

# European Citizens' Gathering



Photo credits: Conrad Simpson

*Louise Regan, National Education Union, opens the Gathering*



*Marina Prentoulis, Another Europe is Possible*

## Second class citizens?

*Beata Polanowska*



*Beata Polanowska runs Signpost to Polish Success, a Nottingham based organisation that publishes the Pol Polska regional newspaper, provides advice, and runs educational, cultural and social events for the Polish community and beyond.*

I present the views of members of the Polish community and our general experience. We at this event are articulate, eloquent and are able to organise initiatives. The people that we help at Signpost to Polish Success have horrendous language and cultural barriers. They have very little representation, are unlikely to speak up for themselves, and need help. The main issue that they face is destitution. We help with referrals to food banks and organise food banks ourselves. There are also housing issues. The austerity that has been imposed in the UK and the welfare changes that were introduced by David Cameron, such as access to benefits for EU citizens, have had a major impact. The benefits and welfare that Polish and other EU citizens receive is much more limited than the benefits that British people can access. The use of the benefits issue during the Brexit campaign was a total misrepresentation of reality.

When we all woke up to the result of the referendum, we just couldn't believe it. We were shocked and scared. There was a sense of disbelief. It was like waking up in a different UK. We were scared and so we organised some meetings at our offices. Our community felt that it needed to get together.

One of the shocking questions that arose was should we speak Polish in public to our children? We were getting 'those looks'. This is how we felt. The campaign that was mounted prior to the referendum and before the previous general election focused so much on the issue of migrants. Polish migrants were blamed for job shortages, housing issues, problems with the NHS, and the lack of school places. We felt that

the result of the referendum was determined by our presence in the UK. It was a horrible feeling to wake up in post-referendum Britain and feel like second class citizens.

We've all heard about hate crime, increases in hate crime incidents and Polish people being subjected to hate crime. Yet Polish people would be the last ones to talk to the media. 'We' don't talk to the media. Some attacks on Polish people were reported to the media but the actual coverage did not represent the extent of the issue. Our organisation acts as a hate crime reporting centre and dealt with cases immediately after the referendum. They were horrendous, not only because of what happened to particular people but also because of the way that services like the police or housing associations dealt with them. They were not treated seriously enough. The problems were belittled by being defined as 'neighbour disputes'.

One Polish woman had to leave her home in the middle of the night. She ran away from her home because she was scared for her life and I mean really scared for her life. The police did not treat this seriously. When a Polish teenager was attacked on a school bus, the police did not even try to retrieve CCTV footage in time and it was eventually lost. When Polish people were reporting crimes, the police did not want to report it as hate crime. It took some persuasion from the victims for the incidents to be reported as hate crimes. I'm talking about comments like 'go home', 'what are you doing here?', 'get back to Poland'. Recently, a parent reported that his daughter had been told: 'I thought you'd gone back to Poland, what are you still doing here?'

Most of the hate crime incidents aimed at Polish people took place six months after the referendum, but we still see things happening. After the referendum, some Polish people in Nottingham felt a much greater need to be together and developed a greater sense of community. Alternatively, this could be presented as people isolating themselves: ghettoization. For example, Polish Saturday schools have seen a huge increase in participation.

After the referendum we organised a campaign where we asked local schools to talk more positively about the Polish contribution to life in the UK, or Polish culture, or to bring into the curriculum something positive representing the Polish community in Nottingham. We gathered over 1,000 signatures, we sent 100 letters. We did succeed in a few cases but it was very hard work and we are still pushing. It's not easy. We had some schools that responded to us and we did some sessions on history such as the Polish contribution during the Second World War. We asked that when talking

about figures such as Marie Skłodowska Curie, it was mentioned that they were Polish. One of the biggest schools in Nottingham failed to mention that this Nobel Prize winning scientist was Polish when teaching students about her work. We will be writing to them. Such small steps to build more positive images of Polish migrants are important. They are positive steps in terms of building community cohesion.

Where are we now? What is the current situation? Obviously, we don't know where we are! In terms of preparation for Brexit, there is nothing concrete. I'm sure this is a shared feeling.

One positive development is that there has been a reduction in negative comments about Polish migrants in the media. Instead, we now hear about the fears of employers not having enough employees or workers. When I speak to Polish people working for agencies, they can sense that maybe in some ways they are being respected and appreciated more. Maybe this is due to trade union action in particular instances, because we hear of other examples of employers not respecting the workforce and taking advantage of them. We don't hear as much general negative talk about Polish migrants as we used to.

It is very difficult for us to imagine what Brexit will bring. We live in the here and now but when we talk about settled status, things are not so clear. Very few Polish migrants have an experience of the UK before 2004 when Poland joined the European Union. I came here in the 1990s, but most people don't know about the queues on the border, the fact that you're at the mercy of customs officers. Many Polish people don't know about this reality, they don't know that connections with our families and our home country will become much more difficult. Travelling to Europe could become much more difficult.

Applying for British citizenship costs one or two thousand pounds. What about applying for permanent resident status as some of our clients do? This costs about £100. For many of our clients, this is unachievable because of the cost and because you need documentation, which many of them do not possess. We're talking here about a sector of our community that will remain in the UK, they are legally here at the moment but they are effectively destitute. After Brexit, they may well become illegal immigrants. They will remain 'In Limbo'. They will have this illegal status and their situation will be quite dramatic in some ways. They currently survive somehow but what will happen after Brexit?

We feel very upset that despite being at the centre of negative attention for such a long time, nobody has made an effort to look at our economic contribution. Maybe it is difficult to assess, but nobody mentions it.

Nobody talks about it positively and yet our economic contribution must be significant. We feel quite bitter about it. In terms of Brexit, many of us don't really understand what it means for us and what will happen next.



*Madeleine Kay (EU Super Girl) and Alba  
serenaded the gathering*





*Elena Remigi, whose ideas gave rise to In Limbo,  
and Claudia Delpero, editor of Europe Street News*

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