

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

## Introduction

World Habitat believes that housing is a fundamental human right and that housing-led approaches offer a lasting solution to homelessness. Housing-led approaches focus on getting people experiencing, or at risk of homelessness, into a secure home as soon as possible and minimising the amount of time spent in temporary or emergency accommodation.

This policy briefing is part of a research project completed by the Metropolitan Research Institute and the Budapest Institute for Policy Analysis. The main report considers the barriers, challenges and opportunities for countries in Central and Eastern Europe to move to a housing-led approach as a means of ending homelessness. This work has been commissioned by World Habitat.

## Summary

**There is a lack of reliable up-to-date data on the numbers of people experiencing homelessness in Slovakia.** The homelessness sector is dominated by emergency and temporary responses rather than (services aimed at) preventing or ending homelessness through targeted access to permanent housing. Despite the implementation of major national-level housing programmes, the size of the social rented sector remains at 2% and the private rental sector partly functions as a grey market.

Despite this, some core conditions are present in Slovakia that could support the successful growth of housing-led approaches. Housing-led models – including Housing First – continue to grow in popularity amongst practitioners and policymakers. Lessons and best practice from a few small-scale pilot programmes are available and continue to drive interest. EU funds have played a significant role in piloting housing-led approaches and continue to provide an opportunity for the scaling up of these models of ending homelessness. In addition to this, further investment into affordable public housing and increased regulation of the private rented sector could go some way to making structural changes which would support a move to a housing-led system. Adjustments to the housing benefit scheme and an easing of existing eligibility criteria for social housing would increase access to affordable housing for people experiencing homelessness.

## Levels of homelessness

**In Slovakia, the last available country-level data report claimed that over 23,000 people were living in long-term transitional shelters or similar arrangements.**

This figure from 2011 excluded rough sleepers and those staying in emergency accommodation. More recent local counts showed that out of approximately two thousand people experiencing homelessness in the capital, 30% were rough sleepers and close to a third were living in homeless accommodation services. Lone middle-aged men accounted for a large share of rough sleepers, 50% of whom had long-term health problems, and 40% over ten years of a homelessness trajectory.

At the same time, close to 10,000 individuals accessed homelessness services across Slovakia, with providers reporting a considerable increase in clients attending night shelters (over 50%) and homeless hostels (up by approx. one-fifth) compared to the early 2010s.<sup>1</sup>

## Gaps in the homelessness sector

**The homelessness sector is overwhelmingly dominated by emergency and temporary responses rather than services aimed at preventing or ending homelessness.** In Slovakia, low-intensity support services that offer non-housing-based emergency support make up the bulk of existing provision. Services for people experiencing homelessness are overwhelmingly located in urban centres and are, to a large extent, implemented by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and charitable organisations. Although public authorities are the main responsible stakeholders in homelessness provision, they often contract non-profit organisations to implement this. The situation is regulated by the central government, which provides funding to regional and municipal authorities. These authorities then contract local providers to deliver homelessness services in line with legal obligations. Private donations are

1. Gerbery, D. (2019). *ESPN Thematic Report on National strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion – Slovakia*. European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission.

key to maintaining the quality of services, and EU funds have played a key role in improving facilities, developing and running services, and funding innovative approaches like the Housing First approach. Non-residential support services address the basic physical needs of clients.

Housing First and housing-led initiatives are receiving more attention, and the first lessons from specific small-scale Housing First and housing-led pilot programmes of the past few years are available. Housing First and housing-led approaches to tackling homelessness are gaining popularity amongst homelessness providers, with the help of EU funds and based on the experience of local initiatives. The 17 European Social Fund (ESF) projects in Slovakia contributed to housing 105 people in the private rental market, and there are other local projects run independently by NGOs (e.g. Nota Bene, Dedo, Stopa) that include allocating municipal dwellings to clients. Isolated service organisations and the general scarcity of trained support staff and human resources for covering various other support needs of (re) housed clients, however, are persistent challenges.

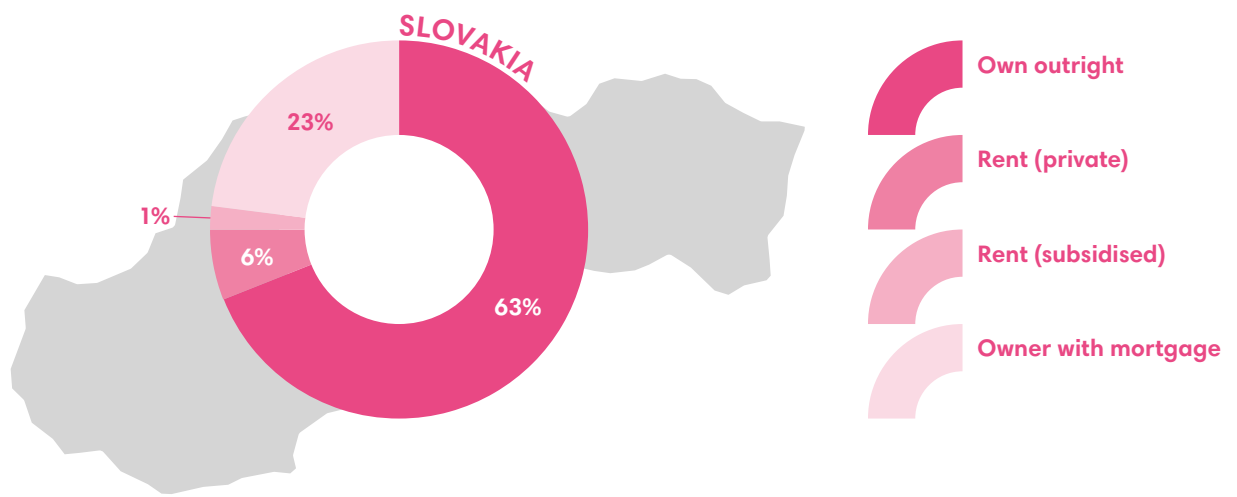
Both universal, upstream and crisis-prevention services are limited and ineffective. Beyond the weaknesses of universal prevention systems that address the affordability issues of the population in general, upstream prevention systems that should be addressing the needs of groups with an 'elevated risk of homelessness' and crisis interventions (like the prevention of eviction) are also largely ineffective. In Slovakia, in the strategy to end homelessness (adopted by the government in April 2023), prevention is of central importance. Several service providers have been engaged in implementing prevention measures directly related to the most common pathways to homelessness, like leaving institutional care, debt and facing eviction. However, providers argue that these preventative measures are largely inadequate.<sup>2,3</sup> Housing benefit only covers a fraction of actual housing costs, so vulnerable households are unable to secure private tenancies.

## Housing system gaps

**Similarly to other post-socialist countries, Slovakia implemented a housing privatisation programme that radically changed the tenure structure. Despite considerable investment the impact on the social housing sector remains marginal.**

Outright ownership and ownership with a mortgage account for an overwhelming majority of the forms of tenancy in the housing system. The municipal sector shrank to approximately 2% after the transition, and despite major national-level programmes implemented until 2010, the relative size of the sector remains very modest. In the very small subsidised rental sector, revenue from rent typically does not cover costs. The private rental sector partly functions as a grey market.

2. Gerbery, D. (2019). *ESPN Thematic Report on National strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion – Slovakia*. European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission.
3. Lachytova, L. and Lehotayova, I. (2022): Prevention and Solution of Homelessness. In: *Scientific Bulletin of ChelM. Section of Pedagogy*, 2022/1, pp. 165-176.



People living in poverty are exposed to a high level of risk in the private rental sector, too. A significant proportion of low-income (urban) families have been pushed out of the social rented sector and have found housing solutions only in the private rented sector or settlements further from urban centres. Much of the private rental market is informal. The supply side is dominated by casual landlords. Under-regulation has created severe risks in the system, both for owners and tenants.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, some social groups (like Roma) are hit especially hard by discrimination.

Housing affordability problems are fuelled by increasing housing prices and growing market rents and utility costs. Housing prices and market rents are very high relative to income, especially in regional capital cities, often exceeding or approaching those of growing European cities with a strong market background. In Bratislava, per-sqm market-based net rates for rent are comparable with those in Berlin; households spend close to 55% of their income on rent, and housing prices have increased by 13% in just over a year.<sup>5</sup> Delays with utility payments or mortgage repayments affect 5.2% of the population.<sup>6</sup>

Policy responses have not compensated for the shortage of affordable housing that exists due to the mass privatisation of the 1990s and the ownership-focused shift of the 2000s. Although Slovakia was a pioneer with regard to investment in social/public housing until 2010 (involving considerable state funding) and has dynamically improved access to various housing finance products for select social groups, access to housing in urban centres for less affluent groups remains a challenge. More recent local housing policy developments (e.g. in Bratislava and Kosice) aim to address this challenge in the near future (e.g. through specific social housing allocation schemes).

4. Hegedüs, J., Lux, M. and Teller, N. (eds.) (2013). *Social Housing in Transition Countries*. New York: Routledge.

5. Deloitte 2021: *Property Index Overview of European Residential Markets*. 10th edition, July 2021. Available at: <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/at/Documents/real-estate/at-property-index-2021.pdf>

6. EU-SILC ILC\_MDES06\$DEFAULTVIEW

# Conditions for upscaling housing-led approaches in Slovakia

**Some core conditions and components are present in Slovakia that are needed for the successful implementation of Housing First approaches to tackling homelessness.** The ESF co-funded housing-first initiatives were focused on families and single persons with multiple vulnerabilities and transgenerational insecure housing histories who otherwise would not have been able to access housing. Intense and regular funding programs enabled tailor-made financial support.<sup>7</sup>

Simplifying participant selection procedures, improving the standard of homes, providing trauma-informed training to support staff, and creating effective organisational arrangements that ensure a clear distinction between housing management and social support services are steps that can feasibly pave the way for a shift towards a housing-led system. Lessons from ongoing projects show that mainstream social housing allocation procedures create various administrative barriers for vulnerable people/families, such as obtaining necessary documents. Given the scarcity of available social housing, it has been hard to implement the choice-based letting of dwellings. Some available housing lacked utilities and were inadequate for satisfactory living. Social workers in Slovakia told us that a settled living environment enabled them to work more effectively with clients, while more thorough training could improve the support offered and more effective partnership working could help to expand the services offered to clients. A clear distinction between social support and housing management was also identified as crucial, and should be encouraged through new organisational arrangements.

Key structural challenges need to be addressed to ensure the sustainability of initiatives. For example, the shortage and quality of affordable homes, tenure insecurity, poor access to integrated support and prevention services, and discrimination. Given that municipalities partly provide the housing stock needed to meet demand, it is crucially important to invest further in affordable public housing and adjust the housing benefit scheme. More support and guarantees are needed to bridge critical periods (e.g. health- or income-loss-related) when clients are housed. These instruments should be applied in addition to mainstream (social or private rental) tenancy solutions to prevent repeat homelessness. More systemic follow-up and care pathways are needed, beyond the current ad-hoc and personal involvement of housing-led program staff. As family homelessness often involves households of Roma ethnicity, addressing their discrimination in various realms of life is badly needed.

7. Ondrusova, D. and Turkovic, Z. (2022). *Housing-first pre rodiny v Košiciach. Priebežná správa z výskumu, Inštitút pre výskum práce a rodiny: Bratislava*, and Ondrusova, D., Turkovic, Z. and Gerbery, D. (2022): *Housing-first Bratislava: Dostupné bývanie so sociálnou podporou. Priebežná správa z výskumu, Inštitút pre výskum práce a rodiny: Bratislava*.

# Recommendations

The order of the recommendations reflects the suggested priorities, with the most important/feasible ones listed first.

## Recommendations for (NGOs, church- or municipality-affiliated) practitioners

- Improve own service provision to move to a housing-led approach through:
  - » Exploring move-on options to support people into permanent housing (if currently a shelter or emergency service provider)
  - » Delivering training for existing and new staff (to include training on harm reduction approaches, Housing First and trauma informed practice)
  - » Creating external partnerships and training staff to effectively support clients with integrated services (e.g. relationships with specialist physical and mental health providers)
  - » Trialling different tenancy and accommodation types to increase housing supply, flexibility and choice
  - » Where applicable, delivering services that separate housing management and social support
- Participate in the design of national and regional strategies and European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF+) programming, implementation and monitoring
- Raise awareness of the extent and routes into homelessness (and the relevant evidence to back this up) and focus on the dissemination of good practice alongside networks of operational, academic and press partners
- Foster country-wide cooperation (possibly by forming a dedicated umbrella association) and participate in international networks to advocate for change and tap into available international learning and best practice.

## Recommendations for local government and city management (municipal)

- Allocate a greater proportion of resources to and prioritise the development and expansion of the municipal housing sector by:
  - » Supporting and incentivising construction of new social housing
  - » Directly or indirectly carrying out renovation work to empty or substandard buildings
  - » Purchasing homes through the private rented sector for use as social housing
  - » Consider leveraging privately owned housing that is available for rent through a social rented agency model
- Relax or change existing allocations and eligibility criteria for social housing to include people experiencing homelessness
- Reduce administrative barriers to accessing social housing
- Conduct peer visits to study local regulations of innovative Slovakian cities with a partially housing-led anti-homelessness approach (e.g. Bratislava) and consult with knowledgeable practitioners and experts

- Actively seek local service delivery partners that prioritise housing-led approaches
- Actively participate in the design of national and regional strategies and the programming, implementation and monitoring of dedicated EU funds and advocate for the nationwide recommendations below – perhaps through an association like the Union of Cities
- Create organisational arrangements that encourage the separation of housing management and social support activities, e.g. by increasing staff capacity and training at local level.

## Recommendations for policymakers (national/regional)

- Consider extending the nationwide housing benefit scheme by making it more generous and targeting those in need
- Make real practitioner participation a cornerstone principle when devising, implementing and monitoring national (regional) housing and anti-homelessness action plans
- Collect and publish timely nationwide data on homelessness and housing poverty based on EU-standard methodology
- Consider adopting framework rules for the municipal housing supply (Social Housing Law) that target those most in need, but allow municipal governments to tailor their provision (including setting rents) to local needs
- Require and enforce anti-discrimination legislation, particularly concerning the housing situation of Roma
- Extend regional funding for the 'social service – support of individual living' scheme
- Improve the regulation of the private rental sector to incentivise affordable rental arrangements e.g. offering tax allowance schemes for landlords
- Introduce and strengthen homelessness prevention mechanisms (as is stressed in the National Strategy), including for those released from institutions
- Actively consider and support piloting ways to develop/expand the municipal housing sector.

## Recommendations for funders and donors (including the EU)

- Fund further housing-led local pilot efforts by NGO practitioners – for example, through capital investment, staff training, covering core costs, supporting feasibility studies, research, and scoping work (depending on the needs and capacities of NGOs and local contexts)
- Directly support and fund international and national networks aimed at promoting housing-led approaches
- Provide support and funding for long-term advocacy and back programmes that focus on developing effective networks and partnerships
- Insist on (and fund) the proper evaluation and dissemination of supported activities that pilot housing-led and Housing First interventions.

Published 2023 by World Habitat. © World Habitat 2023, all rights reserved.

### World Habitat

Office 1, Gresham Works, 38 Market Street, Leicester, LE1 6DP, United Kingdom  
+44 (0)116 482 9446 info@world-habitat.org www.world-habitat.org