

Ewa Sadowska interview

Helping the East Europeans who fail to find success in London

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writes Andrew Mickel



For some Eastern Europeans who come to the capital wishing for a better life, London is just one long boulevard of broken dreams. Andrew Mickel interviews Ewa Sadowska of Barka UK, who helps those in distress

In the four years since the EU expanded in 2004, it is estimated that one million central and eastern European migrants have made their home in the UK. While most find work, for a sizeable minority their ambition for a better life ends in isolation and homelessness.

Ewa Sadowska runs Barka UK, a project that aims to help destitute European migrants. Her experiences in dealing with social problems in Poland, through working with her parents' organisation, the Barka Foundation, led Hammersmith & Fulham Council to invite her to help the Poles on the council's streets.

Shocked

Although she had spent her entire life around vulnerable people she was shocked when she arrived in London in 2006: "We estimate that 20% of the million Poles who came here are facing problems.

"There are entrenched alcoholics, people living in garages, in squats. People are so ashamed. They may have had to borrow money from their whole village and are now in debt," she says. "They can't return to their families if they're dirty, have no money and no teeth."

Sadowska's upbringing has given the 26-year-old a steely ability to get things done. Barka was set up in Poland by Sadowska's parents in 1989 during the fall of communism. As capitalism advanced, Sadowska's parents, both psychologists, found that the most vulnerable people, such as prisoners, mental health patients, and former prostitutes, were unable to cope with the new realities of the world. So six-year-old Ewa and her family moved into a cottage in a small town in western Poland - and took 20 people with them.

The villagers helped to provide some money to begin the project, but over time the social enterprise became self-sufficient, and what Sadowska calls her "multi-generational family of brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts" grew vegetables and sold the products of their labour.

Over time, people left the project and set up similar enterprises around the country. Today, the EU helps to fund 30 sites in the Barka network.

Although she is fiercely proud of Polish people and how her country has changed, Sadowska still recognises that the fundamental problems facing Poles in London now are the same ones that posed a challenge 20 years ago in their homeland. "We don't know how to compete, be resourceful and entrepreneurial in a free market, because we were all told what to do by the regime," she says.

"For those coming here, the common problem is they don't understand the system or speak English. They would arrive at London Victoria not having arranged anything - they would expect employers to come and offer them jobs. They would either ask someone 'where should I go to receive information?', or would have so little money that they would just spend the night at Victoria."

Service level agreement

After Sadowska's visit, Hammersmith and Fulham set up a service level agreement for a six-month pilot project. Barka workers - who are mainly former alcoholics whom the project has helped - meet people in the street and in day centres, and tell them about the difference Barka could make to their lives. Many go to Barka sites in Poland to get back on their feet before returning to their families. So far, more than 100 have returned, leading the project to be extended to Tower Hamlets and the City of London.

The Polish parliament has also funded a separate team to work in London. The funding has stopped for now, but if it is renewed, Sadowska is determined to extend Barka to Paris, Copenhagen and Berlin.

Barka won a World Bank award last year for innovation, while the success of Barka UK has led to Sadowska being appointed a Young Global Leader in the World Economic Forum. As a result of the last global meeting, she is now advising a group in Egypt on how to set up a Barka-style project.

In London, meanwhile, she is talking with organic farmer Julian Rose about taking on workers, and looking to sell organic food grown by Barka projects.

"We are so proud that we are able to exercise our right to freedom after 200 years, but if someone is in trouble, there is no support for them," she says. "These people always have a hope that tomorrow is better - but there has to be solidarity between Poland and England."

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