destitute people without fresh water (Neuberger, 2017).

### Economic insecurity and poverty

Just as in Western Europe, a considerable and growing layer of CEE societies lag behind others, forming a group of extremely poor, destitute people whose living conditions are particularly precarious even compared to the “moderately” poor (Ladányi, 2012; Virág, 2010). These people live in impoverished rural communities and most of them belong to the Roma ethnic minority. People with physical and mental disabilities, as well as single mothers raising their children alone, also belong to the most vulnerable social groups (Ferge, 2017).

According to the indicators of social inequalities and poverty, CEE countries are at the level of the European average or show even slightly better values (Kollár, 2016). In the “Visegrád Group”, the AROPE indicators of in-work poverty, relative financial poverty and material deprivation are mostly improving. This improvement shows that CEE countries can benefit from EU membership and that the general economic development that has occurred in the last



decade is trickling down to the lower-middle class and even to the moderately poor in terms of jobs in agriculture, the service sector or industry. However, millions of CEE people who cannot participate in these activities, who are living in disadvantaged regions and are excluded from state services and support mechanisms, are trapped in a hopeless situation and live in destitution.

## *2.2 Emigration of destitute people from CEE countries*

CEE countries were always affected by different waves of emigration, mostly in relation to historical events. In the region's modern history, millions left their home countries to escape from first the fascist and then the communist dictatorships, leaving behind the oppressive state-socialist regimes in fear of reprisals after certain aborted attempts to achieve political change, like the revolution in Hungary in 1956 and the Prague Spring in 1968 (Scholten and van Ostaijen, 2018).

After the CEE countries joined the EU in three waves (2004, 2007 and 2013), millions of new European citizens migrated to Western Europe in search of better living and working opportunities. The vast majority of these new inter-EU migrants were skilled, multi-lingual young people who could easily find jobs in the Western labour markets. This migration wave became so extended and intensive by the 2010s that the CEE labour markets formerly affected by unemployment tended to weaken due to the lack of skilled workers, particularly in the sectors of healthcare, services, and industry. This tendency further exacerbated the demographic challenges in the ageing CEE region: millions of skilled young people and their families left their home countries, while pensioners, people with reduced capacity to work and other beneficiaries of the social state remained (The Economist, 2017).

Although a relatively wide range of scientific literature explores the East-West migration of the skilled labour force, the migration of the destitute, such as homeless people, street sex workers, temporary harvest workers, beggars, and street musicians, has scarcely been examined. Only a few EU projects (like PRODEC and IMAGINATION) have analysed the living conditions and vulnerability of mobile destitute people. These studies show that while by the mid 2000s, CEE destitute people were already mobile between rural regions and larger cities in a national context, increasing international mobility can be seen since the mid-2000s (Scholten and van Ostaijen, 2018). These tendencies show that when poor people are ready to leave their homes, they are no longer satisfied with the slightly better living conditions afforded in the big cities of their home countries, but migrate toward Western Europe (and other wealthy countries) to access potentially better living and working circumstances.

For example, the first considerable migration wave of destitute Roma was experienced in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when thousands of poor Roma families were seen moving from Slovakia and Hungary to Canada (Durst, 2013). After CEE countries joined the EU, first the United Kingdom, then other Western European countries became the main targets of transnational migration of destitute Central and Eastern Europeans. Among Hungarian, Slovakian, and Polish citizens, Austria and Germany are the most important emigration countries (besides the UK), while Romanians and Bulgarians also choose France, Spain, and Italy (Váradi, 2018).

It is not only the extent of migration that has changed significantly in the last decade, but its characteristics too. The earlier and more or less predictable one-way migration of CEE citizens, when they moved to the West, found a home and a job, and remained in the host country for a long period, is no longer predominant. Due to the cheap and easy transport possibilities offered by discount train tickets, FlixBus and economy flights, a relatively large number of people can now sustain double residency between their home and host countries. Mobile people are now able to stay for a shorter period of time in the host countries, earning money in the primary or secondary labour markets, and then return to their homes where the cost of living is significantly lower. The scientific literature calls this form of migration ‘circular migration’, in reference to multiple immigration and emigration phases within a shorter period of time (Triandafyllidou, 2013). Circular migration typically characterises the survival strategies of CEE harvest workers in Spain and Italy, who return to their home countries in the winter after a few months of work conducted in the summer season and live from their savings for the rest of the year (Kindler, 2018).

Engbersen et al. (2013) applied the notion of fluid migration, referring to the fluid nature of migration of Central and Eastern Europeans working and living in Western Europe. Fluid migration means that social and economic relationships become weak not only in the host countries, where intra-EU migrants are often not integrated, but in their home countries too, when they leave behind their families and friends as well as their jobs and homes. The use of digital tools like social media, digital communication channels and other online opportunities make fluid migration and parallel living in two life worlds easier and more feasible. Cheap and easy money transfer services mean people are able to send cash to support their families remaining at home even if they do not have a bank account in the host countries.

The mass migration of the skilled working-age population leads not only to economic losses for CEE countries, but to social tensions and human tragedies too. In southern Hungary, for

example, many families with disabled, sick, or elderly members lose their only caregivers, as women move to Austria to care for elderly people there (Falkenbach, 2019). In Romania and Bulgaria, hundreds of thousands of so-called “euro orphans” live without their parents who are working in Western Europe, while their children are cared for by grandparents or other family members (Paduraru, 2014). Social scientists in CEE have only just started to research and record these family, community and social tragedies caused by mass emigration. These studies have concluded, among other things, that ‘euro orphans’ in Romania and other CEE countries often suffer from severe mental health problems, like depression and anxiety, and behavioural distortions (Tomsa and Jenaro, 2015).

### **3. Switzerland as a destination country for CEE migrants**

As previously mentioned, the beginning of the 21st Century is characterised by an important migration wave from Eastern Europe to Western European countries. Switzerland, which has a large foreign population, is not an exception. A quarter of Switzerland’s residents do not have Swiss nationality (47, 8% in the City of Geneva, 32,5% in the City of Zurich, according to OFS, 2021), and this phenomenon is probably the consequence of a restrictive naturalisation policy. Moreover, Swiss citizenship is based on *ius sanguinis* (blood right) and not linked to a territorial principal (*ius soli*) (Piguet, 2013).

#### *3.1 Migration policies and laws*

In Switzerland, two federal laws regulate the right of residency and work for foreigners: the LASi (Asylum Act) and the LEtr (Foreigners Act). In the case of people remaining for more than three months in the country’s territory, different residence permits are implemented. These are specified for the following situations: permit N – for asylum-seekers (pending decision); permit F – provisional permit for refugees or foreigners; permit B – residence permit (5 years); permit C – settled permit; permit S – for individuals in need of protection; permit L – short-term (3 to 12 months, linked to an employment contract); permit G – frontier workers with employment contract (Bertrand, 2017). The residence permits and the employment of people from EU/ETFA countries has been regulated by the bilateral Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP) since 2002<sup>2</sup>. Since 1991, Switzerland has adopted a “three-circle model” to regulate migration. In this model the first “internal circle” includes member states of the EU/EFTA, the second “median circle” refers to the so-called Occidental countries (like USA/Canada), and the third “external circle” is for countries from which immigration is limited (extra-European countries, called “third states”) (Piguet, 2013).

Since 2002, citizens from the European countries who are included in the “first circle” may get a residence permit if they have an employment contract. Therefore, the increased intra-European migration can be observed from two viewpoints: the first from the north/west context (Germany, France) with highly qualified migrants, and the second from southern countries comprised of people who are mainly less qualified. The “third circle” is formed of migrants who originate from outside Europe and they are even more restricted and must demonstrate their high qualifications, their reasons for family reunification and/or their refugee status. The access to the Swiss labour market is very strict, and even with a residence permit people can only work if no other Swiss or European citizens possess the competence and qualifications to fill the position (Richter, 2020).

### *3.2 Increasing migration from CEE countries since 2007*

Since 2010, the number of immigrants coming from EU/EFTA countries is steadily increasing as a result of the successive opening of frontiers (guaranteed by Art. 21 of the TFEU) (Richter et al., 2017). Since Romania and Bulgaria became members of the EU in 2007 – followed by Croatia in 2013<sup>3</sup> – a visa is no longer required by their citizens, and people are allowed to stay, live and work in Switzerland without a permit for a maximum of three months (Petry, 2013). Until 2016, there were several restrictions for Bulgarian and Romanian citizens entering Switzerland, and this is still the case for Croatians (Colombo et al., 2016). In 2013, the migratory balance achieved a record with 68,000 people arriving in Switzerland from other European countries. Since 2018, this number of new immigrants has been significantly reduced (30,700 in 2019) (Observatoire sur la libre circulation des personnes entre la Suisse et l’UE, 2020). In the last ten years, immigration from the Eastern European (EE) region has tripled: in 2010 only 4% of all migrants arrived from the EE region, but this proportion reached 13% in 2019 (ibid.:5). In the profile of migrants, a growing diversification can be observed regarding their legal status which often determines their access to social services and even their fundamental (social) rights (i.e., for irregular migrants).

Easier immigration rules facilitate the possibilities for high-skilled foreign workers in the Swiss labour market. However, the “three-circle” immigration policy also tends to increase illegal immigration (Amarelle, 2010; Petry, 2013). The demand for a cheap, low-skilled labour force encourages undocumented migrants, for instance in the household services, care, and catering sectors. According to Swiss legislation, every foreigner without legal authorisation to stay in the country – lacking a residence permit – is considered an undocumented migrant. Undocumented migrants may encounter different situations: a) individual without a visa, but

allowed to stay, b) individual who entered legally, but overstayed after the expiry of their visa, c) individual with an expired residence permit, d) individual whose asylum request was refused (NEM or request denied) (Amarelle, 2010). The estimated number of undocumented migrants in Switzerland varies between 58,000-105,000 people (outside EU/EFTA) of which 85% are active in the labour market (Morlok et al., 2015). The highest estimated numbers of undocumented migrants live in the cantons of Zurich and Geneva (28,000 in Zurich and 13,000 in Geneva) (ibid.:25). However, this estimate does not include EU citizens who are not officially considered as undocumented. Although they may be numerous, EU citizens without a permit are quite invisible, as they are not counted in the UDM estimations, nor in the Swiss statistics of foreigners with residence permit.

### *3.3 Living conditions of destitute CEE migrants in Switzerland*

After arriving in Western Europe, people who were already deprived or stigmatised in their countries of origin are only able to find a job in precarious conditions, mainly in the fields of construction, agriculture, and care. They are generally not entitled to social benefits and are mainly assisted by NGOs, for instance in the form of emergency shelters, food, and basic health services. Based on the statistics of Doctors of the World (MDM) in Europe, 70% of their European patients arrived from Bulgaria and Romania (Hermans et al., 2020). Because of the lack of salary, housing and social protection, homelessness was a common issue among them. According to the European Observatory on Homelessness, migration can be considered as a new structural risk factor for homelessness, as well as for exclusion from the housing market and decrease access to social security in the Western welfare regimes. Thus, migration from poor countries contributes to the increase of homelessness (ibid.:19). In Switzerland, there is no available statistical data (national or cantonal) assessing the numbers of homeless people. The estimated numbers of homeless people vary significantly from city to city. Local NGOs helping homeless people report a high presence of migrants in the homeless population (Drilling et al., 2021).

#### Situation in Geneva

Geneva is the largest and wealthiest city in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. The city is characterised by high social and spatial inequalities (Benetti, 2012; Confédération Suisse, 2019; Observatoire statistique transfrontalier, 2013). Geneva is also the canton with the highest rate of foreign population in Switzerland (40% in 2019, see OCSTAT, 2020). About two-thirds of the foreign population is from the EU. The Canton of Geneva is a border area with around 506,000 people, situated in the ‘Grand Genève’ region with a population of 1 million, including

a French territory and part of the Canton de Vaud. The housing market is characterised by high rental prices – 25 to 50 euros/m<sup>2</sup>/month (Colombo et al., 2016), which makes housing practically unavailable for low-income social groups.

Approximately 250 Romanian Roma people live in Geneva under very precarious conditions. Most of them are homeless, poorly qualified and they need to beg to make a living (Battaglini and Hasdeu, 2017). Those who were once legally employed receive a social allowance (max. 100 euros/month). The Roma mostly come from Central Romania, which is the “poverty pocket” (Colombo et al., 2016) of the country. Social mobility is almost impossible in this region, and young people are often less well educated than their grandparents. The Roma face many difficulties during their migration to Switzerland, where, in the absence of proper housing and qualifications, they can only apply for poor positions in the black zone of the labour market. Even in their countries of origin, destitute people encounter difficulties in finding work, due to disadvantaged rural infrastructure and lack of education. They make frequent round trips from their home villages to the city of Geneva, experiencing a circular form of migration (Ruspini, 2011). As they often borrow money to enable them to travel to Switzerland, begging or practicing illegal sex work occasionally provides their only possibility for repaying this money. These precarious activities are their only route to overcoming poverty, and ‘to make some money’. These destitute migrants mostly use the city’s social services to eat. The estimated number of Roma rough sleepers is more than one hundred. The political response to their needs is mostly repressive: the local government of Geneva introduced an anti-begging law in 2008. The main idea behind this poverty management is to make begging – which is represented as harmful to the image of the city – less visible. In the city’s thinking, the problem is not necessarily related to begging itself, but to the visibility of illegitimate beggars and the so-called Roma community in public spaces. Populist political discourses often differentiate indigenous and foreign beggars, and the latter are regularly associated with criminality (Battaglini and Hasdeu, 2017).

### Situation in Zürich

Zürich canton is one of the most popular target regions in Switzerland for migrating Central and Eastern Europeans. This is not only due to the canton’s prosperity and working possibilities; its easy accessibility also contributes to increasing immigration from the CEE region. Currently more than 400,000 foreigners live in Zürich canton, making up 27% of the total population. Two-thirds of the foreigners have arrived from one of the EU/EFTA countries. Germans and Italians make up the largest immigrant population in the canton, but the proportion of Central

and Eastern Europeans is steadily growing, while migration of Germans and Austrians is falling. More than half of the migrating population (55%) came to Zürich because of a labour market position, and 28% for family reunion (Kanton Zürich Migrationsamt, 2020).

There are no concrete statistics about the number of migrating destitute CEE citizens coming to the city. However, social services have some soft data about the phenomenon and the characteristics of the target group. In the field of homelessness two different departments handle the situation of the local (Secretary of Housing) and the foreign (Central Clarification and Mediation Office) homeless people in Zürich. Apart from some reports in the local media about the plight of CEE homeless people, there are no targeted research projects that scrutinise their living conditions. A special night shelter (Iglu) was established by the NGO *Pfarrer Sieber* for migrating destitute CEE temporary workers experiencing homelessness in the city. Iglu is open in the winter months and only at night. Another supporting organisation for destitute CEE citizens is *Café Yucca*, a soup kitchen, where destitute CEE citizens – among others – can eat and warm up for free and with no special conditions imposed (such as the residence permit that is required by many other homelessness services).

Begging is prohibited in the streets of Zürich, although some CEE ‘walking beggars’ occasionally appear in the city centre. Police view this begging as an organised criminal activity with Eastern European criminal organisations in the background, which are responsible for human trafficking and forced migration (Sicherheitsdepartment Stadt Zürich, 2012). Despite this strong statement, there are no available empirical studies that confirm criminality among the city’s beggars.

#### A special dimension of destitution: CEE sex workers

Swiss regulation of sex work is quite liberal, both on the streets and in the parlours (Bugnon et al., 2009; Büschi, 2014). However, the trafficking and exploitation of sex workers is punishable under the Penal Code. In Swiss cities, sex work is not prohibited as it is considered an independent economic activity. The cantons and sometimes even the communities have considerable freedom in regulating sex work. The AFMP allows EU citizens to hold a B permit and carry out this activity. People from third states can obtain an L permit (short-term). In Geneva, since 2009 a law on prostitution (replacing regulations from July 1994) obliges sex workers to register with the police and the Finance Department<sup>4</sup>. In Zurich there is no specific law covering commercial sex work, but street prostitution is legal in some districts. A 2007 estimate by the University of Geneva shows that there are 1,800 to 3,000 sex workers in Zurich,

and about 2,000 in Geneva. They are 90% women, 7% transgender people and 3% men. According to NGOs working with this group, 31% of the sex workers have an L permit; 23% a B/C permit; 23% are undocumented, and 22% have Swiss nationality. Since this data was collected, a steadily growing number of destitute CEE women has been observed, particularly in the area of street prostitution. This trend has intensified since most of the CEE countries joined the EU and the agreement on the free movement of people between the EU and Switzerland enabled migration (Stadt Zürich Polizeidepartment, 2015). The proportion of CEE sex workers in Zürich is approximately two-thirds of the total sex-worker community (Rathgeb, 2013), and among the city's commercial sex workers, they work in the most precarious positions (including street work and illegal parlours) (Finger, 2013).

### *3.4 Minimum social protection schemes under Swiss social policy*

In 2019, Switzerland was ranked in 28<sup>th</sup> place among the OECD countries for social spending, at 16.7% of GDP<sup>5</sup>, indicating a quite weak welfare state (OECD, 2021). When analysing the social protection framework in Switzerland, it is crucial to differentiate the role of three different political levels: the federal state, the cantons, and the municipalities. Legislation is made at the federal level, mainly through the Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation<sup>6</sup>, the Federal Act on Foreign Nationals and Integration (Federal Law on Foreigners, LEtr)<sup>7</sup> and the Asylum Act (LASi)<sup>8</sup>. The education and healthcare systems, as well as social welfare benefits, are the responsibility of the cantons (Bilger et al., 2011). The handling of residence permits is also managed at the cantonal level.

The Swiss Federal Constitution does not specify an overall right to accommodation. Even though the Constitution (Art. 41e) states that “*the Confederation and Cantons must ensure that [...] every person in need of housing can find an affordable and appropriate house*”, this doesn't mean entitlement to any kind of help from the state. Housing policy measures for socially disadvantaged households are the responsibility of the cantons, cities and municipalities (Drilling et al., 2021). There is no “housing first” policy in the country and Switzerland didn't sign the European Social Charter, whose art. 31 obliges states to prevent and reduce homelessness.

2010 was the European Year of “Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion”. Switzerland designed a national five-year programme on the topic, which started in 2013, but was then reduced in 2018. The programme does not include any real monitoring, even though this has been demanded by aid organisations for years. Switzerland invests little in fighting poverty when compared internationally (Fredrich, 2020). Even though a National Programme Against



Poverty exists, this is more a cantonal than a federal policy, with lots of inequities seen in the different cantons' responses.

### Social assistance

Social assistance is covered by Art. 12 and 115 of the Swiss Federal Constitution<sup>9</sup>. The implementation of social assistance, as a final safety net of social protection, is the responsibility of the 26 cantons. This implementation is generally delegated to the local municipalities. Social assistance is available for Swiss residents, refugees (when asylum has been granted) and foreigners with a residence permit. Access to social services is tied to residency authorisation (Tecklenburg, 2020). For migrants, social assistance is strictly linked to employment status; without a job contract people don't have access to social assistance, but only to emergency aid. In the case of unemployment, even if it is non-voluntary, a claim for social assistance can lead to the loss of the individual's residence permit. In Switzerland, there is no guaranteed minimum income at the federal level (MISSOC, 2020<sup>10</sup>), although the CSIAS/SKOS (Swiss Conference of Institutions for Social Work) offers some recommendations through a series of standards for the cantons<sup>11</sup>.

Art. 12 of the Federal Constitution offers a legal basis for emergency aid for every person in need, but the amount is lower than the financial aid offered through social assistance. It covers only emergency measures, like emergency shelters and social centres. The system of emergency care is managed by the cantons or the communities, or it is sometimes delegated to other subsidiary aid organisations. Emergency assistance mostly provides in-kind support and vouchers, and seldom money (Sanchez-Mazas et al., 2011).

Since 1990, a resurgence of a political discourse that differentiates between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor can be seen, with a clear focus on fighting abuse within the welfare system (Tabin et al., 2010). In this context, active labour market policies are prioritised, with an increasing transition from welfare to workfare. In other European countries, restrictive policies around social assistance for migrants are also based on the fear of welfare tourism. These policies push the most vulnerable people into a state of invisibility and destitution (Da Lomba, 2006). Because of controversial legal actions, many unregistered migrants live in a state of hidden homelessness.

### Medical protection

According to Swiss law, all residents, including undocumented or homeless people, must be covered by basic health insurance with access to the healthcare system (LAMal, art. 3 para. 1). Data from the OECD indicate that 100% of the Swiss population is covered by health insurance (OECD, 2017), which suggests that all residents have access to the healthcare system. However, these figures ignore the fact that a considerable part of the Swiss population is not covered by compulsory health insurance. According to estimates, 0.2% of the resident population was uninsured in 2017, which means almost 20,000 people (Roduit, 2020). Moreover, 80-90% of undocumented migrants are without medical insurance (Médecins sans Frontières and HUG, 2020; Plate-forme nationale pour les soins médicaux aux sans-papiers, 2012).

In the cantons of Geneva and Zurich there is no automatic health insurance coverage for the recipients of emergency aid – in Geneva, only for rejected asylum seekers (Bilger et al., 2011). Regarding undocumented migrants with access to healthcare even without health insurance, the situation is quite different in Geneva and Zurich. In Geneva, all migrants and other vulnerable people have access to a special medical unit that is integrated into the public hospital (CAMSCO<sup>12</sup>) (Bilger et al., 2011). This unit allows basic access to primary healthcare, but does not guarantee access to the system of special (secondary) care (Roduit, 2020). In Zurich, only NGOs provide health services for migrants without health insurance. The project *Meditrina*, now sustained by the Swiss Red Cross Zurich<sup>13</sup>, provides primary healthcare and allows access to undocumented migrants (Bilger et al., 2011). Another organisation, the City Medical Service (*Städtische Gesundheitsdienste*), organises gynaecological consultations for marginalised women (ibid.:79). Despite these supporting services, migrants in precarious conditions often encounter various bureaucratic and legal barriers that hamper their access to healthcare (Bodenmann et al., 2018; Rode, 2010).

### 3.5 Denied citizenship?

Citizenship is based on three main values: belonging to a national community, having certain social and economic rights and the ability to participate as a member of the system (according to Bellamy, 2008, cited by Turner, 2016). It “*draws boundaries between insiders and outsiders in term of access to rights*”, justifying “*closing its borders against strangers*” (Turner, 2016). The extended dimension of citizenship and its relationship to social rights is decisive in the access to social and medical services. Intra-European migrants without a residence permit are mostly considered as “denizens type 1: a group of people permanently resident in a foreign country, but only enjoying limited, partial or even no rights of citizenship”. Undocumented CEE citizens, as well as other undocumented migrants are in this sense excluded from “real”

citizenship and deprived of social protection. This represents a kind of social citizenship denied on the European level. In this typology, the other type of denizenship (type 2) refers to citizens of these countries, for whom “the erosion of social citizenship” leads them to “begin to resemble denizens or strangers in their own societies” (ibidem).

Those who cannot work are excluded from the “*right to have rights*” (Arendt, 1973). In the “*absence of participation rights in diverse dimensions of society, like the labour market, social connections and social/political life*” and with limited access to social resources (training, health, housing), there is a loss of social insertion, which is clearly linked to the tightening of immigration laws (Richter, 2020).

#### 4. Summary

After the majority of CEE countries joined the EU and the Schengen Area, Switzerland became one of the most popular target countries for mobile destitute people searching for better living conditions than they enjoyed in their home countries. The migration of destitute CEE citizens has particularly intensified in the last decade, after Central and Eastern European governments introduced anti-poor measures that steadily exacerbated the poverty, social exclusion, and discrimination of vulnerable social groups in these countries. These penalising actions against the Roma, homeless people, the rural poor, and other disadvantaged groups have had a significant push effect on the emigration of the destitute. In the last couple of years, the migration of CEE destitute citizens has seen changes and their former circular migration has turned into a fluid migration which is characterised by significantly shorter periods of time spent in the host country, and the maintaining of active economic and social relationships with the home countries.

The Swiss welfare state is unprepared for the growing number of destitute people and its institutions can only partially handle the novel crisis of absolute poverty, begging, human trafficking, and welfare tourism. As destitute CEE citizens come to Switzerland as tourists and are therefore not eligible for a Swiss residence permit, they remain in the country as *sans-papiers* and are deprived of social rights and eligibilities. Swiss cities occasionally apply hostile social policy measures against destitute people (e.g., in the form of begging bans or higher fees imposed at night shelters) as measures intended to tackle welfare migration. As a result, destitute CEE citizens often do not experience improvement in their social conditions in Switzerland compared to their former living conditions in their home countries.

## CONCLUSION

This theoretical paper aimed to examine the concept of destitution through the situation of mobile Central and Eastern European (CEE) citizens in Switzerland, based on the literature and previous research. It was also the departure point for our on-going research project *Routes into Destitution* (2021-2022). Initially, we covered the concept of destitution from a historical point of view to the current understanding of the phenomenon, to at length come to an up-to-date understanding of the concept. We then proposed a figure summarising the socio-political structural conditions that have been identified as causes of the status of destitution. We subsequently went on to explore the reasons for migration and the precarious living conditions of Central and Eastern European EU citizens living in Switzerland. We concluded that destitute CEE migrants encounter substantial difficulties in living in Switzerland, are invisible to the institutions of the Swiss welfare state, and their fundamental human rights are often not respected in the areas of housing, healthcare, and the labour market.

Nevertheless, after this theoretical overview and outline of the Swiss context, questions remain as to how people from Eastern and Central Europe actually live in Switzerland: this will be the goal of the current project that incorporates case studies from the cantons of Geneva and Zürich. The research team will conduct biographical interviews among the people concerned in order to assess the weight of various structures and the role of people's individual agency in these situations of destitution. In doing so, the project aims at answering the following questions: When CEE people with insufficient social resources find themselves in a situation of homelessness, or in illegal sex work, can we refer to all of them as experiencing a situation of destitution? What are their resources and vulnerabilities in terms of housing, health, and employment? Do they find resources through their social networks, and if so, how? What is the role of social structures and local policies in maintaining a precarious status or providing the possibility of escaping it? As the life situation of destitute EU citizens without residence permit is scarcely examined in Swiss sociology, social policy and social work, our upcoming research aims to 1) increase scientific knowledge in this field and 2) propose recommendations for social policies.

*Notes.*

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<sup>1</sup> The freedom of movement for workers is guaranteed within the European Union by the Article 45 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. In Switzerland, the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP) rules the right to stay for European citizens since 2002.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/en/home/themen/fza\\_schweiz-eu-efta.html](https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/en/home/themen/fza_schweiz-eu-efta.html)

<sup>3</sup> [https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries\\_fr#tab-0-1](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries_fr#tab-0-1). Since 2004, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia have become members (with Malta, Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania).

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.ge.ch/legislation/rsg/f/s/rsg\\_i2\\_49.html](https://www.ge.ch/legislation/rsg/f/s/rsg_i2_49.html)

<sup>5</sup> <https://data.oecd.org/fr/social/exp/depenses-sociales.htm#indicator-chart>

<sup>6</sup> Swiss Federal Constitution of the 18<sup>th</sup> April 1999:

<https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/1999/404/en>

<sup>7</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> December 2005: <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2007/758/en>

<sup>8</sup> 26 June 1998: <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/1999/358/en>

<sup>9</sup> Art. 12. Right to assistance when in need: Persons in need and unable to provide for themselves have the right to assistance and care, and to the financial means required for a decent standard of living; Art. 115. Support for persons in need: Persons in need shall be supported by their Canton of residence. The Confederation regulates exceptions and powers.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.missoc.org/missoc-database/comparative-tables/results/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://skos.ch/fr/les-normes-csias>. A lump sum for maintenance amounts to 997 CHF for a single person.

<sup>12</sup> Consultation for Community Care: <https://www.hug.ch/en/consultation/community-care-camsco>

<sup>13</sup> Website Meditrina, Rotes Kreuz: <https://www.srk-zuerich.ch/fuer-sie-da/vorsorge-gesundheit/meditrina-medizinische-anlaufstelle-fuer-sans-papiers>

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