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Diaconia as the Art of the Possible: Diaconal Engagement for Roma Migrants in Oslo, Norway

Bjørn Hallstein Holte 

Faculty of Theology, Diaconia and Leadership Studies, VID Specialized University, 0370 Oslo, Norway;
bjorn.holte@vid.no

Abstract: Itinerant Roma migrants travelling from Eastern European countries have featured across the European Economic Area (EEA) since the European Union's eastward expansions in 2004 and 2007. Being unskilled, many Roma migrants engage in casual work and street work such as playing music, selling magazines, collecting and recycling bottles and cans, and begging, making them conspicuously visible in countries with public welfare services and low poverty levels. Citizens of EEA countries can enter and stay legally in other countries in the EEA for up to three months, after which they must register as workers or jobseekers, and generally leave. It is well documented how the countries Roma citizens of EEA countries travel to have enacted migration control measures, often in the form of complex and fine-grained regulations, that exclude them from public welfare services. This is also true of the Nordic countries, such as Norway, where they coincide with universalistic welfare states aiming to cover everyone living in their territories with the same benefits and services. In the Nordic countries, as in other countries, service provision for Roma migrants is largely in the hands of non-governmental organisations, many of them diaconal organisations running emergency shelters, soup kitchens, and other humanitarian services to alleviate suffering for people at the margins of the welfare state. The diaconal organisations also engage in case work and advocacy work to ensure the realisation of the Roma migrants' rights. Many of the organisations depend on public grants, making their relationship to the welfare state ambiguous. This article investigates Christian social practice in the form of diaconal engagement for Roma migrants in Oslo, Norway at the intersection of migration control, the universalistic welfare state, and the theological underpinnings of the organisations.



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1. Introduction

Since the expansions of the European Union (EU) in 2004 and 2007, many people have migrated from countries in Eastern Europe to generally wealthier countries in Western Europe. For example, over 100,000 people from Poland, 40,000 people from Lithuania, and 15,000 people from Romania currently live in Norway ([Statistics Norway 2023](#)). Migrants from EU countries on shorter stays who do not register with the authorities come in addition to these numbers. Because they do not register, they are not included in the official statistics. Some of these migrants find regular work, register, and settle in Norway—eventually making them part of the official statistics. Others engage in casual work or street work and leave Norway after three months, in accordance with EU regulations (cf. [Yildiz and De Genova 2018](#), p. 434), often to return in a pattern of circular migration.

A large proportion of the migrants engaging in street work on shorter stays in Norway are Romanian citizens, and many of them are Roma ([Djuve et al. 2015](#); [Seilskjær and Jensen 2023](#), p. 23; see also [Engebrigtsen 2018](#); [Thorleifsson and Eriksen 2018](#)).¹ The Roma are a minority present in all European countries, and particularly numerous in Romania, whose lives have generally been characterized by intra- and international mobility, as well as marginalisation and social exclusion over generations. In Norway, there are Roma families

with long ties to Norway and Norwegian citizenships, in addition to the Roma migrants (see [Engebrigtsen 2018](#); [Thorleifsson and Eriksen 2018](#)). Making money from selling magazines, begging, playing music, and collecting bottles and cans that can be recycled for a refund, Roma migrants are conspicuously visible in a country where most visible signs of poverty have been eradicated by the welfare state. In fact, the [Vagrancy Act \(1900\)](#) banning begging was repealed in 2006 as begging was no longer seen as a public nuisance ([Johansen 2016](#), p. 172). Since then, however, the EU has expanded and Norway has enacted regulations barring poor, homeless, and unemployed migrants from public welfare services ([Misje 2019, 2021](#); cf. [Tervonen and Enache 2017](#)). Consequently, Roma migrants in Norway generally rely on emergency shelters, soup kitchens, and other humanitarian services run by non-governmental organisations, many of them Christian social actors that I refer to as diaconal organisations in this article ([Holte and Dietrich 2022](#); [Misje 2022](#); [Thorleifsson and Eriksen 2018](#)).

This article explores the diaconal organisations' engagement for Roma migrants in Oslo with a view to understanding the role of diaconal actors in integrated Europe in relation to the welfare state, new forms of migration control, and the organisations' theological underpinnings. European integration and the presence, in recent years, of migrants lacking access to public welfare services challenge diaconal actors to reconsider their role in relation to the Nordic welfare states (cf. [Fagermoen 2023](#)). This article makes an empirically grounded contribution to that effort, addressing questions of diaconal agency and identity in relation to the state, the market, and civil society in this context. It suggests that diaconal theory lacks awareness of how mobility can be a way of life, mode of existence, or resource for some people, and that diaconal engagement for Roma migrants in Oslo fits uneasily into roles of diaconia described in recent literature. The article suggests that diaconal engagement for Roma migrants in Oslo—including service provision to people who are otherwise unserved within the welfare state, case work, and advocacy work—can be conceptualised as the art of the possible to serve the needs, rights, and empowerment of marginalised people.

2. Methods

The article builds on the Norwegian case study of the Role of Religion and Religious Actors in Roma Social Inclusion: Towards a Participatory Approach (PARI), an ongoing research project.² Between November 2021 and December 2022, I conducted interviews with 11 Roma migrants in Oslo and interviews and observations in 7 diaconal organisations and churches that inform this article. However, the public documents and published research referenced as literature through the text and in the reference list on which I have drawn to describe diaconal engagement for Roma migrants in Oslo were the primary data used when writing the article. After the empirical account, sections on the universalistic welfare state, migration control, and the diaconal organisations' theological underpinnings follow before I return to the argument on diaconia as the art of the possible.

3. Diaconal Engagement for Roma Migrants in Oslo

Roma migrants—who are often poor, engaged in street work, and living on the streets—stood out as soon as they came to Norway. As mentioned, begging and other forms of street work was hardly part of the Norwegian street scene at the turn of the millennium. When the current migration from Eastern European countries began, Roma beggars were seen as more “aggressive”, “intrusive”, and “professional” than the few remaining Norwegian beggars (see [Borevi 2023](#), p. 248). Lacking access to housing in Oslo and sleeping in cars or tents, Roma migrants displayed all aspects of their everyday life in public and challenged established boundaries between the private and the public ([Engebrigtsen 2018](#), p. 54).³ There were also issues related to inadequate access to sanitary facilities and littering ([Thorleifsson and Eriksen 2018](#), pp. 98–101). For different reasons, Roma migrants became the subject of political debate ([Tårland 2014](#)), and tensions peaked

in the summer of 2012, when conflicts arose over makeshift Roma camps in Oslo (for accounts in English, see [Engebrigtsen 2018](#), p. 64; [Johansen 2016](#), pp. 172–74).

Following political negotiations in the autumn and winter, the Ministry of Justice and Public Security launched a grant scheme to support humanitarian measures targeted at citizens of countries in the European Economic Area (EEA)⁴ begging in Norway—or “coming to Norway to beg”,⁵ as the title had it—in 2013. The scheme was framed in response to the challenges posed to “the concerned municipalities” when many migrants “stay outside ordinary accommodation” ([Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2013](#)).⁶ “The measures given support”, the grant rules stated, “shall be of help to persons who beg, but shall not promote begging” ([Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2013](#)). The call gave examples of measures that could be enacted with funding from the scheme: establishing and running of hygiene and sanitation facilities, providing information and advice about “rules and regulations that persons begging should abide by, as well as the opportunities to get work”, and offering free or affordable short-term accommodation ([Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2013](#)). The grant scheme, in other words, framed Roma migrants as a problem for public order to be addressed through humanitarian measures (see also [Borevi 2023](#), pp. 283–86).

In Oslo, the conservative City Council did not enact any measures itself, preferring to rely on “relief measures directed by humanitarian organisations” ([Aftenposten 2013](#)). Roma migrants had already sought out churches and diaconal organisations running services targeted at drug users and other people on the streets in 2012 (see [Holte and Dietrich 2022](#)). In 2013, the first year of the grant scheme, the Catholic organisation Caritas, the Lutheran Church City Mission, the Pentecostal organisation Evangeliesenteret, the evangelical organisation Salvation Army, and the secular organisation Red Cross were awarded grants to enact measures for migrants from EEA countries in the margins of the welfare state in Oslo ([Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2014](#)). Four of the five organisations could be called diaconal organisations, the Red Cross being the exception. The collaboration between the Church City Mission and the Red Cross to establish an “emergency overnight and sanitary project for destitute migrants” received the largest share of the funds, close to half of the total of kr. 10,000,000—(roughly €1,000,000; [Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2014](#)).

The anthropologist Ada Engebrigtsen and the political scientist Are Vegard Haug evaluated the grant scheme in 2017. They found that the emergency shelters and sanitary facilities were regularly used by the target group and that the users were generally happy with them, although people often had to be rejected because there was insufficient capacity in Oslo ([Engebrigtsen and Haug 2018](#), pp. 24–31). The emergency shelters and sanitary facilities contributed to reducing illicit camping and littering, and they were valued as contact points between public authorities and the migrants ([Engebrigtsen and Haug 2018](#), pp. 25, 30). Most likely, [Engebrigtsen and Haug \(2018, p. 26\)](#) remarked, the emergency shelters reduced demand for illicit sleeping arrangements, which can be crowded and hazardous—and can relate to exploitation ([Tyldum and Friberg 2023](#), p. 215). Yet, the leaders of the organisations receiving the grants said private donors were not willing to support measures targeted at people who beg ([Engebrigtsen and Haug 2018](#), p. 26; see also [Holte and Dietrich 2022](#), pp. 497–98; [Thorleifsson and Eriksen 2018](#), p. 97). Thus, the measures depended on the public funding as well as the organisations’ own financial contributions.

The leaders of the organisations told [Engebrigtsen and Haug \(2018, p. 39\)](#) that “the voluntary organisations are good at uncovering needs in society, but the public has to take responsibility or at least fully finance voluntary organisations’ humanitarian work for people in distress.” They suggested that the municipalities would have to provide the services if the organisations did not, which would cost more ([Engebrigtsen and Haug 2018](#), pp. 26, 39). The evaluation discussed the relationship between the measures enacted by the organisations receiving the grants and the migrants’ legal rights, concluding that a review of migrants’ legal status was needed ([Engebrigtsen and Haug 2018](#), pp. 38–40, 49–50).

In 2023, ten years after the grant scheme was launched, five years after the evaluation was published, and in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, the organisations offered more or less the same services as before. Rather than fully financed by public authorities, the measures continued to be run using a combination of the organisations' money, public funding, and other funding for smaller projects (see e.g., [Norwegian National Human Rights Institution 2023](#), pp. 6–7). A newly elected, left-leaning City Council in Oslo launched a municipal grant scheme in 2017 as one of 11 measures to “handle visiting homeless EEA-citizens” ([Oslo City Council 2017](#)), supporting some of the same organisations and measures as the statal grant scheme ([City of Oslo 2023](#)). The organisations have also secured project funding from other sources, such as the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi) and the Dam Foundation. Having listed the different ongoing projects in her organisation, an employee at the Salvation Army's Migration Centre said to me: “You can only imagine how much reporting this means. And we have small projects to do this and that, right in the middle of two big ones ... The guidelines for all these projects set the frames for our operation” (interview, 7.11.2022). Funding their work by applying for projects also meant that they had to prove their results: “So we justify and justify and justify. And we have statistics. And we have numbers. And if we didn't have them, then we couldn't have done anything” (interview, 7.11.2022). To paraphrase from [Mawudor and Suparni's \(2021, p. 686\)](#) chapter in the *International Handbook of Ecumenical Diakonia*, financial management and resource mobilisation is how good intentions are converted into tangible results. However, despite this work, the capacity problems reported by [Engebrigtsen and Haug \(2018, pp. 24–31\)](#) continued: The Church City Mission reported that their emergency shelter rejected an average of 30 people per night in November 2022, the same number as in 2018 and 2019 ([Norwegian National Human Rights Institution 2023, p. 4](#)).

At the same time, the diaconal organisations were taking on roles beyond service provision: The Church City Mission initiated reviews of EU migrants' right to shelter and a survey of homeless EU migrants in Oslo that were published in the first half of 2023 ([Norwegian National Human Rights Institution 2023; Seilskjær 2023](#)). During my interviews in the latter half of 2022, an employee of the Church City Mission explained: “Methodically, we are based in grassroot work but we think, how can we engage professionally and in policy development from this base?” (interview, 10.08.2022). Suggesting the importance of other forms of help in her organisations, an employee at the Salvation Army's Migration Centre told me that she had to remind her colleagues not to forget the grassroots in their work: “You have to be at our centre and provide meals and showers and talk to the people. If not, this can't work. That's where you learn about their needs and who they are and whom it is we're actually going to help” (interview, 7.11.2022). Service provision, in other words, served as a basis for casework and advocacy work in the diaconal organisations' engagement for Roma migrants in Oslo.

Before I move on to discuss the role of diaconal actors providing services to Roma migrants in Oslo, I need to present three relevant contexts: the ideal of the universalistic welfare state, new forms of migration control, and the theological underpinnings of the organisations.

4. Universalistic Welfare State

In the Danish sociologist Gøsta [Esping-Andersen's \(1990\)](#) seminal typology of welfare states, the Nordic countries were classified as “social democratic welfare states”. Together with the Swedish sociologist Walter Korpi, Esping-Andersen argued that social policy in these countries is *comprehensive, institutionalised, and solidaristic and universalist*: its aim is to ensure a unified system of social protection and services integrating or including the entire population, giving all citizens rights to a certain standard of living ([Esping-Andersen and Korpi 1986, p. 42](#)). Despite reforms since this seminal work, traits of the social democratic welfare state are still recognisable in Norway.

First, universal rights to relatively generous benefits protecting individuals and families against a wide range of risks are a core feature of the Nordic welfare states. In addition

to universal social protection schemes and insurance-based benefits for the unemployed, sick, disabled, and elderly, social welfare aiming to “contribute to social and economic security” for “everyone residing in the realm” is universally available as a need-tested, discretionary last resort in Norway ([Social Welfare Act 2009](#), §1, §2, my translation). In [Esping-Andersen’s](#) (1990, pp. 21–23) words, the Nordic countries have high levels of “decommodification”, meaning that citizens and legal residents can generally maintain livelihoods without selling their labour on the market, even though workfare policies known as *arbeidslinja* (“the work line”) in Norwegian have limited this to some extent by the increasing use of mandatory activation measures since the 1990s (cf. [Kildal 1999](#)).

Second, welfare services such as health care, childcare, and elderly care are generally provided by the public sector or organisations paid by the welfare state. Many diaconal institutions set up to provide welfare services in the 1800s were subsumed within the public welfare system when the welfare state expanded after the Second World War (e.g., [Leis-Peters 2014](#); cf., [Angell 2016](#), p. 151; [World Council of Churches 2022](#), p. 89). Theirs, wrote the theologians Wanda [Deifelt and Hofmann](#) (2021, p. 54), “is a hybrid model of diaconia that combines the love of one’s neighbour and professional social services (to which people are entitled).” The welfare state is meant to encompass all citizens and legal residents with public services or services provided by private actors (including diaconal actors) but paid for by the state. The services offered are of high standards because more privileged citizens might turn to private alternatives if the public services cannot “offer the best standards available”, which would undermine the solidarity and equality underlying the welfare state ([Esping-Andersen and Korpi 1986](#), p. 70). Reducing risk for individuals and families and alleviating poverty by providing benefits and services to those in need, the welfare state is generally seen as replacing other forms of help, such as charity and more expensive private options.⁷

Yet, as the sociologist Grete Brochmann noted, the Nordic welfare states were “established without immigration in mind” and “assumed a character of *bounded universalism*” ([Brochmann 2022](#), p. 37, original italics). The universalist ambitions applied only to their own citizens and selected immigrants. However, in recent years, discourses on immigration and the welfare state have converged in Norway ([NOU 2017:2](#)). Restrictive immigration policies—especially towards asylum seekers and refugees—are framed as means of protecting the welfare state to the extent that some immigrants are less likely to work and more likely to depend on benefits and services than the majority population. “Good welfare states could not systematically accept substantial numbers of residents who were not being productively absorbed in the labor market, disturbing the regulated world of work and burdening social budgets” ([Brochmann 2022](#), p. 38). Thus, Norway has taken “a dual approach” to immigration consisting of strict migration control and the integration of immigrants into working life: “Ideally, only labour in demand was to be let in” ([Brochmann 2022](#), p. 38).

In this context, Roma migrants from EU countries begging and engaging in street work constitute an exceptional case. As citizens of EU countries, they have a right to enter and stay in Norway, even if they are not Norwegian citizens and their labour is not in demand. They cannot be rejected at the border or deported, but neither are they absorbed by the labour market nor subjected to integration measures.

5. Migration Control

Immigration control is linked to border control and territorial control, which are fundamental aspects of states’ sovereignty. In Norway, a general ban on immigration has been in force since 1975, with some exceptions ([Brochmann and Kjeldstadli 2008](#), pp. 201–12). Yet, since the EEA Agreement entered into force in 1994, citizens of the other countries in the EEA have had rights to work, study, and live in Norway. “This labor had the right to free mobility within the area of the EU/EEA, which meant, in effect, that immigration control within the EU/EEA was abandoned” ([Brochmann 2022](#), p. 46).

Following the EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007, free mobility was extended to the citizens of the generally poorer Eastern European countries.

Even within the universalistic welfare state, legal presence does not confer social rights on all migrants. Legislative changes barring certain migrants from public welfare services—even if they are legally in the country—have been referred to as “welfare bordering” in the research literature (Guentner et al. 2016; Misje 2019). In accordance with EU regulations, citizens of other countries in the EEA can enter and stay legally in Norway for up to three months but must register with the authorities to stay longer (Yildiz and De Genova 2018, p. 434). Migrants from EEA countries engaging in casual work or street work who do not have habitual residence in Norway have limited rights within the welfare state (Misje 2019, pp. 406–7; 2022, p. 450).

As described above, the public welfare system has generally replaced other forms of help in the Nordic welfare states. Charity-based initiatives are scarce, diaconal organisations generally provide services “to which people are entitled” (Deifelt and Hofmann 2021, p. 54), and few institutions or organisations provide services outside of the public welfare system. When the current migration from Eastern European countries began, destitute migrants at the margins of the welfare state sought out the places they could access for help, such as services and places targeted at drug users and other people on the streets (see Holte and Dietrich 2022). However, within the universalistic welfare state, these services were generally meant to supplement public welfare services and not to cover basic needs. Diaconal services meant to cover basic needs at the margins of the public welfare system is a novelty within the Norwegian welfare state (cf. Misje 2021, pp. 109, 113).

As described above, the launch of the public grant scheme for humanitarian measures targeted at citizens of EEA countries begging in Norway was grounded in concern for public order as well as humanitarian concerns (Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2013). The social anthropologist and social worker Turid Misje (2021, p. 106) argued that the diaconal engagement for Roma migrants in Oslo formed part of “a parallel social service system” where help was “meted out through benevolence, charity, and compassion . . . rather than comprehensive, inclusive social rights.” She was critical of the inferior services provided to migrants in the parallel social service system relative to the public welfare services for citizens and migrants with habitual residence in Norway. Overall, she concluded, “[t]he parallel social service system, while alleviating precarious situations, consequently takes on a bordering function in marking certain migrants as ‘unwanted’” (Misje 2021, p. 114).⁸ Another way of looking at these services, which I return to below, is as support empowering Roma and other citizens of countries in the EEA to employ their rights and resources by migrating (Holte and Dietrich 2022, p. 512). The relationship between migration control and diaconal engagement for Roma migrants in Oslo is, in other words, ambiguous.

6. Theological Underpinnings

Diaconia can be framed as Christian social practice (Dietrich et al. 2014). It “includes acts of mercy and mutual service in accountability and reciprocity” (Dietrich 2014, pp. 13, 26). In a recent book chapter, theologians Deifelt and Hofmann (2021, p. 55) suggested that care, transformation, empowerment, advocacy, and conviviality could be entry-points for a comprehensive approach to diaconia, which, they wrote, “is a transforming presence that encompasses transformation of individuals and communities” (Deifelt and Hofmann 2021, p. 60). Recent years have also seen calls for a “diakonia of the marginalized people” (Ham 2012, p. 386), a vision of “*diakonia* as action ‘from below’” (World Council of Churches 2022, p. 39) based on how marginalised people “... resist injustice and oppression in their own ways and through their struggles for life, justice, dignity and rights for themselves and for all, unveil the presence and power of God in their lives. . . . In all such expressions, in their actions and allegiances towards liberation and transformation, the churches today have new possibilities of *diakonia* as well as of new ecclesial self-discovery”. (Ham 2012, pp. 387–88). Overall, scholars seem to agree that diaconia has moved beyond charity and service provision towards empowerment and transformation in recent years,

especially in Western Europe (e.g., [Deifelt and Hofmann 2021](#); [Ham 2012; 2014](#); [Meijers and Roy 2021](#), *passim*; [Swart 2021](#)).

[Deifelt and Hofmann \(2021, p. 54\)](#) also suggested that diaconia could be described as service, although “there is no uniformity in how this act of service is carried out.” In welfare state contexts, different instances of diaconal service provision can be placed on a continuum from Christian and church-related practice grounded in biblical principles to the provision of publicly funded welfare services. Thus, on the one hand, diaconia is understood as “a theological concept that points to the very identity and mission of the church” ([Nordstokke 2009, p. 8](#)) and seen an integral part of the church ([World Council of Churches 2022, p. 15](#) and *passim*). On the other hand, diaconal institutions providing health and social services were set up in the 1800s and later often subsumed within welfare state structures in Norway, as in Germany ([Hübner 2021](#); [Leis-Peters 2014](#)). Within European welfare states today, these diaconal institutions often provide the publicly financed services “to which people are entitled” ([Deifelt and Hofmann 2021, p. 54](#)) alluded to above. In between these extremes—and as the account of diaconal engagement for Roma migrants in Oslo above can illustrate—diaconal actors also provide services within and in the margins of the welfare state while advocating for Christian values through a radical commitment to marginalised people (see [Holte and Dietrich 2022, p. 491](#)).

Service provision at the margins of the welfare state is a well-known role for diaconal actors. According to the sociologist Olav Helge Angell, services initiated by the church or diaconal organisations have often been taken over by the public sector when they have proven their value in practice, although “serving [the] unmet needs of a user group already served by the welfare organisation may be more common than we often like to think” ([Angell 2016, p. 151](#)). The idea of uncovering needs and initiating new services as a role of diaconal and voluntary organisations was also voiced by the leaders of the organisations receiving grants from the Ministry of Justice and Public Security interviewed by [Engelbrigt-sen and Haug \(2018, p. 39\)](#), who suggested that the public sector needed to take over or finance their work. In the Norwegian context, the state or the municipalities are generally expected to take responsibility for welfare services, in line with the ideals of the social democratic welfare state, and diaconal organisations often identify as welfare pioneers or innovators identifying new needs or ways of organising services (see [Angell 2016](#)).

However, [Angell \(2016, p. 152\)](#) suggested that diaconia also has roles that “are less practical in their nature, and more ideological or political.” In one article, he showed how the Church City Mission acted as “a value guardian” through its social work for people using drugs and its participation in the public discourse on welfare in Drammen, a mid-sized Norwegian city ([Angell 2007](#)). This is analogous to the role of the Swedish diaconal institution Samariterhemmet “as a critical companion of the public welfare system” that “could observe the welfare service provision critically and help to find gaps and potential problems” described by the sociologist of religion Annette [Leis-Peters \(2014, p. 147\)](#). Analysing the establishment of the Health Centre for Undocumented Immigrants serving the unmet needs of migrants staying illegally in the country, which provoked strong political reactions, [Angell \(2016, p. 155\)](#) suggested that it “may have [had] a clear political function, and in such a way that though the service is innovative in its character, it still falls short of being a service innovation.” That the Health Centre for Undocumented Migrants later came to receive some public financial support ([Aftenposten 2017](#)) may reflect how welfare innovation or the role as welfare pioneers can take time to manifest and may even begin as a provocation. This, in turn, shows how humanitarian action and “political and prophetic diakonia which speaks truth to power” can go together in practice ([Baberske et al. 2021, p. xxxvi](#); see also [World Council of Churches 2022, pp. 32, 50](#)). However, while service provision can give diaconal actors “credibility based on the congruence of words and deeds” ([Angell 2007, p. 189](#)), prophetic diaconia and pragmatic interaction with public authorities can also be incompatible in some contexts ([Bowers Du Toit 2016, 2021](#)). As Christian social practice, diaconal engagement is defined by its theological underpinnings rather than its relation to the state.

7. Diaconia as the Art of the Possible

To make a long story short, European integration has led to a situation where Roma migrants are legally present in Norway but have limited rights within the welfare state. Diaconal organisations have engaged for them. Similar situations can be found in many European countries (e.g., [Tervonen and Enache 2017](#)). When diaconal organisations respond to the vulnerability and destitution these migrants represent in the city and at their doors—forming part of “a parallel social service system” ([Misje 2021](#)) and receiving public funding to do so—how should we understand their role? Are they charitable actors, service providers, welfare innovators, pioneers, or prophetic and critical voices?

While it may represent a peculiar form of diaconal service provision—one in the margins of the welfare state—diaconal engagement for Roma migrants in Oslo does not fit the model of welfare innovation: Despite shifting governments and city councils over the last 10 years, Roma migrants remain without individual rights to their services, and the services are not financed within ordinary welfare state structures (cf. [Misje 2021](#), pp. 106, 113). Neither are they fully financed by the state or municipality but depend on the organisations’ own financial contributions ([Norwegian National Human Rights Institution 2023](#), p. 7). The pioneer role of diaconia, on the other hand, might take more than 10 years to manifest. However, this is a matter of perspective since the pioneer role is a matter of hindsight or even a strategic self-presentation by diaconal organisations emphasising past successes, but not intrinsic to their work itself. What might turn out to be pioneer services in the long term might rather appear as prophetic or political diaconia in the short term—as the case of the Health Centre for Undocumented Immigrants illustrated. Yet, diaconal engagement for Roma migrants in Oslo also fits uneasily with descriptions of political and prophetic diaconia speaking “truth to power” ([Baberske et al. 2021](#), p. xxxvi; [World Council of Churches 2022](#), p. 50). Unlike the Health Centre for Undocumented Immigrants ([Angell 2016](#), pp. 154–55), the services for Roma migrants did not represent a political provocation. Inversely, rather, public funding contributing to establishing and running the services followed political controversy. In this light, the services can be seen as a contribution to public order by reducing the incidence of rough sleeping and littering ([Engelbrigtsen and Haug 2018](#), p. 25), and one might ask if diaconal engagement for Roma migrants does not merely continue a longer tradition of dealing with unwanted people in the margins of the national community, including Romani people, in partnership with the state (see e.g., [NOU 2015:7 2015](#), pp. 49–51).

However, in addition to service provision, the diaconal engagement for Roma migrants in Oslo has developed to include case work and advocacy work to ensure the realisation of their rights as citizens of EEA countries in Norway. In this light, diaconal engagement for Roma migrants in Oslo might represent a novel form of inclusion—one making migration or, rather, transnational mobility more humane ([Holte and Dietrich 2022](#)). This argument builds on an attentiveness to mobility that seems to be underdeveloped in diaconal theory (cf. [Engelbrigtsen 2018](#)). For example, in their meditation on the cover design of the *International Handbook of Ecumenical Diaconia*, Beate [Baberske et al. \(2021\)](#) suggested that “humanitarian action [for refugees and strangers] will always be accompanied by efforts of political and prophetic diakonia which speaks truth to power and raises questions around the root causes of migration and flight which too often are silenced down and avoided.” This phrase obscures how mobility can be a way of life, a mode of existence, or at least a resource for some people (cf. [Engelbrigtsen 2018](#); [Friberg 2020](#)). The attentiveness to mobility, furthermore, is not merely an academic insight but was brought up by an employee of the Church City Mission during my interviews when she told me: “We have actually been more concerned with making the mobility visible than with thinking about integration projects. We are speaking of legal European mobility that we lack policies and a terminology for in Norway where we are so very settled” (interview, 10.08.2022). Perhaps, it might seem, diaconia should not only question the root causes of migration, but also engage with the conditions for mobility, and particularly the mobility of the less privileged (cf. [Fagermoen 2023](#))?

Diaconal engagement for Roma migrants at the margins of the welfare state in Oslo represents diaconal actors providing services to people who are otherwise unserved within the welfare state—with whatever financial resources are available to them. Some—perhaps many—of the people using the services may not aspire to full inclusion in the welfare state based on formal employment and habitual residence, but rather to live mobile lives or improve their own and their families’ lives elsewhere—for example in Romania.⁹ In addition, the organisations engage in case work and advocacy work. In this perspective, diaconal engagement for Roma migrants in Oslo is not merely a return to charity, service provision, or a welfare innovation. Neither is it necessarily a case of prophetic diaconia nor a case of diaconia of the marginalised people. The work does not fit neatly on a scale from charity through mutuality to transformation (cf. Ham 2014), or from charity to rights-based services (cf. Misje 2021, p. 106). What diaconal engagement for Roma migrants in Oslo at the intersection of migration control, a universalistic welfare state, and its theological underpinnings represents—more than anything—is diaconia as the art of the possible to serve the needs, rights, and empowerment of people at the margins in one particular context.

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Notes

- ¹ In Norwegian, foreign-looking street workers are often referred to as *romfolk* (“Roma people”), applying the ethnic designation indiscriminately to all visibly poor or destitute migrants.
- ² PARI is formally conducted between from 4 January 2021 to 30 April 2024 with funding from Norway Grants and the Romanian state budget (see funding declaration).
- ³ A ban on rough sleeping in urban areas was enacted in Oslo in 2013 and remains in force at the time of writing (Seilskjær 2023, p. 44). Together with the opening of the emergency shelters that I describe in some more detail later, it has contributed to reducing the public visibility of some aspects Roma migrants’ private life.
- ⁴ The European Economic Area comprises the EU member states, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway.
- ⁵ I have translated all quotes from Norwegian sources into English.
- ⁶ According to Engebrigtsen and Haug (2018, p. 39), an acknowledgement of Norwegian public authorities’ humanitarian responsibilities towards the target group underlay the grant scheme, although this claim was not further explained or substantiated. EU migrants’ rights and the public authorities’ responsibilities have remained underexplored in the Norwegian context. Only in 2023, for example, were reviews of EU migrants’ right to shelter published on the initiative of the Church City Mission (Norwegian National Human Rights Institution 2023; Seilskjær 2023).
- ⁷ The extensive media coverage of a recent report on people using food banks titled *Charity in the welfare state* (Fløtten et al. 2023) illustrates how strong this ideal is.
- ⁸ The phrase that “[t]he measures given support [...] shall not promote begging” in the call for the statal grant scheme supporting the services underlines this impression (Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2013).
- ⁹ It should be noted that other people using the services are trying to settle in Norway (cf. Seilskjær and Jensen 2023), raising other questions.

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