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Blind man's buff: Losing contact while coping with the arrival situation

Abstract

What happens when newly arrived EU citizens lose their point of contact in Germany? Most migrants have a trusted person in the destination area, for example a relative or friends. These people usually help immigrants register, find housing or jobs and offer them a certain degree of security.

This essay is about a case in which this contact point is lost early on. A relative withdrew her support and the family had to cope with the arrival situation on their own. The article analyses this individual case against the backdrop of migrating from Romania to Germany. It refers to the legal situation of newly arrived EU citizens in Germany and describes the problems immigrants face in exercising their rights. Adding to migration theory, the article once more emphasises the crucial importance of social capital for the integration process.

Keywords: EU migrants, network, social capital, Romanian immigrants, homelessness

1. Introduction

What happens if the social network of newly arrived EU citizens in Germany breaks down? As part of a larger project on migration from Romania to Germany, fifteen qualitative interviews with Romanians were conducted on their first steps in Germany. All interview partners had at least one family member who had already some experience with temporary work stays in foreign countries before they decided to migrate permanently to Germany. Everyone had confidants in the target area such as relatives, friends or former employers. These persons offered support with registration, finding an apartment or a job. All interviewed families could rely on such contact points – all except one family.

The following case study is about this family and raises questions about the impact of the loss of the social network at an early state in the arrival situation. The point is to highlight the significance of social networks in the arrival situation by analysing it from an ex negativo perspective: What are the consequences if the social network no longer exists?

The article structure is as follows. In the next section the migration situation from Romania to Germany will be described as well as the existing data about newly arrived Romanians. Methodological background is given as well as an insight on the theoretical research of the meaning of social capital for integration processes. Finally, the case study will be presented to illuminate the situation of the Romanian

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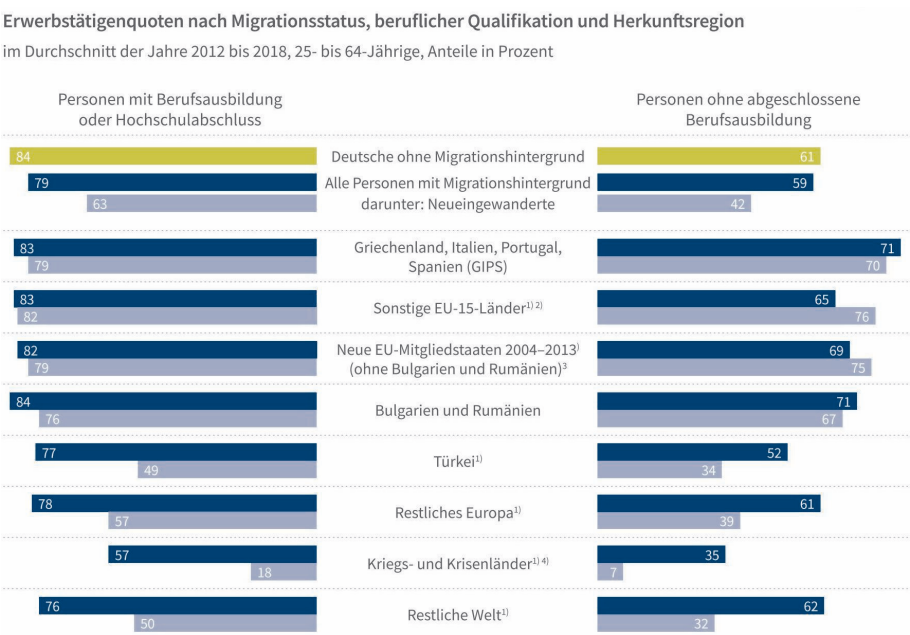
family who lost their local contact point. They experienced homelessness, hunger and were excluded from social participation. Without a social network they were not able to request assistance to improve their situation.

Migration situation Romania – Germany

In 2021 more than 191.000 persons migrated from Romania to Germany (Statista, 2022, 1). In relation to the overall immigration of 1.184.000 persons coming to Germany, 16 % came from Romania (Statista, 2023, 1). However net migration for Romanians was only 35.254; many Romanians returned to Romania or to other countries. This data is in line with the fact that 28 % of the registered Romanians had already been registered in Germany before, which is an indicator for a large number of seasonal or temporary workers.

Figure 1: Employment Rates



1) Erwerbstätigenquoten für Neueinwanderer beruhen auf sehr kleinen Fallzahlen und sind daher mit höherer Unsicherheit behaftet.
2) Frankreich, Belgien, Niederlande, Luxemburg, Großbritannien, Irland, Dänemark, Schweden, Finnland, Österreich.
3) Estland, Lettland, Litauen, Malta, Polen, Slowakei, Slowenien, Tschechische Republik, Ungarn, Zypern, Kroatien.
4) Afghanistan, Eritrea, Irak, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Syrien.

Anmerkung: Nicht berücksichtigt wurden Personen in Gemeinschaftsunterkünften, Personen, die erst im Befragungsjahr eingereist sind, und Personen, die angeben, als deutsche Staatsangehörige eingereist zu sein. Als neueingewandert gelten Personen, die jeweils im Vorjahr der Befragung eingereist sind.

Quelle: Mikrozensus der Jahre 2012 bis 2018, eigene Berechnungen. © IAB

Source: Seibert & Wapler (2020, 8).

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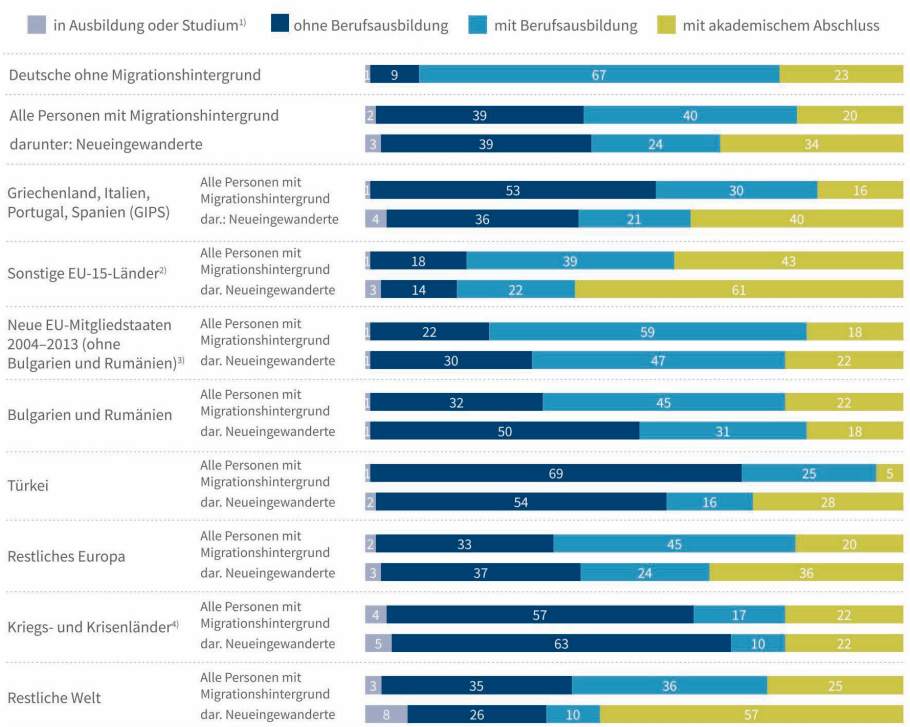
Most of the arriving Romanians are between 20 and 55 years old, 56 % are male and more than half are unmarried. The naturalisation rate (Romanians that have acquired German citizenship) is low which correlates with the overall naturalisation rate of EU citizens. In the region Baden-Württemberg the naturalisation rate is 0,6 %, representing 864 Romanians who became German citizens in 2020 (Statistisches Landesamt BW, 2021).

Figure 2: Qualification structure, migration status and place of origin



1) Anteile von Neueingewanderten in Ausbildung oder Studium aus der sonstigen EU 15, aus den neuen EU-Mitgliedsstaaten 2004–2013 und der Türkei beruhen auf sehr kleinen Fallzahlen und sind daher mit höherer Unsicherheit behaftet.
2) Frankreich, Belgien, Niederlande, Luxemburg, Großbritannien, Irland, Dänemark, Schweden, Finnland, Österreich.
3) Estland, Lettland, Litauen, Malta, Polen, Slowakei, Slowenien, Tschechische Republik, Ungarn, Zypern, Kroatien.
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Abweichungen von 100 Prozent sind rundungsbedingt.

Quelle: Mikrozensus der Jahre 2012 bis 2018, eigene Berechnungen. © IAB

Source: Seibert & Wapler (2020).

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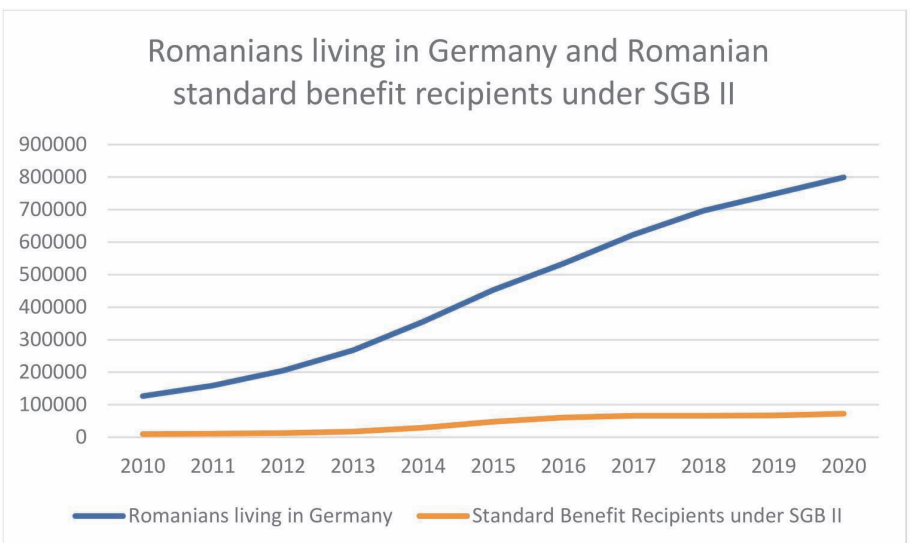
The employment rate of newly arrived Romanians and Bulgarians represents 76 %. This is similar to rates for newly arrived persons from other EU countries. Due to lack of data for Romanians only this information refers to both Romanians and Bulgarians.

Half of the newly arrived Romanians and Bulgarians do not have any vocational education. 18 % have a university degree and 31 % have vocational training (Seibert & Wapler, 2020, 6).

As EU citizens Romanians do not need any kind of work or residence permit. For the first three months of their stay in Germany they are excluded from social benefits for unemployed or disabled persons under SGB II and SGB XII as long as they do not have an employee status, work as a self-employed person, as trainee or refer to § 2 Abs. 3 FreizügG/EU.

For an employee status in Germany a person has to work a minimum of eight hours per week and earn a minimum of 250 € per month (BSG-Urteil vom 27.01.2021, B 14 AS25/20 R). Employment of a minor extent is considered as insignificant and does not constitute an employee status. EU citizens having an employee status can apply for supplementary social assistance for their family if the additional requirements are fulfilled.

Figure 3: Romanian Standard Benefit Recipients under SGB II



Own diagram; Data souce: Destatis, 2021 and Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023

One major concern in Germany before the free movement of workers from the EU-2 countries Romania and Bulgaria was that immigration on a large scale would

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place a significant stress on social systems (Soldt, 2013). This concern turned out to be unsubstantiated. The majority of Romanian immigrants pay into the social systems because they are regularly employed. The increase of Romanians living in Germany during the last ten years does not correlate with the number of welfare recipients within the Second Book of the Social Code which offers support for persons whose condition renders them fit for work.

Nevertheless, many Germans do not have much trust in Romanian migrants causing problems for Romanians looking for work: "The less the trust in migrants of a certain nation, the longer it takes to find a job and the higher the risk to quit the job market at all." (Keita & Valette, 2020, 3). While more than 65 % of Germans state that they trust migrants from France, Spain or Austria, only 29 % trust Romanians (Keita & Valette, 2020, 3).

Methods and theoretical background

A case study had been described by Robert State as being "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances." (Stake, 1995, 7). "Case study research is consistently described as a versatile form of qualitative inquiry most suitable for a comprehensive, holistic, and in-depth investigation of a complex issue." (Mills et al., 2017, 13).

Defining the case can be difficult as many different points of interest and variables intersect and overlap in every case (Mills et al., 2017, 13). Hereafter the single case will be shown in its bounded system and context. The criteria for its selection are set out and the case study design is explained (Mills et al., 2017, 15).

The single case of one targeted family has been chosen because it contrasts the arrival situation of the family after the loss of its social network with the arrival situation of the other interviewed newly-arrived Romanians. 'Newly-arrived' is defined for this research that the arrival for the permanent migration was from 2014 to 2020. The rest of the sample found a place to stay immediately, assistance with registration and with finding a job. All of them had a local contact point that could answer their questions and guide them to cope with their tasks. Therefore, the starting situation of all of these interviewed newly-arrived Romanians was comparable. They migrated to the same city in Baden-Württemberg, none of them had German language skills and all of them already had at least one family member with migration experience. The moment their experiences diverged was the moment this one family lost its local contact point.

Nevertheless, this essay is about particular incidents and designed as a descriptive case study. Various aspects need to be considered to fully understand why the situation became so bad, as for example their life before the migration in Romania, their personal and educational background and their personality. Such aspects will be described as they might be relevant.

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The impact of social capital

Social capital can be defined as actual or virtual resources acquired by individuals or groups through the possession of „more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, 119). The term "social capital" describes the resources that are anchored in social relationships which can be activated if necessary.

The relevance of social capital is recognised in two major contexts of migration research. First it is essential for the migration decision process and chain migration and second, it is relevant for the integration process in the target area (Haug, 2005, 14). This study refers to the second context.

The social network at the arrival location plays an exceptionally important role regarding practical knowledge which is essential for the active participation in all areas of society. Common everyday knowledge is a form of social capital. It may grant access to various relevant areas such as the labour market, housing market or the system of social security (Hoesch, 2018, 103). The relevance of the social capital rises if alternative resources, such as economic or symbolic capital, are lacking.

A major part of everyday support services is provided through to close social relationships with persons or family members (Haug, 2005, 14). Social contacts with persons of the target area are seen as an indicator for social integration (Nauck, 2002, 319). A typology created by Haug shows the impact on social integration depending on the various options of existing or none existing relationships to their own ethnic group or to members of the target area.

Figure 4: Typology of Social Integration and Endowment with Social Capital

Typology of Social Integration and Endowment with Social Capital

Integration		**Place of Origin**	
		Relationships to members of own ethnic group	
		Yes	**No**
Target Area Relationships to members of receiving society	**Yes**	multiple integration	social "assimilation"
		social capital specific both to own ethnic group/ place of origin and to receiving society	social capital specific to receiving society only
		ethnically heterogeneous network	ethnically homogeneous network
	No	segmentation & self-demarcation	marginality
		social capital specific to own ethnic group / place of origin only	low endowment with social capital
		ethnically homogeneous network	social isolation

Source: Haug, 2010, 16, own translation

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If a person has relationships both to persons of their own ethnic group and to members of the target society, this person owns specific social capital in both groups. This results in ethnically heterogenous networks and makes multiple inclusion possible. In cases where the relationships only refer to members of the target society, ethnic homogenous networks develop and might result in a social assimilation. The opposite constellation would be that only relationships to members of the own ethnic group exist. Such persons own specific social capital referring to their own ethnic group which may lead to segmentation, the persons would distance themselves from the receiving society. If a person has neither relationships to their own ethnic group nor to the receiving society, it owns very low social capital which might probably end in social isolation (Haug 2005, 17).

The case study

The object of this case study is a Romanian family with a 14-year old daughter. They migrated to Germany in 2017 and were invited to stay at the father's aunt's house for the first time. The aunt lived in a small village with 11.000 inhabitants in a rural area in Baden-Württemberg.

After two weeks, the aunt became tired of her guests and tried to evict them from her apartment. Many discussions followed and the family stayed three more weeks, but they could not find an apartment within that time. At the end of September 2017, they had to leave the aunt's house and found themselves homeless in an old Opel Vectra, driving to the next *Netto* parking, not knowing what to do next.

For a full understanding of the situation, we have to look at the family's personal and vocational background. The father was a miner in the region Hunedoara, Siebenbürgen, who lost his job in 2014 at a time when most of the mines in the area closed. He went to England as a migrant worker from 2015 to 2017 where he had a job as a warehouse keeper. Every month he was able to send home around 500€ remittance. This money was used to cover a housing credit.

The mother stayed in Romania with the grandmother, the great-grandmother and the daughter. They lived in two small apartments one above the other. Both grandmother and great-grandmother were suffering from cancer. Both required nursing and needed help with shopping, housekeeping, washing and eating. Additionally, the great-grandmother suffered from dementia and the daughter had an autoimmune disease and hormonal distractions. From time to time a cousin came to stay overnight with the great-grandmother, but this was the only help the mother had. She worked 8–10 hours a day in a company's office and earned about 300 € per month. This was not enough to feed the family and heat the apartments. This stressful situation continued for years and lead to the social isolation of the family.

In January 2017 the grandmother died and in March the great-grandmother also died. The mother had to keep on working, but the daughter had lost two of her

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closest contact persons. Her autoimmune disease worsened, she became desperate, quiet and suffered from shortage of breath. She was taken to the emergency hospital several times but her body and soul suffered from the loss of her grandmothers and the absence of her father. The father returned from England to support his wife and daughter but he could not find a job in the area. The family decided to stay together and migrate to Germany. Moving to England was not an option because of the forthcoming Brexit.

Things moved quickly. The father's aunt offered to let them stay in her apartment in Germany until they found a home. The father visited the aunt for some weeks in July 2017 to find an employment and was quickly successful. He was able to start his new job as a warehouse keeper in September, so the family moved to Germany on August 15th 2017.

The first two weeks went well. The family helped the aunt with the household, the father started to work in September, they registered at the city administration and the daughter enrolled at school. Local and everyday knowledge was contributed by the aunt. But that stopped after two weeks when the aunt tried to evict them from her house.

It turned out to be difficult to find an apartment. The family had no access to the internet and the Romanian prepaid phone ran out of credit. They could only use the aunt's landline telephone. They spoke little English and no German. They did not know how to use social media networks like Facebook, Ebay or Immoscout24, which are the platforms for social networks and housing adverts online.

The father asked his colleagues and boss for support finding a home, but they couldn't help. The family inquired with the city administration for an apartment, but they did not have any available. Not knowing how to get a flat they started walking through the streets of the village looking out for vacant apartments and if they found one, they asked the neighbours for further information. This approach was not successful either. Once a neighbour tried to help them with answering on a newspaper's advertisement. He made the phone calls for them, but the landlord asked for the last three payrolls and a deposit which is usual practice in Germany. But the first payroll was not due until the end of September and the family did not have any reserves.

In the last week of September, the family was finally evicted from the aunt's apartment. With only some clothes to change into they found themselves homeless in their car. The aunt wouldn't support them anymore in any way, instead she claimed rent for the last weeks and refused to hand over the rest of their belongings. The family did not have any friends in the village and their social network had completely ceased.

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Legal background on social benefits for EU-citizens and requirements for deportation

Before describing what subsequently happened to the family, the legal situation of stranded EU citizens in Germany should be evaluated.

Hereafter claims under the Second and the Twelfth Book of the Code of Social Law (SGB II and SGB XII) will be analysed, whereby mainly SGB XII faces emergency aid. Regarding the legal situation it is referred to 2017.

EU- citizens are excluded from social benefits of SGB II and SGB XII for the first three months of their stay in Germany if they are not employees, don't work as self-employed persons or trainees or refer to § 2 Abs. 3 FreizügG/EU.

The father of the Romanian family worked as a warehouse keeper and had already started his employment by the beginning of September 2017. As an employee he is not excluded from social benefits of SGB II. His wife and daughter as members of his "community of dependence" (Bedarfsgemeinschaft) might also be beneficiaries. Benefits under SGB II include money for living, accommodation and heating. These services may only be granted upon application and after the need has been verified by the competent job centre. This process may take a considerable time and due to the employment of the father the result would probably be that support is not needed. The SGB II is not designed for short term benefit. Such regulation can rather be found in SGB XII.

"Stranded" EU citizens may apply for temporary benefits under § 23 Abs. 3 S. 3 SGB XII. These payments may only be granted for one month once in two years and shall cover basic costs for living, hygienic needs, accommodation and heating as well as basic medical treatments. The idea of the regulation is to support foreigners until they are able to leave the country, but nevertheless it is not restricted to prospective emigrants (EU-Gleichbehandlungsstelle 2023). Thus, the family could have applied for it although they planned to stay in Germany.

Homeless persons can also apply for assistance to overcome serious social difficulties under § 67 SGB XII. This assistance may be granted regardless of income or assets if it is needed in the particular case. Structurally this benefit is subordinate to assistances of SGB II, nevertheless both assistance options stand alone. That means that one social service provider must not refuse a current need with reference to another competent social service provider whose social benefits might have priority (Bieritz-Harder et al., 2020, 505). Claims under § 67 SGB XII do not depend on a formal application. The claim arises as soon as the social service provider knows about all the circumstances of the case that are required for the claim.

The competent authority for claims under § 67 SGB XII are the local authorities because homelessness is seen to be a danger to public safety and order. The local authorities must not reject any homeless person claiming that no accommodation is

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available. In cases where there is no accommodation available, they are obligated to organise a place to stay, whether it is an emergency shelter, hotel room or at least a camp bed in the public gymnastic hall. Relevant for their competence is only the place where the person had become homeless – regardless of his nationality (BVerwG, Beschl. V. 24.4.1993 – 7 B 155/92 und BayVGH, Beschl. V. 7.5.2018 – 4 CE18, 965, Rn 10). The stranded Romanian family could have raised a claim on accommodation with the local authorities.

Further, the legal situation regarding deportation is analysed. EU-citizens have the right to stay in Germany for at least three months. This right must not be restricted as long as they do not constitute a risk to public safety (BAG Wohnungslosenhilfe e.V., 2012). The evaluation if there is such a risk has to be made for every individual case. There is no standard situation – as to be homeless or have criminal convictions – that results in a standard procedure of deportation (Wissenschaftliche Dienste, Deutscher Bundestag, 2017). An adequate deportation reason would exist if the individual concerned is currently a „genuine and sufficiently serious threat affecting one fundamental interest of society" (§ 6 Abs. 2 S. 3 FreizügG/EU). Homelessness it not covered by this definition, so deportation would not be an option for German authorities in this case.

Returning to the case study

What happened with the stranded family? The 14-year-old daughter had been visiting the local school for two weeks when they became homeless after the five weeks stay at the aunt's house. Referring to the legal situation explained above we know that the only thing they would need to do is go to the local authorities, explain their situation and ask for accommodation and temporary benefits according to § 23 Abs. 3 S. 3 SGB XII. But they did not know about their rights or the procedure.

They bought salami, toast and water and stayed in the Netto car park until the supermarket closed. They had less than 20 € cash, it was late September, rainy and cold. Finally, they drove to a parking area for wanderers in the forest to stay there for the night. Returning to Romania was no option at any time. The father had an employment in Germany and expected to receive the first salary by the end of September.

During the weekend the family changed the parking areas every day because they feared the police. In this region there are a lot of car parks in the forests. After the weekend, on Monday, they brought the father to work at 6am and the daughter to school at 7:30am. Then the mother drove to the local authorities to ask for help. She asked in English if there was an apartment available. There wasn't. She asked if they knew about any job option and was sent to "Jobcenter", without knowing what a "Jobcenter" was or where it might be located. She failed to tell the officials in charge about their overall situation. She did not tell them that her family slept in

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the car or that they did not have access to a bathroom and that they did not have any money left. Why didn't she tell them?

Today it is hard for the mother to understand. She says that she had been ashamed. And they were worried about deportation and feared the police. They had no idea what might happen if the police received information about them and their situation. They expected problems because they did not pay for the parking lots and slept in the car. These expectations and distrust in police and public authorities may be a result of their experiences from Romania. They had made the experience that asking authorities for help and support is not an option and generally results in a negative outcome.

During the next few weeks, the father was brought to work in the morning and picked up in the evening. The daughter attended school and the mother tried to look for accommodations, find out about the "Jobcenter" and what is meant by "AWO", which was also mentioned by the city administration. They ate nothing but salami, toast and drank water out of bottles. The remaining money was spent on fuel. It was still rainy and cold, their clothes got damp and they did not have the opportunity to wash or dry. The forest was their bathroom.

The daughter got sick, had a fever and a cold and her mental health got worse. Nevertheless, she went to school. One day she brought an invitation for a parents' evening.

After ten days being homeless this was the first parents' meeting at school. Her parents waited after the meeting until the other parents had left to talk to the teacher privately. They wanted to explain to the teacher why homework wasn't done well and why the girl was not able to take showers. The teacher asked a lot of questions and was informed about their situation. He told the family to go to the city administration the next day. Until now the family does not know exactly what the teacher did the next day, but things went better.

When the family arrived at the city administration the next day, the staff had already been informed about their situation. They went with the family to see their car in which they had stayed the last weeks. They took photos and then they told them that they have an accommodation. It was a room in a container with three beds. Bathroom and toilets were shared with two other families living in the neighbour container. There were wardrobes and a place to wash and dry the clothes. They had a roof over their head and a place to stay.

The family stayed in the container for almost three months. Then one of the colleagues of the father convinced a landlord to give an empty apartment to the family. They could move in on December 24th 2017 and still live there. Their new landlord became their new confidant. Although in the beginning he had to be persuaded to give the apartment to Romanians, he then started to support them by offering every-day common knowledge. From this date on the integration process

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continued similar to the integration processes of the other interviewed families. Both parents worked and could pay the apartment's rent. They attended a German course and were included into the local society and have been invited to local events. This development demonstrates the importance of having at least one single local contact point at the target area.

The daughter graduated secondary school (Hauptschule) in 2019 and now attends the eleventh class of a gymnasium. She is in good health. After her A-levels she plans to join the police academy or to study tourism. The mother works for a cleaning company. The father had a bad traffic accident in 2018 and has been disabled for some years. In 2022 he went back to his first employer and is now trying to be reintegrated into work life.

The sequence of events exemplifies the inaccessibility of the German social system. In theory, it provides support to stranded persons but in reality, stranded persons might not have the ability to make use of these regulations. This is not to criticise the local authorities who from the moment they had been informed about the poor situation of the family took prompt action. The aunt's actions might seem nasty – nevertheless it was her accommodation and she had the right to evict the family from her home. There was no legal obligation on her part to accommodate her relatives.

In the end, the following aspects are relevant:

- The family had very little information about their legal situation. Their fear about deportation was unjustified, they did not know about their claim for an emergency shelter and did not know which authorities were competent to organise the necessary support.
- After their eviction the family had no social network they could mobilise. They were very isolated. No family member was able to speak German.
- The family was not familiar with the common everyday knowledge about the relevant processes. They did not know about the common strategies of finding accommodation or claiming social benefits.
- They did not know how to gain useful information on the internet or in social media. That excluded them from low-threshold offers of information. Social media groups for example on facebook as there are „Romanî în <city XY>“ or „Romanî în Baden-Württemberg“ would have been useful to get necessary information. These groups are open for everyone and offer details about job offers, available accommodation, furniture or lifts. Everyone can ask questions on relevant topics and often the answers are quick and helpful.
- The experience of isolation, the mental distress during the previous years and the continued financial worries may also have played an important role.

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Eventually, the story can be viewed in two ways: On the one hand, the question is why the homelessness of the family remained unnoticed for such a long time and what could be done to avoid this happening again. On the other hand, it showed that the authorities acted promptly and effectively as soon as they knew the details of the situation. From this point of view, the social system worked.

Conclusion

The case study shows the importance of social networks for the arrival situation of EU-citizens. Social networks may contain relatives, friends or group members on social media. Such group members on social media might be individuals who are not known personally but share relevant experiences or life situations together, for example migrant groups like "Romanians in XY city". The aim of the group is to support each other.

If the social networks, the personal relationships and the online social network fall apart or no access is available, it is difficult to cover basic needs such as access to accommodation and employment.

Governmental institutions have only limited options to support persons without any network. In the case study no support could be granted because the competent institutions did not know about the actual situation. The principle of freedom and the individual responsibility result in reluctance by the authorities not to intervene without being asked – as long as there is no danger to public safety and order.

Nevertheless, the city administration as governmental institution had contact to the family at its registration. That would have been a good time to provide information on their legal situation, on social insurances and a guide to local contact points that may offer support in emergency cases, unemployment or homelessness. Such information could be provided in relevant foreign languages and offer low-threshold help for stranded and vulnerable persons.

The person who finally helped the family in its situation was the daughter's teacher. Schools and kindergartens are reliable contact points for families with kids, so an option to recognise such emergency situations would be to familiarise educational staff and to provide a guideline about the necessary steps to take in case of a suspected homelessness.

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