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| East European Forum | 8 December 2018 |
| Meeting held on 24 November 2018 | London, United Kingdom |
| Report on the first East European Forum meeting Supporting Eastern European Communities Living in London: Barriers and Challenges for Social Inclusion and Integration | |

1. Background

1.1 In 2017, the Eastern European communities, and notably the Bulgarian and Romanian communities, were recognised as hard-to-reach and underrepresented groups by the office of the Mayor of London. The reasons for this decision are complex and are related to the interaction between local authorities in London and those communities.¹

1.2 The data from the Office for National Statistics² for non-uk born populations by country of birth confirms that, in 2017, the largest East European communities were:

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| Poland | 1,021,000 |
| Romania | 411,000 |
| Lithuania | 199,000 |
| Latvia | 117,000 |
| Hungary | 98,000 |
| Bulgaria | 86,000 |

However, the last Census was held in 2011 and the data is mostly projected. Since then, the demographic picture has changed dramatically and anecdotal evidence shows that the numbers are significantly higher (mostly due to the lifting of all restrictions for Romanian and Bulgarian nationals in 2014).

1.3 The Runnymede Trust Integration for All report³ issued in March 2018 identified the top three biggest social integration gaps as follows: fluency in English, electoral registration, and economic inactivity. The same applies to the East European communities as well.

¹ https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/dd2159_for_citizen_led_engagement_programme_signed.pdf

² <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/ukpopulationbycountryofbirthandnationality/2017>

³ <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/policyResponses/Integration%20for%20All.pdf>

1.4 All of us: THE MAYOR'S STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL INTEGRATION⁴ published in March 2018 notes that Bulgarians are amongst communities historically less well represented.

1.5 The Race Disparity Audit⁵ issued in 2017, and revised in 2018 by the Cabinet Office notes that children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups, who often face multiple discrimination and inequalities, registered the lowest rates of attendance, school attainment, and experienced the highest rates of exclusion. Only two thirds of Gypsy or Roma children over 16 stayed in education, employment, or training in 2014/15.

1.6 Challenges for inclusion and integration:

- Number of Eastern European citizens in London. According to local data, the Eastern European communities in some parts of London are either the biggest or the second biggest group of taxpayers and local residents. Inevitably, when a large group of people move to a certain area, interaction with the local authority and with other agencies and communities might be limited to some extent and/or going through some difficulties, at least in the beginning of this interaction.
- Lack of support network. Unlike any other communities, the Eastern European communities are lacking the support of a network of organisations supporting immigrant communities.
- Lack of political representation. The EE communities are not represented on a political level. It is a rare occurrence to meet a councillor from an EE background.
- Lack of correct and up-to-date data available to local authorities. The last census in the UK was held in 2011. Since then the demographic picture in some parts of the UK and London has changed dramatically. The lack of accessible, correct data can prevent local authorities from measuring the impact on the local services and taking appropriate measures.
- Lack of awareness of the specific issues and cultural barriers those communities are experiencing.
- Lack of representation within local councils. The number of local residents doesn't match the number of council employees, as a percentage. Having a member of staff familiar with the culture and cultural norms of those communities and speaking their language would significantly improve the interaction between those communities and local government.
- Lack of specific programmes and events designed by and for those communities. For example we celebrate Black History Month, the LGBT community, International Women's Day, etc., but when it comes to one of the biggest groups of immigrants in the UK, we don't have any annual events on our calendar to mark their contribution, or even their presence.
- Lack of any system linking up local authorities and partner organisations which would allow us to share good practice and information about those communities.
- Lack of resources tailored to the specific needs of those communities. For example, marketing materials, leaflets, posters, etc., on topics related to them in their mother tongue.
- Lack of engagement. This would apply to the both sides: on the one hand, local authorities not knowing the specific issues those communities are experiencing and not addressing the lack of language skills, while on the other hand these are communities with little prior experience of engaging with local government and other bodies.

⁴ https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/final_social_integration_strategy.pdf

⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/686071/Revised_RDA_report_March_2018.pdf

- Lack of trust. Some of the most vulnerable members of those communities come from countries in Eastern Europe with a not very long democratic tradition. Engaging with local authorities is primarily a trust issue for most of them.
- Lack of information about the services provided by local authorities. Some of the services available to them in the UK don't exist in their country. Other services available to them are not accessed by those communities as they are not aware of them.
- Lack of role models and community leaders. Most of the EE citizens in London are recent immigrants of working age. Being part of a community is a long process. The lack of role models and community leaders makes the process even more difficult.
- Hostile environment towards immigrants and especially Eastern Europeans after Brexit. For years and years, a massive campaign against us was on the agenda of some of the political parties and tabloids in the UK.
- Lack of local hubs or centres where information about available vacancies, training, etc., that can be accessed in their mother tongue or with English support.

1.7 On 24 November 2018, Nishan Dzvingozyan and Adina Maglan organised a first East European Forum round table discussion at the Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria. The purpose of the meeting was to identify and bring together organisations working with and supporting the East European communities in the UK.

2. Notes from the first forum meeting:

2.1 Representatives of 27 organisations (35 people) from the voluntary sector, the public sector, and community volunteers participated at the first East European Forum meeting. The meeting was chaired by Adina Maglan and Nishan Dzvingozyan. For confidentiality reasons, the names and contact details of those present will not be disclosed in this report. For specific queries, please contact the forum founders.

2.2 The geographical coverage of the discussion was the whole of the UK. However, the discussion was more focused on the Greater London Area and Luton.

2.3 The first point raised was from schools in Enfield and the low engagement of Bulgarian and Romanian Roma families with the school system in particular, and with public and support services in general. Three types of communities have been identified as hard to reach: Bulgarian, Bulgarian-Roma, and Turkish-Bulgarian, each with very specific needs and specific cultural barriers:

- Families are reluctant to get involved in the school life due to a break-down of trust. There is very low parental engagement.
- Families, adults and children, do not read or write in any language. This is a major barrier for communicating with the schools. Adults are not aware of free school meals entitlement or welfare benefits and cannot apply due to language and literacy issues. Children are left out and cannot benefit from support from charities either as they are not known to the system.
- There is a high mobility rate of 36% and there are often cases of casual admission. Some children are kept out of school while their siblings are not. In some cases, children did not have exposure to school in their home country either, most of them being hidden to the system. Often cases, there are no books in the household in any language.
- Children in years 4,5 and 6 do not speak English.

- The general distrust affects also registration with health services. Eastern European families choose to seek treatment in their home country at a higher cost and without being known to the local GP or surgery.
- There have been many cases of prostitution being reported in Enfield, most of the women trafficked being from a Bulgarian or Romanian background.

2.4 The second point raised around the social integration of the Roma communities was around advocacy for policy change in the public sector, particularly to Local Authorities for improvement of engagement programmes that should be more meaningful and tailored to the specific needs of these communities. Most of the Roma workers work under zero hours contracts and Roma families are particularly vulnerable when it comes to the EU Settlement Scheme. They are at the risk of being deported with severe implications for the most vulnerable family members.

2.5 The next point raised was on language barrier and accessibility to English courses. Several issues have been identified:

- There is a whole spectrum of language barriers as different proficiency levels are required. English can be a barrier for those overqualified who cannot progress in their career due to lack of professional or academic language proficiency. Underemployment has been identified as a major challenge and a source of frustration and lack of trust amongst East Europeans, this reinforcing their perception of being seen as 'second class citizens'. There are many cases of degree or masters holders working in cleaning, hospitality, warehouse operating roles or delivery/driving services.
- ESOL courses are not always very efficient. Practical experience and voluntary work, for example, would be more efficient. Learners need exposure to day-to-day interactions and opportunities to practice by speaking with native speakers.
- Shift work and child care have been identified as barriers for accessing ESOL courses.
- In addition, those who work in environments dominated by their native language do not have any exposure to English speaking environments, they socialise in clustered communities and lack the opportunity to develop their English language skills through interaction with native speakers.
- English is a barrier for those who are not fluent in their native language as well.
- Another communication barrier is finding an interpreter for those who hold a certain nationality, but only speak a specific dialect. For example, Roma Romanian passport holders do not always speak Romanian, but they speak Romani, which is a distinct language.
- A risk of exploitation through volunteering has been identified where people have been made to work for free, without having any real benefit or exposure to a learning environment. There is a need to raise awareness on the rights of volunteers and a clear message should be put forward on what work exploitation means.
- Attendees suggested that organisations could lobby for businesses to train their staff and offer free English courses under the Corporate Social Responsibility.

2.6 The following issue raised was the lack of representation of East European communities in the public sector and on a political level. The attendees confirmed that they have only met very few East European Local Authority employees working in community engagement or development. There are also very few EU nationals working in key positions in the public sector. There are no EU local councillors to represent the East Europeans at a borough level. For example, over 30k (10% of the whole population) EU nationals live in the London Borough of Brent, but there is no EU elected councillor to represent them.

2.7 It has been acknowledged by attendees that there is a slightly growing rhetoric around the criminalisation of East European communities. A media campaign is needed to action immediately and lobby for a fair representation of facts and for cautioning the media outlets dispersing fake news or exacerbating the situations where Eastern Europeans have been involved.

Diplomatic missions should be made aware of such cases and ask for their involvement in order to protect those affected.

2.8 The lack of funding and limited resources are the main barriers for organisations to enhance their engagement and support programmes. Organisations are willing to join forces in order to have a stronger voice and more credibility, but also to access more generous funding in order to reach and empower more vulnerable East European communities.

2.9 A stronger engagement with the authorities is required. Community organisations and volunteers need to be seen as partners. Their resources complement the strategic work of the local councils and can help reach the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach communities.

2.10 Other communities will need to be included in the conversation as well, such as Serbian, Albanian, and Moldovan who are facing the same challenges due to often holding dual citizenship, one of which is of an EU member state. Geographically, these countries are part of the Central and East European region and their citizens living in the UK share the same concerns around barriers for social integration and lack of support networks.

3. Next steps:

3.1 The following immediate actions have been drawn:

- Identify a minimum of three trustees and register the East European Forum as a charitable organisation
- Establish a core working group of 3 to 5 experts in order to set the main short term and long term objectives of the forum, write the constitution and the relevant policies
- Establish a core technical working group to develop a website, logo, and overall image of the forum
- Identify funding available and start applying for grants for core costs and for project based work
- Establish a working group for organising five East European fairs in five different areas in London during the summer months in 2019

3.2 The forum aims to meet again in February 2019. Adina Maglan and Nishan Dzvingozyan will send the invites and will collect feedback for writing the agenda items.

3.3 Several attendees have expressed their consent for their contact details to be shared with the members/attendees. The list will not be part of this report for confidentiality reasons. However, those interested can contact the founders to request access to the list.

4. Summary

4.1 The first East European Forum meeting has been very successful and there is a desire for the forum to continue its work. The founders will continue promoting the forum as an opportunity for organisations and services working with and supporting the East European communities living in the UK to participate and contribute to the discussions.

4.2 Organisations are encouraged to provide feedback on the format, topics, actions, or any other relevant area of the forum. The forum is a platform for dialogue and it will not hold any responsibility for the statements of attendees or third party organisations' views. There is a zero tolerance approach to violence or harmful behaviours and the forum will function under the principles of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion as stated in the Equality Act 2010.

4.3 There are no financial implications at this stage.

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