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WARM SOLIDARITY IN THE BELGIAN HOMELESSNESS POLICY ASSEMBLAGE DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Abstract

In 2020 in Belgium the coronavirus crisis generated a widespread solidarity between the housed and the homeless. This paper adopts a policy assemblage approach to investigate policy responses to the pandemic with regards to actions, discourses and spatial materialities around homelessness. Three areas of contingent reassembling emerged from the analysis: spaces of cooperation, domestic space and public space. All three were permeated with new charity power relations and warm solidarity rhetoric. Firstly, emergency responses involved a high level of cooperation between different actors. Secondly, domestic space became a space for participation for helpers, while recipients – temporarily and as an exceptional measure – were granted access to it. Thirdly, daily practices in public space revealed and exacerbated power imbalances. Additionally, homelessness was portrayed in the media as caused by these exceptional circumstances rather than a problem of structural inequalities and insufficient policies. In this rhetoric, increased civic solidarity

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was the answer to the extraordinary situation. Despite all their drawbacks, in the context of the multilevel Belgian administrative structure, however, these contingent initiatives are potentially also a tool of critique and policy change.

Keywords: homelessness, policy assemblage, coronavirus pandemic, new charity, warm solidarity, Belgium

INTRODUCTION

“Stay at home!” became a universal requirement in the early months of the global spread of the coronavirus in 2020 as the first lockdown measures were introduced in Belgium. The pandemic quickly generated widespread concern for those unable to stay at home because they have no home. In the spring of 2020, Belgian newspapers published extensively about various acts of solidarity with people experiencing homelessness. The warm solidarity discourse and the neo-philanthropic turn in practices, however, did not appear with the onset of the pandemic but had been prominent elements in social policy observed long before 2020 [Villadsen 2007; Parsell, Clarke 2022].

The aim of this article is to trace the most recent developments in the Belgian homelessness responses that have received little critical attention until now. We focus especially on the period of the coronavirus crisis of 2020, when the need for immediate action was coupled with a common feeling of shared responsibility for the most vulnerable. We adopt a policy assemblage approach to explore the interplay of various processes, discourses, and materialities. We sketch the complexity of the Belgian homelessness policies and examine a selection of actions and discourses that emerged at the time. We analyse how the coronavirus pandemic impacted the relations and their discursive expressions within the assemblage. We argue that the crisis strengthened the ongoing processes of hybridisation and the charity practices and discourses already apparent in the Belgian homelessness responses.

This paper has been divided into five parts that deal with: (1) the complexities of homelessness policies in Belgium and the concept of the policy assemblage, (2) the new charity and warm solidarity concepts, (3) the study’s methodology, (4) the findings of the research, focussing on the three key areas: the spaces of cooperation and participation, the domestic space and the public space, and finally (5) we raise some questions for future research.

THE BELGIAN HOMELESSNESS POLICY ASSEMBLAGE

The paper is based on the cases from Flanders and Brussels, two of the three Belgian regions. Belgium has a long tradition of catholic charity organizations, and despite the emergence of the modern welfare state, the church and other non-governmental organizations had a great influence on social relief. As a result, a hybrid model emerged where both the state and influential civic society organisations shape policies and provide support with an intricate network of hybrid organizations, especially in Brussels [Deleu et al. 2022]. From the 1970s onwards, the support system also became increasingly complicated due to the subsequent phases of federalisation. Contemporary Belgium is a federal state consisting of regions and language communities. Regions are responsible for, among other things, social services, the labour market and housing policies. Social security remains in the hands of the federal authorities. Brussels Capital Region is a bilingual, separate region with its own parliament and cabinet with overlapping competences from the French and Flemish Communities, some of which are coordinated by the Common Community Commission (La Commission communautaire commune/ Gemeenschappelijke Gemeenschapscommissie – COCOM/GGC). Each Belgian municipality implements the right to social assistance through a Public Centre of Social Welfare. In Flanders, other kinds of social services such as transitional housing or women’s refuges are coordinated by Centres for General Welfare. In Brussels, a wide network of local and voluntary organizations provide basic support [Bogaerts 2019; Deleu et al. 2022].

The data on the extent and nature of homelessness in Belgium is slowly emerging [Meys, Hermans 2014; Demaerschalk, Hermans 2020]. For the country’s 11.5 million inhabitants, no nation-wide estimate of homelessness exists at present. Point-in-time counts conducted in several cities and counties in the years 2020–2022 present a fragmented picture, yet it is still the most accurate picture to date of Belgian homelessness. More than 8000 people were counted across those localities, with more than a third living with family and friends or under threat of eviction [Telling 2022]. A large proportion of children in transitional housing, many young adults experiencing rooflessness, a lack of clear pathways out of transitional housing and a large population living under threat of eviction are characteristic features of Belgian homelessness. In the latest Brussels study, more than 5000 people were counted, out of a population of about 1.2 million within the city limits and 2.5 million in the whole metropolitan area. Data from the Belgian capital is collected in a different way and primarily shows the most vulnerable groups: people living in public space, emergency shelters

and vacant buildings. Around half of this population does not have any income; the same proportion does not have recourse to public support [Bruss Help 2020].

Thanks to a growing body of knowledge and the 2016 Flemish Policy Action Plan, the policy in Flanders focuses on youth leaving care, and a transition to housing-led approaches with individual studios replacing dormitory-like shelters. Housing First is becoming an established type of support. This trend is being undermined, however, because a large number of migrants have no access to formal support, especially in large cities [Bruss Help 2020; Schuermans et al. 2019]. There is a progressing hybridisation of responses, mainly involving voluntary and municipal organizations. This blurring of the boundaries also concerns individuals, for instance, social workers working as volunteers after hours [Plovie 2019]. Formal and informal organisations work in a complementary manner, with people being referred through formal and personal connections between the sectors [Swyngedauw 2019]. The prominence of NGOs is partly caused by growing specialisation, sectoral divisions, and a focus on the efficiency of the formal welfare institutions, a growing group of migrants without formal residence [Hermans et al. 2020], and the impact of austerity measures on formal programs. One example of this is the Citizens' Platform, a movement to house refugees in private houses in Brussels, which is complementary to the shrinking public infrastructure [Schuermans et al. 2019].

Alleviating homelessness requires an integrated approach based on collaboration between different actors and policy fields. While policies such as income support or housing are usually implemented by national or regional government, homelessness policymaking is often in the hands of local government. Not-for-profit and charity organizations, subsidized by (local) government, are often the main providers of support for people who are homeless. Adding to the complexity, homelessness policies have been characterised by opposing strategies: controlling versus caring [Davelaar, Kerstens 2012]. Some homelessness policies are a result of historical durability, such as soup kitchens at religious missions; some developed with time, like the staircase model; others mark important societal breaks, such as women's refuges; still, others are transferred from other contexts, adapted and applied locally, for instance, Housing First. This multiplicity of actors, modes of implementation, approaches and the importance of spatial and temporal contexts suggests the relevance of studying homelessness policies as assemblages.

The notion of an assemblage is an analytical response to the complexity and contingency of current policies and the shifting of the perspective from institutional structures and actors to practices and relations [Savage 2020]. By its

very nature, precise conceptualization is lacking, but “assemblages have been conceived as dynamic, decomposable but irreducible, revisable compositions emerging from processes of diverse, heterogeneous, material and immaterial co-functioning components, or actors, coming together, or assembling, to serve an overt or covert purpose in a milieu” [Briassoulis 2019: 421]. There are a number of features pertaining to policy assemblages. Governance is increasingly driven by informal processes [Savage 2020], with private and public actors cooperating or obstructing each other. The fitting and fixing concerns processes that are both historically rooted as well as impromptu initiatives [Koster 2015] assembled from an existing repertoire, by way of habit, accretion, and bricolage. Assemblages are never complete and are always a work in progress. Power is relational and is flowing through a polycentric network and there is always contestation and resistance embedded in the processes [Savage 2020]. Assemblages are therefore contingent and unstable [Koster 2015; Bueger 2018], dynamic [Briassoulis 2019], and with an immanent potential for change [Savage 2020]. The power dynamic of an assemblage cuts through and across administrative boundaries. Assemblages create and claim territories by the constant (re)assembling of their parts, and by controlling the flows in and beyond the claimed spaces. Both human and non-human, material and immaterial components are taken into account. Objects have both material and expressive roles [Lancione 2014]. Practices of implementing policies create discourses that frame the problems and solutions [Koster 2015]. Last but not least, ideas forming assemblages are borrowed, adapted and implemented. This approach allows us to investigate the international transfer of ideas and model practices from other cities or states that are implemented in new contexts [McCann 2011], for instance, through networks of knowledge-based experts [Bueger 2018].

In the field of homelessness, for example, the assemblage approach has been used by Lancione [2014]. The study in Turin demonstrated how spaces, people, and policies form a network of relations, where power is diluted into everyday practices. The materiality of these “assemblages of care” has its discursive expression. For instance, containers used to offer night shelter were “*removing unwanted bodies from the streets*” [2014: 34, italics in original], in fact, creating an especially stressful place for some people who were seeking shelter. Another study of governmental assemblage of homelessness explored the ambiguities and interrelations between care and punitive policies in Brisbane [Clarke, Parsell 2020]. This approach allows for an appreciation of the heterogeneity of multiple practices in the homelessness sector, requires attention to the enacting processes, and acknowledges their contingency. We propose an analytic of

assemblage for the homelessness responses during the coronavirus crisis for three reasons: (1) the complexity of homelessness policies, (2) the emergency and contingency of the pandemic situation, (3) the need to couple the localised materiality of homelessness responses with the global trends and discourses permeating the debate.

THE NEW CHARITY AND WARM SOLIDARITY

Policies are adopted in a particular territory and are a product of local forces. Policymaking, however, is also affected by globally-circulating policy ideas, imaginations and models, especially if those appeal to universal values. Some trends are driven by widespread processes, such as the rolling back of welfare state provision, which seems to go hand in hand with the emergence of neo-philanthropic initiatives, and calls for acts of solidarity by citizens, charity organisations and private for-profit actors.

The terms New Charity [Kessl et al. 2020], Neo-philanthropy [Villadsen 2007], Postsecular charity [Cloke et al. 2006; Herman et al. 2012], and Filantrocipitalism [Bishop 2013] have appeared in the literature on social work to describe an increasingly visible trend. These concepts refer to policies and social work practices that are based on gifts and voluntary work performed by individuals, volunteers, non-governmental organizations or private companies. Depending on the focus, several causes of neo-philanthropy are identified: (1) the withdrawal of the welfare state from the alleviation of poverty and an increased conditionality of social services, (2) an increase in the number of people who have no entitlement to public support, (3) helpers' and donators' motivations. The limits of new charity are not easily defined. Its activities are often interlinked with the welfare state's institutions, such as food banks supplying public shelters or volunteers working in municipal services. Neo-philanthropic initiatives, such as mobile washing machine services [Parsell, Watts 2017], are sometimes termed "innovative", but they are primarily filling a gap where public provision falls short. The postsecular empowering of communities, engagement and ethics are appealing because they alleviate the neo-liberal impacts on the marginalized [Herman et al. 2012: 68] and lead to "private solutions for public issues" [Bishop 2013]. As Spade [2020] points out, however, mutual aid strategies are the most effective way to support vulnerable populations, mobilise significant resistance and build alternative infrastructures. If these solidarity practices do not exclude specific groups, and are developed by means of democratic decision-making, they are not simply a form of charity and can challenge current policies.

Still, this neo-philanthropic turn has mostly been criticised for creating a power imbalance; recipients have to declare themselves in need, feel shame, and are forced to rely on strangers for survival and dignity [Villadsen 2007]. As Parsell and Watts [2017] argue, this type of alleviation of homelessness creates dependence on the benevolence of others. Conditionality, which is also present in welfare state support, rests here on the expression of gratitude. Where the welfare state (in principle) treats everyone equally, charity organizations are free to choose their clients. Even though they generally serve anyone based on need, some of them introduce means-testing and waiting lists. Since such neo-charitable initiatives usually focus on basic needs, they distract from the structural causes of homelessness and may normalise such ameliorative responses. By attracting attention, they may also influence policy and investment in that direction [Parsell, Watts 2017].

New charity activities seem to have more lasting effects on helpers rather than recipients. The “warm glow” of charity is not the only benefit; there are more tangible advantages for people and companies engaged in helping in terms of career-building, networking or tax exemptions. In Australia, as Parsell et al. [2021] observe, welfare retrenchment is coupled with significant material and symbolic support for the new charity and an attempt to create an “ethical society”. This type of society would be powered by the ethical commitment of its citizens, who would address the social problems of their communities. It normalises and even celebrates certain philanthropic initiatives while stigmatising people in poverty and eroding citizenship rights.

A concept affiliated with new charity is used in the Dutch-speaking context, namely the distinction between “warm” and “cold” solidarity [de Beer, Koster 2009; Oosterlynck 2020]. Cold solidarity is based on rights, is formal, and is where support is granted based on legal procedures. Warm solidarity, on the other hand, is based on need, and is usually delivered through personal contact, often in an informal way. Warm solidarity expects no reciprocity and is therefore unselfish, is “affective”, and hence borne out of feelings of sympathy, a sense of community or moral duty [de Beer, Koster 2009]. Cantillon [2020] argues that warm solidarity is an expression of the failing welfare state, and the problem is that it does not necessarily lead to a change in policy and does not guarantee social rights.

Warm solidarity and new charity are not separate streams of policy responses or a world of separate organisations. On the contrary, they are integrated into the system, mutually dependent on the welfare state [Elander et al. 2012: 97], and form a “shadow state” [Cloke et al. 2012]; they permeate discourses, and have

an impact on the formal system. For instance, Clarke and Parsell [2020: 1626] observe how punitive and caring homelessness policies in Australia interact with each other, that is, how care-oriented interventions “take on a punitive feel”, while punitive policies may in fact lead individuals into caring services. For instance, Midgley [2016] analyses how the staff of a charitable food provider in England negotiated and encouraged rough sleepers to engage with commissioned support. In this context, on practical and policy levels, new forms of interaction between institutions emerge and lead to hybrid forms of solidarity practices in which the borders between institutionalised and informal solidarity are blurred. A policy assemblage lens directs our research focus to these complex and contingent processes in homelessness responses.

THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to analyse the (re)assembling of the Belgian homelessness policies during the coronavirus crisis of 2020. This is a mixed methods study where a variety of materials were analysed. During the pandemic, the authors took part in several projects on homelessness in Belgium. Koen Hermans lead the first Belgian count in the city of Leuven (and then subsequently the next counts) and oversaw other projects, specifically those concerning youth homelessness. At that time, Magdalena Mostowska was working on a project on women’s homelessness in Flanders. In the twelve interviews with experts and policymakers conducted for that latter study, the coronavirus crisis became the principal thread. This material was supplemented with the following: a review of organisations’ social media and press releases; national and local news concerning homelessness; and interviews with experts and officials published in the media. Additionally, a systematic content analysis of 86 articles concerning homelessness was conducted. These consisted of all the texts on homelessness published during the first six weeks of the lockdown, between March 16, 2020 and April 26, 2020 in the selected media. These were the three mainstream Flemish news sites with the largest audiences: VRTnws – the news site of the public TV broadcaster, De Standaard – the largest “quality” daily newspaper, and Het Laatste Nieuws – the largest “popular” daily newspaper.

Our study was guided by an extended case method, where we attempted to identify structural regularities by a detailed analysis of micro social processes. We used an inductive approach to identify the patterns appearing in our data by means of thematic codes. The first coding pertained to the features of the new charity, such as warm glow, solidarity, and feelings of gratitude; and to

homelessness responses, such as emergency, basic needs, accommodation, street-level policymaking, cooperation, hybridisation and regulations. A number of sensitising concepts that reflected the stakeholders' (interviewees and persons giving voice in the media or social media) perspective emerged from the data, such as anticipation, sense of urgency, visibility and invisibility, volunteering, solidarity and hope. These concepts provided an analytic frame, serving as points of reference to reanalyse the material, and were further organised into three areas: (1) spaces of cooperation and participation, (2) domestic space, and (3) public space. Through such an iterative process, we identified similarities, differences, and general patterns of practices where the relations and discursive expressions had shifted during the pandemic.

THE BELGIAN ASSEMBLAGE OF HOMELESSNESS RESPONSES DURING THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

In the early months of the pandemic, guidelines for the protection of people who are homeless were released by bodies such as the American HUD, the UN and FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless). Large sums of money were allocated by some governments to accommodate people in hotels [Parsell et al. 2023], many dorm-like shelters were eliminated, evictions were halted [Fitzpatrick et al. 2020], incomes were supported and rough sleeping criminalisation measures were reduced. Responses were not equal across the countries; they were sometimes uncoordinated and fragmented. In contrast to the economic crisis of 2008, when mostly austerity measures were apparent, the 2020 coronavirus crisis led to the creation of bottom-up initiatives and a sense of shared destiny and shared effort. This was also apparent in Belgium, where the logic of new charity and the warm solidarity rhetoric were already present within the homelessness policy assemblage previously. Although there is a large overlap between them, three domains emerged from the analysis and will be scrutinized below: (1) spaces of cooperation, (2) domestic space, and (3) public space.

Spaces of cooperation and commitment

Smooth coordination is one of the key factors that should be present in an effective homelessness response. The larger the city, the more complex the network of stakeholders and the more diverse group of people in need of support. The situation is especially complicated in Brussels, where the administrative and

linguistic puzzle adds to the complexity. Uncertainty, anticipation and a growing frustration were apparent in the first weeks of the lockdown. Public services were not quick to respond and communicate. Voluntary organizations had to obey the lockdown measures and often had to suspend their operations; however, they returned with their (adjusted) services within weeks. New bottom-up initiatives were formed, and non-profit organizations formed coalitions. Also, commercial actors, such as hotels and restaurants, joined in.

According to experts on the ground, a sense of urgency and solidarity during the coronavirus crisis accelerated the processes of collaboration that were very apparent before the coronavirus outbreak [Bogaerts 2019]. Local Centres for Public Welfare (CPAS/OCMW) were referring an increasing number of clients to food banks. In Brussels, cooperation started between commercial hotels, not-for-profit shelters, and organizations such as *Medicins du Monde* or *Infirmiers de rue*, sometimes with the help of the CPAS/OCMW [Legrand, Marmont 2020]. *DoucheFlux*, which had not offered shelter before, started providing accommodation for 15 people, mostly women, in cooperation with a hotel and with subsidies from the COCOM/GGC in April 2020. The arrangement was stopped in September 2020. With two other NGOs, and another hotel they also organized “*Hôtel solidaire*” to house another 21 people. Organisations such as *Bulle mobile* laundry switched temporarily to distributing food packages, but quickly returned to hygiene services, which demand close cooperation of municipalities with regard to permits, and connection to electricity and water. In addition to donations and crowdfunding (for a new truck and washing/drying machines), they received subsidies from the COCOM/GGC. The mutual dependency of private and public initiatives was tightened thanks to existing connections. In the early days of the pandemic, when emergency actions had to be undertaken, the boundaries between charity and systemic support seemed to be even more blurred.

Reliance on voluntary organisations also creates a vast area for commitment. During lockdowns, several cities launched platforms for bringing together volunteers and people in need. There were also a number of crowdfunding initiatives that were supported by municipalities. In Antwerp, for instance, a *Solidarity Fund* was initiated by the platform of not-for-profit organisations. For each euro donated to the fund, the local government added one euro. In Ghent, the *Solidarity Fund for Difficult Times*, a cooperation of non-profit organizations, launched a number of actions, such as distributing food vouchers, warm meals, and clothes. The organisation was also crowdfunding to provide emergency aid and financial support to households in need. Their cooking team used the slogan: “No pity,

but real solidarity”. In the autumn of 2020, this fund started receiving public subsidies from the city of Ghent.

Since the rollback of support for people with refugee status and undocumented migrants in relation to housing, citizens have supported migrants directly by housing them in their homes. From the Brussels homelessness count in 2018 it turned out that almost 18% of people in crisis accommodation were staying in private houses opened up by volunteers and coordinated by the Citizen’s Platform; in 2020 almost 500 people were still housed in this way, which made up around 10% of all people experiencing homelessness in Brussels. In the report, the authors called it an “explosion of charity” [Bruss Help 2020]. During the early days of the lockdown, the shelter of the Platform, in an unused office building provided for free by the city, ran 24 hours a day to its full capacity. Another 200 people were placed in hotels and 250 more in private homes. In sum, the crisis strengthened the cooperation between private, public and individual actors; ad hoc initiatives started, and donations and emergency funds were used.

Ambiguities of domestic space

During lockdown, the internet became the primary tool of communication, and also a way to engage in supporting others from the safe space of home. Online commitments and donations became more individualised. For instance, Bulle mobile laundry asked for specific technical parts and equipment to fix washing machines in their new truck. Students from a local school donated not only laundry detergents but also personalised greeting cards. DoucheFlux offered vouchers enabling individuals or organisations to get a free shower whenever they needed one. The cooking team in Ghent offered a QR code on social media so you could donate as little as 2 euros per meal with one click. Another informal group in Brussels came up with an idea of “rescue food packages” that anyone could buy and then distribute in their own neighbourhood or simply somewhere in the city when meeting a person in need. This was seen as a way to expand the network of volunteers, but also “give everyone a chance to do good” [interview 22.12.2020]. More than before, social and mainstream media became a channel to organise but also to express and benefit from the “warm glow” of solidarity.

While for the helpers’ domestic space also became an opportunity to experience a “warm glow”, for some people without a proper shelter, safe private space became suddenly available. In Brussels around 700 people, many of them migrants, were accommodated in hotels and more than 200 in transitional housing. Winter shelters and night shelters extended their operations and changed routines

to make it possible to stay during the day, as well as overnight. Still, providing private space was seen as an exceptional measure officials such as, for instance, Rudi Vervoort, the Brussels minister-president:

In such a way people who are accommodated can stay put without having to hit the city when the day begins [...] We'll have lockers, toilets, and meals so that the homeless can stay indoors. [DS 20.03.2020]

The extraordinary and temporary nature of providing people with “private” space during the day normalises the fact that not everyone has access to it. Another paper called a solution “creative” when people from the Roeselare night shelter were moved to transitional housing:

In the current corona crisis, it's not responsible that up to thirteen people share one living room and three bedrooms. [HLN 18.03.2020]

Having a private space was also seen as exceptional by people who were finally accommodated. In one of the few media texts where recipients of support are given a voice, two men staying in a hotel in Bruges express their gratitude:

The first thing I do, is take a bath. Wonderful after a whole day in the cold. And then watch the news. Own bathtub and a TV that is a luxury. And [hotel manager] is the best. [The other interviewee nods]: This morning she even gave us chocolate. To encourage us. It's such good luck in all this bad luck, that we can stay here. [DS 27.03.2020]

Domestic space, a crucial resource during the spread of the virus, became even more distinctly divided between the housed and the unhoused. For helpers, a sense of solidarity could manifest itself from home through personalised charitable actions online. However, access to private space round the clock for the homeless was portrayed as exceptional and something for which they should express gratitude.

Regulating public space

As elsewhere, it has also been observed in Belgium that many phenomena that were not visible before were exposed during lockdown [Debruyne et al. 2020]. Demand for food increased. In otherwise deserted public spaces, queues were formed in front of food banks and soup kitchens. Public space became a space of contestation and opposing forces. On the one hand, federal and local government imposed restrictions: distancing, wearing masks or a curfew. On the other hand, things that were taking place indoors before were moved outside: for instance, food packages were handed out instead of a meal indoors.

This visibility prompted some people who had not engaged in volunteer work before to act. One of the groups of volunteers organised an ad hoc food and

clothes handout action in the centre of Brussels. Volunteers had to make sure that the queuing participants kept their distance. Since word spread quickly and the queue grew longer by the week, volunteers equipped themselves with yellow reflective vests and were “controlling the traffic”. The queue became even more visible and regulated. The visibility of volunteers was also apparent in the media, where they received symbolic recognition. For instance, a student that rode the streets of Antwerp on a cargo bike and delivered “soup and bread to the homeless” explained:

I don't get the money for it, but that adds value to my life. I devote my free day to helping others rather than Netflix.

The volunteer had a chat with people she met. “There's good in everyone” in this discourse [Villadsen 2007], but this philanthropic activity also benefits the feelings of the giver [Parsell, Watts 2017] with quasi-religious emotions:

Think about people who are in need, people who struggle. Open your heart and spread love. That's why I'm ready every Sunday. It's my way of doing something good for the world. [HLN 18.03.2020]

This personal engagement, according to an interviewed volunteer, stands in contrast to the work of those within established and bureaucratised organisations, who no longer have knowledge of the field and live off subsidies, while “we gather people and give them an opportunity to do good” (interview 22.12.2020).

Initiatives that were transferred from other parts of the world also form a part of the Brussels assemblage in the public space. For instance, Rolling Douche's mobile shower idea was taken from Paris in 2016. Bulle mobile laundry operates a truck with washing and drying machines. This Australian idea was implemented for the first time in Brussels in 2018. Trucks of the two organisations often park next to each other, forming a make-shift hygiene spot. Such services that normalise getting by on the streets were strengthened in early 2020 by discourses that were juxtaposing the “ordinary” pre-corona period with the “exceptional” lockdown circumstances under which living on the streets is not that “normal”:

Sant Egidio suspects that, under normal circumstances, many homeless people get free meals at restaurants or shops which now have to keep their doors closed because of the lockdown, and that begging on the street is also hardly profitable at the moment. [HLN 23.04.2020]

People sleeping in public spaces often found themselves breaking the ban on alcohol consumption and gathering, and in the fall also breaking the curfew regulations [Legrand, Mormont 2020]. In reaction, in October 2020 certificates of “lack of shelter” were distributed by a number of organisations in Brussels.

The postcard size document was thanking the police for “forgiveness and solidarity”. The idea was heavily criticised and the organisations explained that it was an ironic tool of last resort to appeal to the police and the government for more understanding of people who sleep rough and to stop criminalising them. Even though a significant number of people were accommodated, there were still people on the streets during the second lockdown when a curfew was introduced and pushed some people into invisibility. Some of the partnerships with hotels ended. Also, the testing centre in Brussels operated only during the first lockdown in the spring.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The outbreak of the pandemic (at least temporarily) strengthened the processes of the hybridisation of responses, and altered power relations between the actors and the discourses around helping the homeless. In various parts of the Belgian homelessness policy assemblage, these changes intensified the new charitable approach to public issues such as homelessness. Emergency measures and funding involved more cooperation and hybrid solutions but also meant that ethical commitments and donations became more prominent at the expense of rights and entitlement discourse. The meaning of the domestic space during lockdown became even more ambiguous. For helpers, a sense of solidarity could manifest itself from home through virtual space. However, access to private space during the day for people who are homeless was portrayed as exceptional. Some power relations shifted, giving more prominence to relations in public space. Policing queues and imposing curfews exacerbated the power imbalance between volunteers and recipients. The renewed relations were even more permeated with the new charity ideal and an obligation to express gratitude. Solidarity was also apparent in the names and slogans. Sympathetic voices in the media symbolically valorised charity and the citizens’ commitment to helping “the most vulnerable”. As a consequence, homeless people’s problems were portrayed as being caused by the extraordinary situation that the whole of society was facing, rather than by the underlying structural inequalities and insufficient policies.

The implications of this analysis of homelessness policy assemblage go beyond the coronavirus pandemic and beyond the Belgian context. Our research has demonstrated the importance of acknowledging unstable power relations and the transient nature of arrangements. Despite its exploratory nature, this study also offers some insights into the material aspect of the changing relationships within the public space. Further, the assemblage approach reveals that there is no clear

indication of how policy changes after a moment of disruption. Neo-philanthropic power relations permeated the practices and warm solidarity was a dominating feature of the discourses around the support during 2020 in Belgium. However, it is not obvious whether the changes observed during the pandemic will have long-lasting effects on homelessness responses. The housing situation improved for some people, but with unclear prospects for the future. The impact of charitable initiatives does not necessarily lead to an obscuring of the structural causes of homelessness. The voluntary sector fills the gaps where the welfare state is failing but can also become a tool of critique and a vehicle for policy change if certain conditions are fulfilled, as shown by Spade [2020]. Most Belgian organisations seem to have ambitions to influence policy and to provide long-lasting support and housing solutions, but at the same time they wish to avoid an overly activist approach to policy change. Uncertainty remains as the effects of the post-pandemic economic recession (evictions, loss of income), family breakdowns, and limited access to health care will probably have delayed adverse effects on homelessness and will lead to further (re)assembling of policies and responses.

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AURA SOLIDARNOŚCI W BELGIJSKIM ASAMBLAŻU POLITYK DOTYCZĄCYCH BEZDOMNOŚCI W CZASIE PANDEMII KORONAWIRUSA

Streszczenie

W 2020 roku pandemia koronawirusa w Belgii wywołała powszechne poczucie solidarności z osobami doświadczającymi bezdomności. W artykule przyjmujemy koncepcję asamblażu polityk (*policy assemblage*), by zbadać reakcje na pandemię w zakresie polityk, dyskursów i relacji przestrzennych dotyczących bezdomności. W toku analizy wyłoniliśmy trzy główne domeny ciągłej recompozycji tego asamblażu: przestrzenie współpracy, przestrzeń domu i przestrzeń

publiczną. Te trzy rodzaje przestrzeni wyróżniały się relacjami władzy charakterystycznymi dla Nowej Dobroczynności oraz retoryką aury solidarności. Po pierwsze, działania interwencyjne charakteryzował wysoki stopień współpracy wielu aktorów. Po drugie, przestrzeń domu stała się areną uczestniczenia dla darczyńców, natomiast beneficjentom wsparcia – tymczasowo i z zastrzeżeniem wyjątkowości tego rozwiązania – została ona udostępniona. Po trzecie, codzienne praktyki w przestrzeni publicznej unaocznily i wyostrzyły nierównowagę relacji władzy. Ponadto w mediach bezdomność była konstruowana jako skutek niespotykanych okoliczności, a nie strukturalnych nierówności i niedostatecznej interwencji publicznej. Zgodnie z tą retoryką na tę wyjątkową sytuację należało zatem odpowiedzieć wzmożoną obywatelską solidarnością. Mimo wielu wad, w kontekście skomplikowanej struktury administracyjnej w Belgii, takie prowizoryczne inicjatywy mogą stać się jednak także narzędziem krytyki i trwałej zmiany polityk publicznych.

Słowa kluczowe: bezdomność, asamblaż polityk (*policy assemblage*), pandemia koronawirusa, Nowa Dobroczynność, aura solidarności, Belgia