

THE UNWANTED

Social and cultural determinants of  
homelessness and alcohol abuse  
among Eastern European migrants in London –  
research report

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#### **About CRONEM**

**CRONEM, Centre for Research on Nationalism, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism is a multidisciplinary research centre based at Roehampton University and University of Surrey. CRONEM undertakes in-depth, ethnographic studies of various migrant communities from Asia, Africa and Europe. It has carried out a number of research projects informing social policy debates in Britain and has a strong track record of engaging with various stakeholders and user groups. For more information visit our website: <http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/researchcentres/cronem/>**

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**Content:**

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1. Introduction – background of the study</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1.1. Numbers and scale</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2. Theoretical position and methods employed</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.1. Sample and fieldwork</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>3. Results and findings</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3.1. Background of respondents</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3.2. Eastern Europe – ambiguous drinking cultures</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.3. Being ‘outside the system’ - routes to homelessness</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>3.4. Structural factors and constraints</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>3.5. Anti-institutionalism as a response to structural constraints</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>3.6. Family, migration and solitude</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>3.7. Social bonding and (in)security</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>3.8. Alcohol, homelessness and masculinity</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>3.9. Alcohol and work</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>3.10. Alcohol and women</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>3.11. Economy of homelessness – power of the powerless</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>3.12. Quitting drinking</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>3.13. ‘Us and them’ reinforced – dilemma of engagement</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>3.14. Excluded further - ‘you’re not one of us’</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>3.15. What’s next? Reflections on the future</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>4. Conclusions</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>5. Recommendations</b>	<b>58</b>

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*Michal P. Garapich*

## **Executive summary**

This study looked at alcohol abuse and problem of homelessness among Eastern European migrants living in London exploring how both structural and individual factors determine their current situation. On the one hand they suffer from exclusionary policies of the British structure of welfare assistance; from the other they represent a population with low levels of economic capital, English proficiency, awareness of rights and high levels of destructive drinking habits and histories of personal relationships and family breakdown.

Structural exclusion reinforces Eastern European homeless migrants' perception of the world outside their immediate network as essentially alien and hostile. This perception is fuelled by traditionally embedded anti-institutionalism of Eastern European societies, especially Polish. Therefore, the homeless interviewed put an extra value on bonds between people in a similar position and form communities of their own constructed against the alien 'system' and vaguely defined 'them'. Both processes – the construction of the world outside as alien and the value of bonds between homeless men - entrench and reinforce the embedded problems these people suffer from – unemployment, alcohol abuse, homelessness, mental problems, ill health and poverty.

These bonds within the group of males are strengthened, reproduced and articulated by symbolic tools stemming from association between masculinity and alcohol consumption – a cultural feature typical of Eastern European drinking cultures. The public visibility of men drinking means that problems suffered by women from Eastern Europe will be more hidden and requiring different approaches to deal with.

The economic functionality of bonds between alcohol abusing homeless men is demonstrated in highly efficient strategies of acquiring the means to survive on the streets of London through scrap collection, begging, petty theft, finding things and general street-wise knowledge where to find food, shelter or how to deal with the law. This resourcefulness and ability to survive is treated by respondents with pride and is a source of their sense of self-esteem among people, who most often experience powerlessness and poverty.

The lack of clear access to public funds for most of the homeless means that it is much harder for them to access treatment resulting in further worsening of the problem. This, in turn, results in a reinforced unwillingness to engage and commit to treatment further entrenching their anti-institutional attitude. The ability to survive long term periods on the streets, supported by a sense of companionship and common fate between men, means that it is much easier for an Eastern European migrant to become a homeless person abusing alcohol – and survive years in this state - than it is to stop being one.

The above forms the basis for anticipating that London and more widely England will see a deepening and entrenching of these problems in the coming years. Despite various programs and initiatives the vast majority of those interviewed do not intend to go back to their countries of origin and any attempts by the British administration to remove them are likely to fail or become too costly for public purse. If nothing changes, there will be more, not less, Eastern European street drinkers and rough sleepers.

Service providers report a deep problem with the level of engagement and cooperativeness from Eastern European migrants. They are described as 'passive' and unwilling to help themselves and engage – which is understandable taking into account the points above. There is a clear indication that some culture awareness raising seminars need to be organised in order for the staff and general public to better understand the situation of homeless and alcohol abusing Eastern European migrants.

In terms of service delivery, the growth of homelessness along with the public cuts means that the brunt of the problem will fall on the shoulders of the voluntary sector, among others also the Methodist run Day Centers. There should be specific preparations undertaken in terms of seeking bi-lingual staff or volunteers who are crucial in breaking the 'us' and 'them' divide which at the moment hampers engagement.

Personal trauma and the support of friends are seen by those, who quit drinking, as crucial in their struggle against alcohol abuse. Eastern European AA Groups are probably the fastest growing social movement within that group in the UK. However, it is clear that treatment is organised along class lines and it is much easier for a wealthy

Eastern European to sign up for therapy than it is for a homeless and destitute migrant without recourse to public funds.

Accepting the existence of a problem and quitting drinking is also made difficult due to gender roles in Eastern European societies. While it is regarded as a weakness among men, for women it is regarded with strong shame and condemnation.

Eastern European migrants, especially Polish, who are homeless, are further excluded by their own ethnic groups, who try to distance themselves from 'problematic' members of their groups in order not to attract negative attention.

## 1. Introduction – background of the study

The expansion of the European Union in 2004 and 2007 resulted in one of the largest migration movements from the countries of the former communist bloc to Western Europe and it is widely acknowledged by scholars that the largest number of these migrants made Britain its country of destination (Okólski 2008; Drinkwater, Eade, Garapich 2009). According to the Home Office and the Department of Work and Pensions data over one million migrants came from the countries commonly known as A10<sup>1</sup> to work and live in Britain (AMR 2009, DWP 2010). There is general agreement that at the macroeconomic level these migrants helped the economy, filled skill gaps and assisted employers in finding suitable labour (Pollard 2008; Drinkwater, Eade, Garapich 2009; AMR 2009). There is, however, growing recognition of the pressure on social services that population movement had put on local areas, with local authorities sometimes struggling to meet demand in terms of schooling, housing, health, translations and general advice and assistance (see for example CRONEM reports on A10 migrants in several London Boroughs<sup>2</sup>).

One of the areas recognized as experiencing particular pressure is the sphere of assistance and social welfare provision for those who, for numerous reasons, found themselves destitute, homeless, in severe poverty, unemployed and suffering from various forms of exclusion and health problems. Although a vast majority of migrants from A10 states work and contribute to the economy and communities they chose to live in, a small minority has increasingly attracted attention from the social services, as well as the local and national media, for their reliance on social welfare and voluntary organisations providing assistance for those in need. CRONEM's previous research for instance in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, or London Borough of Lewisham has contributed to highlighting the issue of Eastern European (mainly Polish) migrants who, due to a lack of access to public funds, uncertainty of the labour market, mental health issues, lack of know-how in operating in market economy and lack of resources, found themselves on the street, rough

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<sup>1</sup> Ten countries that accessed the EU in 2004 and 2007 are: Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/researchcentres/cronem/>

sleeping, depending on voluntary organisations assistance and suffering from deteriorating health problems, substance addictions and, in some, cases death.

## **1.2. Numbers and scale**

Statistical data indicates that over the last six years there has been an obvious increase in the number of rough sleepers from Eastern Europe and those with problematic alcohol consumption and street drinking. Homeless Link – a national organisation for agencies working with people who are homeless -state in their report from 2010 that:

*In recent years, our members have reported an increase in demand on their services from Eastern European clients and other migrant groups, many of whom have limited or no access to welfare support and as a result find themselves homeless and without basic resources (Homeless Link 2010: 4).*

According to Homelesslink in 2006 the percentage of A10 nationals sleeping rough stood at 15%, whilst in 2008 this has jumped to 25%. At the local level, this study came across some Day Centres or agencies which state that around half of their client group comes from Eastern Europe and, in some cases, they comprised up to 80% of their clients.

The complex relationship between homelessness and alcohol abuse has long been documented and it isn't a coincidence that, in the overwhelming majority of studies reporting on the issue of destitution and homelessness of Accession States migrants published by organisations assisting homeless (Homeless Link, 2006; 2008; Morris, 2007) and academics (Garapich 2007, Mills et al, 2007 McNaughton 2009), the problem of substance abuse, mainly alcohol is a dominant factor. As the pressure group Alcohol Policy UK notes:

*...an increasing number of authorities are becoming aware of migrant workers from A8 countries who have not successfully found employment and are engaging in street population activities including street drinking, rough sleeping, begging and associated Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) and low level crime. These individuals, like existing street populations, are vulnerable to a range of threats*

*including ill health, exploitation, crime and often have histories of alcohol problems, homelessness or mental health issues*<sup>3</sup>.

The problem has also been recognized on a larger scale by health authorities with the authors of an article in the British Journal of General Practice noting that there are strong statistical indicators pointing to the fact that the health of Eastern European migrants in the UK will deteriorate due to their conditions of work and lifestyle habits. Particularly, the authors note that: '*A likely contributory factor in the Polish community is heavy alcohol intake which may be both a cause and consequence of depression*' (Lakasing, Mirza 2009).

These developments are not only important from the point of view of national health, employment or housing policy but are even more vital - in the time of public cuts – since they affect voluntary organisations, which are assisting those in need who do not have recourse to public funds. Therefore, the processes described above directly affect the numerous centres and services for homeless run by the Methodist Church as their clients are now increasingly from Eastern Europe. Understanding the complexity of the phenomena seems crucial, then, for good service delivery and assistance.

## **2. Theoretical approach and methods employed**

It is in this context that the idea of an in-depth anthropological research on homelessness and alcohol abuse/misuse among Eastern Europeans in London developed at the Centre for Research on Nationalism, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism at the Roehampton University. The intention was to provide a study from the perspective of social anthropology, which has a rich tradition of researching the roles and functions of alcohol consumption in different cultures and societies (SIRC 1998) and at the same time due to its methodology is able to engage in direct ethnography with – in our case - migrants who experience destitution. The value of this perspective stems from two factors:

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.alcoholpolicy.net/2007/08/the-barka-pilot.html>

First, there is a clear lack of deep, qualitative data about the cultural and social factors, which are behind the combined problems of homelessness and problem drinking among Eastern Europeans in Britain. Apart from some (mentioned in this report) studies identifying the problem and describing social policies dealing with the issue of homelessness and some reports based on anecdotal evidence, there are virtually no studies that systematically provide a culturally sensitive voice to people concerned, who are affected by the problem and offer an actor-oriented approach to the study of the problem taking into account cultural, social and economic context in which problem drinking – especially among the homeless - takes place.

An anthropological approach seeks to analyse and interpret individual actions and attitudes and how their beliefs, cultural meanings, symbols and social circumstances affect their behaviour – in this case drinking, rough sleeping and service use. It also gives careful consideration to the structural factors, which affect their social position – gender, class, situation on the labour market, family, migration and life trajectory. The actor-centred approach sees individual participants in society not as passive recipients of culture but active creators and manipulators of meanings. Following Clifford Geertz, the argument is that culture is not something found in an individual's head, but something manifested in public symbols, performance, speech, interaction and agency. The emphasis is on studying culture from the perspective of those actors that exist within that culture, who perform and give meanings to their actions according to their interests and norms. This means that one must view individuals as attempting to interpret situations in order to act (Geertz 1973).

The second factor stems from a position widely shared among anthropologists that alcohol consumption is a complex socio-cultural phenomenon, which involves deep symbolic meanings. Its non-problematic and problematic outcomes have to be analysed in a wider context, which takes into account cultural and structural factors. This is particularly important in a study, which looks at migrants who have moved from one cultural environment to another. Thus, in this study problematic alcohol use is not abstracted from other issues, such as unemployment, homelessness, gender issues or general lifestyle choices, but taken as a cluster of mutually interconnected issues that affect peoples' wellbeing, self-perception and problems with substance abuse.

This approach is linked to the second aim of this study, which is the analysis of the response of social services providers and treatment services, which cater for Eastern European migrants, who are experiencing problems related to alcohol abuse and homelessness. In tune with the assumption that as well as drinking, treatment is strongly influenced by cultural factors, this part of the inquiry aims to look at how British institutions, catering to people from Eastern Europe with substance abuse, cope with and relate to their new clients. Hence, this study examines not only patterns of problematic drinking often accompanied by homelessness but also the cultural aspects of quitting drinking and abstinence. In this way, this study looks at two sides of a problem – at people experiencing particular issues with alcohol abuse and its consequences and people whose job is to deal, help and understand these issues.

It is important to note here that the approach to alcohol consumption from a problem-oriented perspective (which dominates the literature on alcohol, see: SIRC 1998) has been often criticized by anthropologists for defining alcohol as an essential social evil behind various problems. This approach obscures the fact that mainstream patterns of drinking in human societies do not result in specific problems or anti-social outcomes. This study, however, while recognizing this fact has the clear applicable aim of facilitating an understanding of the cultural and social determinants behind the problematic drinking of Eastern European migrants in England and, ultimately, offering them a suitable set of services and treatment approaches. This study, in brief, should benefit the migrants themselves as well as those that work to help them. However, the approach taken in this study presupposes that in order to explain problematic-drinking the clinical and mental health studies paradigms aren't sufficient and a careful look at the social and cultural factors behind this issue is crucial.

The anthropological approach treats alcohol consumption as one of the fundamental cultural artifacts strongly intertwined with the history of human society. As David Mandelbaum notes in his seminal article on the relationship between alcohol and culture, from all substances ingested to achieve bodily sensations, *'alcohol is culturally the most important by far and there have been very few societies, if any, whose people knew the use of alcohol and yet paid little attention to it. Alcohol may*

*be tabooed; it is never ignored'* (1965: 281). Its consumption, then, can never be seen in isolation but as *part of a larger cultural configuration*. What's more, people's behaviour and outcomes while intoxicated cannot be solely explained in terms of the chemical and physiological properties of alcohol. As Mandelbaum explains, it is people's ideas about alcohol consumption that are just as important:

*... the behavioral consequences of drinking alcohol depend as much on a people's idea of what alcohol does to a person as they do on the physiological processes that takes place...When a man lifts a cup, it is not only the kind of drink that is in it, the amount he is likely to take and the circumstances under which he will do the drinking that are specified in advance for him, but also whether the contents of the cup will cheer or stupefy; whether they will induce affection or aggression, quiet or unalloyed pleasure. These and many other cultural definitions attach to the drink even before it reaches his lips* (1965: 282).

As numerous studies have shown, cultural meanings attached to drinking patterns are acquired during the process of socialization and acculturation:

*Over the course of socialization, people learn about drunkenness what their society 'knows' about drunkenness; and, accepting and acting upon the understandings thus imparted to them, they become the living confirmation of their society's teachings* (McAndrew, Edgerton 1969)

This means that, from an anthropological perspective, drunkenness and problematic behavior and alcoholism need not be abstracted from general patterns of drinking. In fact, these two are closely related because social actors in the course of the process of socialization learn what is morally and socially acceptable while drinking and what is not. Some anthropologists even argue that drunkenness and pathological drinking shouldn't be considered as a symptom of either personal deprivation or defective social organization. Edwin Lemert, for example, argues that *'there is an alternative way of viewing drunkenness, which is to say as an institutionalized pattern operating in a relatively autonomous way and only tenuously related to other aspects of culture'*. From this perspective problem-drinking ceases to be an abnormality, but becomes an integral, albeit extreme, manifestation of more general tensions, ambiguities and problems within a given society.

This is why in this study alcohol abuse is being treated in conjunction with other related problems, such as homelessness, unemployment or general insecurity associated with migration, as well as general patterns of modern life in the city and in a turbo-capitalist market economy. The position taken through this study is that it is a superficial and methodologically biased way to approach alcohol related problems in isolation from cultural, social and economic factors.

## **2.1. Sample and fieldwork**

This approach to the study of alcohol and homelessness imposes a specific methodology, since the central attention is given to the social actors engaged in alcohol problematic-consumption and their world-views, perceptions, attitudes, forms of behavior and group formation processes, especially among those with highly unsecure accommodation arrangements. For this study a life story interview method and direct participant observation has been chosen as the best strategy, because it would generate crucial data on the early socialization of individuals, alcohol initiation moments and culturally specific meanings attached to migration, living on the streets of London, survival strategies and perceptions of the social world around them. It would also provide direct access to group formation dynamics among the homeless and the role of alcohol in these situations, especially those that are engaged in street drinking and rough sleeping.

The interviewees were selected from two categories of people I spent a considerable time with. The first consisted of Day Centre users, often homeless, or in some cases shelters or squat dwellers that all had more or less serious issues with alcohol consumption and associated problem drinking. In total 35 people from that group were interviewed. Fieldwork was carried out in thirteen Day Centres/service providers/organisations across London or places where Soup Kitchens were provided. Specifically for this study in order to facilitate entry into the group and gain trust, I spent approximately one day per week for seven months in one of the Methodist- run Day Centres acting as a translator and mentor to some of the Centre's clients.

From those 35 individuals interviewed, 27 were Polish three were Slovak and five Lithuanian. In addition, informal, less structured conversations and talks were conducted with around 20 individuals, who were approached while drinking in public spaces, such as parks, high streets or front of churches. These drinking meetings were a separate fieldwork experience more akin to spontaneous focus group discussion than interviews; they have brought, however, crucial data related to the dynamics within a group of problem-drinkers.

The second group consisted of members of a Polish-speaking AA group, which meets on a weekly basis in the Polish Church in Ealing and another group meeting in Shepherds Bush. Six people from these groups were interviewed. Fieldwork consisted of participating in nine AA meetings, 2 hours each where notes were taken (with consent of the participants). This proved to be very valuable sources of data corresponding with individual interviews as well as providing insights into dynamics within a group of people who quit drinking alcohol. What was interesting is that these meetings were also often frequented by people with experiences of rough sleeping – be it in England or in their countries of origin – further demonstrating that homelessness and alcohol intake are strongly related.

In addition, ten interviews were carried out with people directly involved in service provision and work with Eastern European migrants in various agencies across London. These were individuals who anonymously talked at length about the difficulties, challenges and their perceptions of their Eastern European clients.

This combination of sources – in-depth interviews, , observation of open-air drinking session among street drinkers, following homeless daily routine, casual conversations with Day Centres users, interviews with staff and Polish AA meetings – offer a three dimensional and rich source of data on social and cultural factors behind problematic alcohol consumption and associated problems with homelessness. What's novel, it offers an actor-centred perspective on how people, who experience destitution, homelessness and addiction, articulate and conceptualize their situation, how they contest and resist dominant structures of power, form social relationships and survive in a global city during recession. In brief, these multidimensional sources give an insight on how Eastern European migrants experiencing particular problem view life and society in Britain.

In more detail, fieldwork aimed at generating data on following issues:

- What are the routes to homelessness and destitution for Eastern European migrants
- How structural constraints (labour market, economy, welfare state) affect their homelessness and problem drinking?
- What role alcohol consumption plays in the life of marginalized migrants from Eastern Europe (homelessness, poverty etc)?
- What notions, concepts and symbols people use while conceptualizing their relationship with alcohol?
- What notions, concepts and symbols people use while conceptualizing their situation as homeless?
- What does their social and family background says about the role of alcohol?
- Why and in what circumstances people stop or reduce their drinking patterns?
- Why and in what circumstances people move off the streets?
- What is their attitude towards the system of help offered by voluntary sector and the British state?
- How the members of staff at the centres view Eastern Europeans?

### **3. Results and findings**

#### **3.1. Background of respondents**

The majority of respondents were Polish and male; with three women interviewees from the AA group and one woman from Lithuania approached in one of the Day Centres. Most of the respondents were from working class or rural backgrounds born in small to medium towns and had poor command of English. They were mainly in their late 30s or 40s with several individuals in their 50s or in two cases in late 20s. Majority of were at some point employed in their country of origins as well as they had a rich history of previous migrations to other European countries, in few cases these were people leading almost nomadic lifestyles, moving from one country to another since number of years, even decades.

Homelessness involve various forms of highly unsecure accommodation and Eastern Europeans interviewed demonstrate that fluidity – they have been either rough sleeping, living in a temporary shelter provided by various religious institutions in London, living in squats, garages, parking lots, sleeping in night buses or in tents around capital's many parks. A small minority which had access to social welfare were staying in shelters. Their migration history is quite uniform and confirms findings of previous surveys on homeless and destitute Eastern European migrants (Homeless Link 2006, 2008, 2010). Most have been the victims of high unemployment in their countries of origin, were unsuccessful businessmen unable to pay of their debts, workers of large state owned industries made redundant or long-term unemployed. In a few cases they were people with a considerable amount of time spend in the criminal justice system or people sought by the law in their countries of origins.

Crucially, most of them have been working in the UK for some time after arrival and their decline into poverty and destitution had a similar trajectory – they had been either laid off suddenly without compensation, lost jobs in the construction industry where they were paid sash in hand on daily basis, were thrown out by their landlords or had been victims of unscrupulous employers and gangmasters extorting money and documents from vulnerable people. This employment history may have been formally documented or in the grey economy, but overwhelmingly these people were

economically active immediately after arrival into the UK. In some cases they even remain economically active while being homeless.

Previous studies on street drinking report that among the homeless population of migrants from Accession States, two types of individuals can be distinguished (Fitzpatrick, Qullgars, Pleace 2009: 81). The first came with pre-existing conditions, with a troubled history of institutional confinement, prison, unemployment, homelessness and substance abuse. The second was composed of people, who have descended into poverty and subsequent substance abuse after migrating to Britain due to bad luck, economic downturn or personal circumstances. This division seems slightly simplistic as it will be noted later, all individuals participating in this study were active drinkers prior to migration also most have experienced some levels of poverty and destitution back home (but rarely rough sleeping). In some cases their drinking patterns in London deteriorated into more problematic drinking but this is more due to culturally determined stress-coping strategies and the need to establish meaningful networks of friendship and support between men, than only their migration history. Of course, new circumstances, new challenges, unfamiliar environment should be regarded as additional stress factors, but as I argue, the pattern of drinking employed to reduce these is strongly influenced by cultural factors. In any case it seems artificial to divide this group into those, who 'brought' the problem with themselves and those who were only victims, since this assumes that the latter have a weaker right to seek help, because they were experiencing problem before coming to Britain. In general, the societies of origin of these migrants are societies where rural and urban working class mark their rituals, celebrations, transitions from work to play, meetings and intimacy by consuming alcohol – sometimes in large quantities. However, respondents were more inclined to stress that it is in England that they began to drink much more heavily – a declaration that needs to be treated with care, but as we can see may reflect certain social dynamic that occurs within that group.

It would be difficult here to list the level of alcohol addiction among the respondents who were interviewed. Overall, everyone was at some point a frequent drinker with a long history of alcohol consumption; most have started drinking in their teens and majority come from households with an alcoholic father. Apart from AA group

members and five respondents, who went through some treatment and were not drinking at the time of the interview, all respondents were still engaged in heavy drinking at the time of the study. Several individuals were self-admitted alcoholics and in three cases – during this study - they were admitted into hospitals after being found unconscious on the street suffering an alcoholic fit. At least four respondents were engaged in heavy drinking of antiseptic liquid stolen from hospitals, which obviously presents a serious health hazard.

### **3.2. Eastern Europe – ambiguous drinking cultures**

Anthropologists generally distinguish between societies with overall positive beliefs and expectancies about alcohol (variously defined as non-Temperance, 'wet' or 'integrated' drinking cultures) and those whose beliefs are more negative, inconsistent and ambivalent (defined as 'ambivalent', 'Nordic' drinking cultures). It is not the task of this report to detail each country's social history of alcohol but a few points need to be made. Historically, in Eastern Europe, as in the case of Poland, Slovakia or Russia, drinking has been strongly associated with its rural cultural roots where serfs and peasants engaged in frequent and excessive drinking bouts and drinking was predominantly a male activity, marking transition into adulthood (Zielinski, Moskalewicz 1995: 220).

Drinking had also a distinct political aspect since dependency on alcohol of large section of population was seen in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century by the socialist and temperance movements as the way in which the oppressed classes or nations were controlled by the dominant classes and/or foreign occupiers. The long history of the state's monopoly over spirit production – both in pre-socialist and socialist states – meant that there exists a strong tension between individuals and communities' patterns of culturally acceptable drinking behaviour and the attempts by states and elites to control it. Socialist states have often elevated the drinking of its population into a national problem with massive campaigns and educational programmes to reduce consumption and associated problems – usually with little visible success. The widespread existence of black market economy in alcohol in these countries (production, smuggling and sale) meant that alcohol consumption in itself has been

elevated to a political act and seen as an aspect of citizens' freedom from state control.

Since the collapse of the communist system there has been a general trend for alcohol consumption per capita to increase in Eastern Europe. Undergoing massive cultural and social change, these societies, also note a shift in patterns of drinking. At the same time alcohol and types of drinks remain deeply associated with national and ethnic identity and the stereotypical perception of Poles or Russian style of drinking reinforces senses of identity as well as type of drinking behaviour.

These stereotypes remain powerful and they have often been voiced by respondents for this study who agreed that Poles, Slovaks or generally Eastern Europeans, drink differently from British and that their drinking behaviour is much more aggressive, public, loud, excessive and linked with demonstrations of ones' masculinity – all features that have been noted by scholars. This perception was also widely shared by the service providers, who regarded the style and way of drinking by Eastern Europeans as somehow 'different' and much more intense and destructive. As these staff members of two different Day Centres note:

*[alcohol drinking among Eastern Europeans] is definitely a problem; it is also very noticeable, because it is quite heavy drinking all the time; we do get clients with alcohol problems but I'd say the Eastern European clients drink much more heavily; [SP\_1]*

*Poles are worse in this respect; much worse; Romanians don't drink like this... Poles do... [SP\_4]*

Sometimes, this recognition of a different, more heavy and visible drinking behaviour was explained in cultural terms, as 'this is how they are', hence giving them an aura of legitimacy and acceptance. On the other hand Eastern European respondents themselves almost took pride in the fact that their distinctiveness is being recognized. This on the other hand relates strongly to the perception of manhood, role of a male as a worker and community bonds – issues which will be explained more in-depth in later chapters of this report.

### 3.3. Being 'outside the system' - routes to homelessness

#### 3.3.1. Structural factors and constraints

In order to see the accounts of participants in this study in wider socio-economic context it is advisable to offer a general picture of most often encountered paths that lead Eastern European migrants in this study to the current state of destitution with combined problems of alcohol abuse and homelessness.

One of main structural factors stems from the uncertainty of the modern capitalist labour market and fluidity of employment in sectors of industries most of Eastern European migrants are employed in. As all studies show, these are most often low paid, manual, seasonal jobs in construction, agriculture, catering or cleaning. These jobs, by definition, are marked by high uncertainty, temporality and fluidity. Dishonest employers, gangmasters, unscrupulous agencies, uncertainty of the labour market feature in almost all accounts. A typical story would be that of M:

*I worked for an English construction firm, but they began to lay off people and I was the first, I was at the bottom of the pay... I worked there six months but was sending all money back home; then the job stopped and I was looking but nothing was around, I didn't have any savings so got kicked out of the flat... and you know, you meet others in this situation, have a drink and it rolls over... [A2]*

The uncertain situation of these migrants is further worsened by the fact that most of interviewees worked in the grey economy and, therefore, do not have recourse to public funds. Some of the interviewees I talked to lived in the UK for six to ten years but still do not have a National Insurance number; and are therefore invisible to the system of welfare assistance. This, in turn, means that they cannot access basic benefits for jobseekers, get a shelter, cannot access prolonged alcohol treatment or any of social benefits available to those who have a documented history of tax payments. As noted in previous studies (Garapich 2007, Homeless Link 2008), this situation of being structurally excluded from welfare is one of the major factors behind the state of destitution and homelessness among A10 migrants. As the report from the Audit Commission states:

*The few [migrant workers] who fail to find accommodation or work, or are made redundant, or become victims of domestic violence and leave their homes, may not be entitled to Housing Benefit. Because hostels often depend on this, they may not be able to accept such people [and these] individuals can drift into squatting, rough sleeping and street drinking. (Audit Commission, 2007: 24).*

Unlike the indigenous population or migrants from older EU states, these migrants cannot apply for benefits or can do so under strict conditions which people working in grey economy cannot fulfill. Furthermore, given the fact of their frequent substance misuse problems, they cannot access rehabilitation programmes for alcohol addiction. In some cases they do use the detox services but without prolonged aftercare services and rehabilitation which may actually worsen the problem of an alcoholic through giving the abuser a false sense of security and recovery.

Another crucial factor of structural constraints, which drive people into their current state of destitution, refers to housing shortages and the generally recognized fact that London always has had a sizeable homeless population due to its high rental prices and shortage of social housing (Fitzpatrick 2000). Nevertheless, it seems that it is being excluded from welfare that is the main factor determining their current situation. Another consequence of their 'out of the system' status is that they are highly vulnerable to numerous scams, frauds and violence from criminals specializing in preying on the vulnerable, mainly for identity theft. In their dramatic accounts, the world they occupy is full of potential enemies, who take advantage of their not 'existing' in the normal world of institutionalized presence. Several respondents have been the victims of crimes involving theft of identity; for instance:

*You know, I worked for this guy and he was all right, he was from the town I come from... he was saying that he needs my passport to register something and then; some months later, I found out that my bank account is overdrawn by 10 gran; he was using my account to buy stuff... [S1]*

*S.; came from Birmingham to the West London Day Centre with three other Lithuanians; he told a story of a slave farm controlled by Irish-Gypsies who were*

*confiscating peoples' passports in order to open bank accounts or claim benefits. When he refused to hand over his; he was beaten up; robbed and left by the side of the road [notes\_Jan.2010]*

*You hear it all the time; someone is being offered a job, goes to the bank with the guy to open a bank account on this guy's address, then this guys disappears and next you find out that you own the bank thousands of pounds... [D1]*

*I was picked up by this gang of Polish gypsies and they opened my bank account here, promised work; and then they just kicked me out; later I learned that they get Child Benefits on my name, when I don't have any children! [M5]*

Almost all respondents eagerly engaged in describing similar stories with frequent cases of violence, theft, intimidation, modern day slavery, beatings, even killing. I took part in some meetings between the clients of Day Centres and various bank officials in order to clarify their paperwork and undo the various scams done under their name (the most frequent being applying for Child Benefit or credit cards) and bank officials confirmed that 'we get that very often'.

### **3.3.2. 'It's a jungle out there' – anti-institutionalism as a response to structural constraints**

The scale of the problem aside, the fact that these stories circulate among migrants indicates not only that they are being preyed upon and remain highly vulnerable, but also that these narratives intensify migrants' view of the outside world as fearsome, untrustworthy and to be treated a priori with sense of suspicion. At the same time the outside world it being generalized to the extent that everything – expect their immediate network was treated with is treated with suspicion. It was striking during interviews and casual conversations that migrants basically regarded anything that had to do with formality, administration, tax, institutions with strong suspicion and a sense of hostility and helplessness. In the words of one:

*...it is so complicated, really all that stuff is overwhelming, I don't trust it... Poles are on the streets because they do not know how to function in all this; they don't know the law, the system. It is easier to drink than to ask... [A2 ]*

*It is a jungle out there... it's dangerous... you need to stick together... [S3]*

In terms of the level of awareness about social and welfare rights the picture is mixed – some homeless interviewed, due to a complete lack of English skills, were unaware of their rights, where to seek help, how to refer themselves to various agencies and so on. They were often relative newcomers, who relied heavily on others for information and assistance. On the other hand, there is a group of respondents, who seem very well aware of their rights, who possess a good street level knowledge of where to find food, shelter, clothes, charities, where it is best to beg, find lost property, where to find free food or alcohol, how to organize and defend legally a squat dwelling and how to behave towards the police etc. These individuals are crucial for maintaining the existence of a particular network of homeless and their knowledge is sought in case of problems. Nevertheless, it is obvious that even these street-wise individuals find the system of support and how help is organised complex and unfriendly. Their concerns, shared with me, show that they seem to be constantly confused over issues related to tax, housing, benefits and institutions. During sessions with various institutions where I took part as a translator it was clear that those who were boasting about their ability to survive on the streets, a minute later seemed to be totally lost and were deeply afraid that they may get something wrong or misunderstand what the service provider is trying to tell them. This issue will be explored more in-depth in the section on the economics of homelessness and psychological value of survival stories.

In general, the homeless that took part in this study understand the structural constraints on accessing the welfare state and they often discuss them among themselves and with the staff of agencies. These discussions are marked by deep sense of injustice and unfairness, entrenching their perception that 'they aren't wanted' and essentially, the authorities would like to get rid of them. In consequence, the welfare state and social assistance in their view becomes a part of the one 'system', which discriminates against them and keeps them in their state of

destitution and poverty. Despite the dedication of workers in Day Centres, they too became part of the alien world the homeless have to struggle against,

It is, then, not surprising that most of the respondents' world view is dominated by sense of mistrust, angst, fear and sense of being overwhelmed by forces they cannot control. 'The system', the economy, the authorities, thieves, scams, 'gypsies', police, market forces and so on form a highly hostile mix about which one needs to be aware. On the other hand deficiencies on their own side – their lack of English, suitable social networks of support and rights awareness - add to that general sense of alienation from the 'normal' world and throughout the interviews and conversations with migrants this sense of helplessness is striking. In some cases this feeling is given clear political articulation, as in the words of this migrant from Poland, who after years of working as a carpenter decided to stop working and live on the streets of London:

*A human being doesn't count these days; Poles and others that sleep on the street and drink aren't just lazy – it is simply helplessness, no resources, no help....The system is sick. Politicians and bankers just lie and fuck us – why then we should play this game? [R1]*

The view of the system as essentially alien, hostile and inhuman is certainly reinforced and supported by the strong anti-state and anti-institution traditions of Eastern European societies (Sztompka 2000). However, it seems that this mistrust gains particular justification due to these people's exclusion from the welfare state – as migrants - and society in general – as homeless. In other words the structures of exclusion provoke and reproduce a tested cultural response of withdrawal and unwillingness to engage and change their situation and seek security and comfort in other domains, mainly private, small group relationships. Thus we have two reinforcing cultural and social dynamics which entrench people in their anti-institutional hostility against 'the system' – viewing the state and market economy as an alien and inhuman force and the sense of being a victim of the economic forces of British capitalism, which are beyond ones' control.

In this context living rough, along with drinking, is often regarded as an anti-systemic act, an act of resistance against the dominant forces of the modern world. Alcohol consumption, as the antithesis of productive work in a mechanistic society, becomes a statement - a culturally significant act of defiance. Roch Sulima, a Polish anthropologist studying the everyday aspects of alcohol consumption, calls this the thrill of “stolen time” (Sulima 2000) - a perception by workers in state-owned industries that they manage to steal the time of employer and enter – via alcohol intoxication – into a different dimension of reality and time, thus resisting and contesting the dominant social and economic constraints and power relations. Homeless migrants with whom this research was conducted, also often articulate a view that homelessness and their survival in London was a question of individual choice and quest for freedom.

This isn't to argue that the homeless 'choose' their lifestyles and romanticize their plight as an anti-conformist act, something that researchers on homelessness rightly warn against (Fitzpatrick 2000, Oliwa-Ciesielska 2006). It is simply an anthropological explanation about how people defend, explain and make sense of the structural constraints and barriers they face. Having to deal and contain forces beyond ones' control – economy, legal framework, system of help provision, unfamiliar/foreign contexts, state policies – individuals with little cultural capital and limited resources need to retain some degree of self-autonomy and agency in order to keep some basic levels of self-esteem. By playing on culturally significant narratives from the socialist era, these strategies also makes their chaotic lifestyles meaningful and understandable within a group of Eastern Europeans who share similar biographies and socio-economic backgrounds.

In brief, explaining the world as essentially alien is a self-defense mechanism that helps people in group to feel that they still have some control over their lives. Engaging in some activities that are 'theirs' – like group drinking, squat finding, scrap collecting - and surviving the rough sleeping on the streets of London – and being proud about it - is another part of that strategy. This isn't easy as often people that took part in this study were suffering from poor health, chronic alcohol-related illnesses, depression, bruises from fights and often hunger. However, the argument made here is that how people explain and rationalise their life and situation has to be

regarded as a response, contestation and negotiation of the structural barriers migrants face. Again, this anthropological interpretive explanation ought not to be seen as arguing that the people, who are homeless and engage in street drinking, have deliberately chosen this as their lifestyle. It is simply to demonstrate how people try to make sense of what is happening to them and why and how the powerless try to regain some power over their destinies.

### **3.3.3. Family, migration and solitude**

In the literature on homelessness and alcohol problems personal issues, family breakdown and traumatic experience are cited along structural triggers for people ending up on the street (Fitzpatrick, Kemp, Klinker 2000). It was clear from the sample that for almost every respondent – who wanted to share his/her personal story – family breakdown, divorce, broken relationships were important, if not crucial factors behind their destructive drinking habits and homelessness. It could have been the initial trigger or a continuous reason behind their current plight.

The features of migration from Eastern Europe can partially explain these, as often migration was initiated by males, who were joined later by their partners, or males working on a seasonal, short term basis and living in over-crowded, accommodation predominantly occupied by males. This pattern has strong historical continuity, since this was the main pattern of seasonal rural-urban migration during communist period (Okólski 2001) and even pre-war international migrations (Morawska 1985). In general, it resulted in weakening the nuclear family ties but strengthening ties among single men, ties strongly lubricated by alcohol. The social outcomes of this migration pattern are captured by this comment from a respondent:

*So they live in groups in these houses, drink every evening; sober up once a week to talk with the family over the phone or skype; to convince them that everything is under control. And this lie carries on...[K1]*

There is no single pattern of family relationship breakdown – some respondents left their families, others still maintain the fiction of earning and living well in the UK, others broke all ties, others still have families in the UK but are not in touch. Overall, however, it can be argued that in the sample studied both migration and alcohol

consumption contributed strongly to the process of family breakdown and subsequent further alcohol abuse and homelessness. Their life stories are often punctuated with continued conflicts with spouses, children, parents – with alcohol almost always as the background. As this man recalls:

*I got on the streets here in London for the same reason; my second wife is a good woman but she just works too much; she works; we saw each other only during weekends. We also drank during that time... I mean drank quite a bit, a bottle or two of wine and whisky; all weekends were the same... life with her was difficult she is a wealthy and ambitious woman and thinks about her status a lot, about money. We argued a lot when drank and one day I just left. [A2]*

This combination of migration, family breakdown and resulting solitude is crucial for understanding further narratives and stories presented in this study. Most notably it helps to explain why people form strong – although short lived – groups of men that support each other.

As many previous studies show both structural and individual factors need to be taken into account to explain why certain individuals end up on the street and engage in street drinking. This combination of structural and individual factors behind people's descent into destitution is reflected in some accounts of the interviewees. Eastern European migrants we spoke to were eager to stress that both aspects – lack of work, stability, house and no sense of security, lack of friendships and broken family relationships - are behind their drinking habits. This attitude is typified in these accounts:

*I drink because I'm depressed; I'm so sad. I can't see my son, my grandson, don't have a job, can't send them money....[N1]*

*You drink here to survive the weather, the loneliness, the stress and all that. I need to be strong but at the same time it is difficult; drink supposed to be something that relaxes you, but how can you relax if you don't know where you are going to sleep and if your plans [bringing his family over] will work out. [M1]*

*I drink not to think; I drank on the streets to forget that I live rough; in the house now [shelter] to forget that I am all alone there [A2]*

*I drink to kill time, to be with mates, to forget that I'm in this bloody town, that I don't have a job, family, house... [P3]*

### **3.4. Social bonding and (in)security**

In the complex world of the urban jungle, capitalist market and exclusionary welfare provisions, where anyone can be a thief or a threat and the system is dehumanised, and essentially hostile; and taking into account the omnipresent experience of family breakdown shared by many respondents, the value of honest, simple, personal, face-to-face based, egalitarian and trustworthy human relationships increases. I argue that this sense of fear and uncertainty towards the complex and sometimes incomprehensible world of the capitalist labour market and the global city on one side and family breakdown on the other, pushes migrants to seek simpler, tested, known means of finding trust, friendship and companionship. And it is no surprise that they find it in drinking group sessions between men. In the process of a positive feedback once they do find companionship – however brief it may be – the isolation from the system increases. This functional relationship between group formations, subsequent homelessness and isolation from the institution is what makes that group particularly prone to alcohol abuse from one side and hard to engage with the administrative system of help – however little is there for them - from the other.

One of the primary functions of alcohol intake noted by anthropologists is its role as a social bonding mechanism and symbolic marker of intimacy (SIRC 1998). People meet, talk, establish the term of their relationships and their affinity, similarity and emotional bond is symbolized and affirmed through collectively consumed alcohol. Among the Day Centres and homeless service users interviewed the dominant pattern of drinking is social, communal where typically a group of three to ten people meet in a park, in back alley or parking lot and consume, mainly most affordable drink – cider, or when funds permit, vodka, rarely with food. In most cases the alcohol is drunk from one cup or directly from the bottle – increasing the symbolic closeness of drinking session participants. Alcohol consumption, as a way of creating

bonds between people, becomes paramount in the light of the fact that almost all people interviewed live apart from their families, wives and children. As noted, almost all interviewees have a history of separation through migration and their urge to seek companionship in drink can be interpreted as a desire to rebuild broken sense of belonging and community – in brief, coping with solitude and lack of close friendship.

Groups of street drinkers observed and interviewed demonstrate a fascinating case of friendships and relationships formed out of common fate and situation. During meetings with members of drinking groups a constant topic of conversations was the fate of mutual friends and drinking companions: where they are at the moment, how are they, where they drink, if they have a job, where they sleep, whether they have been recently arrested or hospitalized, what are their plans. It is not only the information that seems to be of social importance, but it is the very fact of exchange of gossip and news that creates a perception of common fate - hence their dominant presence in conversations. So it is not so much the content of the news, but the fact that they are shared that is culturally significant; they *build* a sense of group and shared experience. These bonds making mechanism are worth emphasizing and it is safe to say, that these groups form closely knit communities. The closeness is also borne out of mutual interests and collective actions undertaken – in most cases when the group resources are pooled, information shared, plans coordinated. This sense of community is strengthened by a sense of equally sharing the same position as homeless, destitute people who are somewhat “outside” of the normal world, “outside” the hostile system that rejected them.

*Yes, we are a group here; look all friends here we drink from one cup, we talk and drink because we are all equal, all the same; somewhat separate from the world out there... [D1]*

*You need to stick together; it doesn't always work but to survive here you need to stick...[W1]*

Crucially this is the fact that service providers often recognize; a perception that these people form tight groups, which support themselves and can be quite

resourceful additionally strengthen group bonds. This service provider for example notes:

*The Poles stick together and they form little communities, very cohesive; they always together, in two, fives, sixes...this gives them support, but it isn't the right kind of support. It is destructive support... everybody share the same misery, they know they have a common problem; they haven't got any money, they haven't got a job so they stick together and look out for each other. So if they're begging, if they're stealing one party will look out and cover. [SP4]*

On the other side in a similar manner, non-drinking lifestyle can connect people and the role of the AA movements among migrants, especially Polish, is highly indicative. From only a few in 2004, there are today around 20 regular AA weekly meetings in London and according to one inter-group member, there is a huge demand from the Polish community. Besides the therapeutic function, an obvious issue behind this is the need of migrants to establish meaningful friendships and communities in new settings. As this member of AA states:

*Yes, my AA friendships are deeper and stable; other are rather superficial; AA friends simply understand what you have been through... [R4]*

This respondent, as many others in that group, had been a member of AA prior to migration. Hence it is safe to say that, with the influx of migrants to London, they have also imported their coping strategies with particular problems. At the same time, it is clear that one of the attractiveness of AA groups is the availability of friendship networks – replacing those left behind in the country of origin.

Although interviewees were keen to stress how drink brings people together, we mustn't romanticize this aspect of drinking, because the very same respondents were equally keen to highlight the ambiguity and short life span of these bonds. Furthermore, they often held contradictory views about the value of these drinking groupings and subsequently established social bonds as one interviewee notes:

*Vodka connects and divides people at the same time. It makes them come together to break that bond later... [P1]*

*Alcohol has this double use – it unites and divides at the same time; it forms friendships but these are intensive and they last only until alcohol is there; once it is gone it is a problem. Here you have people who are a team, who hang around together, who like each other and support each other, who are worried about each other and all that – but when the booze is finished it end with aggression – it is: “you pig!”. [R3]*

In fact, besides the obvious emotional value for people experiencing brief togetherness in a drinking session, interviewees often recalled instances of breaking the rules of street drinking companionship. Most common is a story of someone who has passed out intoxicated and was left alone on the street, pavement of park bench. This was often regarded as breaking a rule of solidarity as the person who passed out may be robbed, may have an epileptic fit or – in cold weather – freeze to death.

*Sometimes when we drink, there are people you don't know or know vaguely but you drink with them, so they are somewhat part of a group; and then when one guy falls, there must be someone who takes care of him, you can't leave him there even if you don't know him... [D3]*

Respondents thus have a deep emotionally charged ambiguous attitude towards alcohol – from one side it is a social bonding mechanism, one that sets apart the group from the hostile, impenetrable world of the ‘system’; one that creates a brief egalitarian group of men sharing the same fate. On the other hand the basis of that bond is viewed as temporary, weak and untrustworthy. Respondents thus see alcohol as both functional and dysfunctional, as both evil and good. That ambiguity runs throughout peoples’ narratives about alcohol and is also reflected in individuals’ attitude towards recovery and non-drinking.

The alcohol bond forged in communal drinking is most often broken through violence or theft and interviewees often question the sense of community among homeless by recalling numerous cases of violence, fights and conflicts. Violent behaviour is

regarded as a frequent outcome of drunkenness and condemned but at the same time it is regarded as “normal”, something that is embedded in national, Eastern European, “Slavic” character. As one interviewee notes:

*Oh yeah, yeah this is a very Polish thing; these guys just go nuts after drinking... the English they drink but remain calm; but Polish people just lose it... I think this is just frustration and depression, people are scared are afraid of the unknown big city, all these people around; they are just helpless. They can't find themselves in the system so they drink. Because deep there, they know that they will not make it, that they are the scum of this world, that no one will look at them, no one will give them a job because they don't know the language, stink of booze, are too old, come from Eastern Europe. So drinking is the only option when you are so helpless. And aggression hides your weakness. I am not violent and was often the guy who separated fighting parties. It always struck me that they [Poles] are so aggressive. Other guys with us [a group of homeless people], Slovaks, Lithuanian and Italian weren't so violent but they [Poles] were. They just go nuts – steal, fight, abuse and all that. [A2]*

Breaking the rules of companionship among homeless and strong condemnation in peoples' narratives shows that migrants have clear moral expectations of certain obligations towards others during group drinking session. At the very same time, they recognize that alcohol consumption results often in breaking these rules. These ambiguities result from contradictory expectations people have from alcohol. On the one hand it is expected to bond people together and create intimacy, on the other hand there is a widely shared popular belief that drink reveals 'one's true self', that one can relieve its stresses and sorrows after a drink. This leads to conflicts and often violence, as men find themselves competing or arguing over dominance in a group, resources, over smallest things.

Violence in fact, seems to be frequent, as numerous reports and police data reveal. For example, in the Borough of Haringey three murders (from 25 last year) occurred between Polish men in a drunken feud (interview with local street worker). All service providers acknowledge that violence and fights among Eastern European is frequent and something that distinguishes them from other groups:

*When they drink they fight, but mainly among themselves; they drink and fight and they stay among themselves; in a way it is an isolated community it doesn't spill out*  
[SP4]

Violence then is a direct result of the strength of bonds forged between these men – paradoxically, they form strong friendships but when they fall out it is often violent. It is safe to say, that majority of interviewees expect alcohol consumption to have violent outcomes and this is one of main cultural expectations from alcohol intake among homeless, and also other respondents. But, as it relates to the gender aspect of drinking, we must turn now at one of the most important aspect of the study, the association of drinking with gender roles and masculinity.

### **3.5. Alcohol and masculinity**

One of the most important cultural aspects of drinking is its direct association with manhood and socially constructed role man plays in societies migrants come from. In case of Poland, it has been noted by previous studies that alcohol initiation is a purely manly affair and especially in rural areas it is one of the most powerful symbolic ways a man asserts its role in society (Zielinski 1995: 230). It is clearly linked with the public display of drinking and its social acceptance - a drunken man on the streets provokes radically different reactions than a drunken woman, as Zielinski notes: *Drunkenness on the part of a woman is not acceptable, and a woman who drinks alone in public may be regarded a prostitute.*

Since groups in this study were formed almost uniquely of men in their 30s to 50s it is crucial to look at this aspect in more detail as it offers important insights and interpretations of behavior of Eastern European homeless. As noted respondents attitude towards drinking linked strongly to their need of creating social bonds, but these were mainly bonds between men. The way they talked about drinking had a distinct flavour of masculine pride in the amount drank, the type of drink they ingested and colourfully described behaviour they exhibited while intoxicated. Whenever drink was mentioned, it was usually as something men simply had to do, otherwise they would be regarded as socially inadequate and not complete. It is

crucial to note here that a frequent account of alcohol initiation mentioned in the interviews was the role of the army as the place where 'man were made' and large, prolonged alcohol consumption sessions was practiced as a form of initiation into adulthood:

*I began to drink in the army; at home there wasn't any drink; my parents were strict on that, they weren't drinking at all. The problem began in the army; in the army you have to drink, drink is part and parcel of being a recruit. You have to drink but why? I don't know, where army begins, logic ends; this is part of bullying and ways to control the younger ones. The older know how to drink heavily, they learned the young ones...*

*In the army men had to drink it is normal; you are out there, no family just others like you...*

*It's all started in the army...*

The association of the army, the group of men and the drink is further emphasized when the homeless migrants' accounts and casual talk about the life on the streets of London is analyzed. Here, a constant reference is to frame it in the language of struggle, war and constant threat of violence. Group drinking discussions are full of colourful talk about the realities of the life on the streets as it was a war-like situation, with death, injury, blood spilled a commonplace among their drinking-mates, with beatings and violence experienced on regular basis. Here again drink potentially bonds people together in that struggle and makes them almost a brother-in-arms group:

*It is a fight, struggle, war here [among homeless]... people die on the street and you have to be really careful with whom you talk; that's why it is so important to have friends. But in order to have them, you need to have a drink sometimes or just buy one to guys who may help you. [M1]*

Others make the comparison with reference to the male-centred companionship and drinking as an obvious outcome of this:

*But here I just drink like in the army... it is the same stuff really... you drink because everyone around you drink...and here you now; it is like camping a bit... [Z1]*

As the quotes above demonstrates, these narratives increase the sense of threat from outside which in the process of positive feedback increases the desirable sense of trust and companionship among members of the drinking group; at the same time these bonds have a more practical gain, through drinking people can also get necessary information about resources vital for homeless – for example squats, places with free food, odd jobs or an information about a group drinking session that takes place nearby. This masculine discourse of war and struggle on the streets of London has several functions – first it gives meaning to the everyday survival of a homeless person with drinking problem and gives meaning to the omnipresent sense of insecurity and unpredictability; second it reinforces a bond between men who share similar fate; third it lifts person's self-esteem as someone who 'knows the tricks' of life on the streets giving a sense of power to those who have it very little.

On the other hand, the conceptualisation of alcohol as the 'enemy' with whom one needs to wage war is a frequent reference during the AA meetings; here the fight can be fought but only in a group as the egalitarian and anonymous setting of the meeting provides a solution to individual problems.

### **3.6. Alcohol and work**

The cultural construction of alcohol as something predominantly associated with manhood and the role of man in society links to another very important dimension: a functional relationship between work and alcohol. As other studies have noted, alcohol consumption in some societies creates a symbolic boundary between the world of work and the world of play, and alcohol intake marks the boundary between these two spheres of the everyday (SIRC 1998). Someone who works marks the end of the day by an alcoholic drink. In consequence a hard working man, thus acquires right to drink heavily and it was often noted by AA meetings participants that one did not noticed a problem with alcohol, since *"I was working all the time and was paying for my drink I felt I deserve to relax"*. This cultural ethos of man the worker who

asserts his value by working and then drinking seems a powerful cultural construction very much in use by the respondents in this study. As noted, almost all interviewees had previously worked and earned money and were visibly proud of it. They were also well aware of the reputation Eastern European workers have in the eyes of the British and played upon this frequently. According to their accounts and observation during fieldwork, it is a quite routine practice for Polish builders for example to drink heavily on weekends, starting on Fridays.

*You know, how builders live... from Monday to Friday and then booze like mad... [Z1]*

*In Poland it's normal, you are a builder, you drink, you are a good professional and this means you have to drink, otherwise you are not a good builder... [Z2]*

*Slovaks like Poles... they work and then drink; we're the same....[D2]*

The symbolic association between hard, good work and heavy drinking among men means that in the perception of many migrants one reinforces another, the harder you work, the harder you are allowed to drink and by hard drinking you are sending a message that you have worked hard. Thus even if people ceased working, their self-perception as hard workers remains. In some cases the balance of work and play has been shifting gradually and has marked a steady decline into addiction:

*I was working hard and, you know, as all I was drinking at weekend, then Sundays sobering up and back to work; this was good money and I was working as self-employed, I went to work when I wanted, so I began to work a bit less, four, three days a week; and then in turned out that I was working one, two days a week and the rest was spend drinking with mates... [K3]*

This combination of cultural associations between work, manhood, struggle and discourse of war helps to explain the social importance of group drinking sessions among homeless Eastern Europeans. It also explains why drinking in public, especially parks seems to be one of the favourite spaces to consume alcohol – not only among

homeless, but more general among migrants from this part of the world. As one worker of a charity assisting Eastern Europeans note:

*When you see them drinking in parks, you see that their way of drinking is different; our way of drinking is that it is segregated, it is drunk in the pub (...) or others would drink at home and there would be a great deal of secrecy over their drinking habits. Denial and secrecy are part of the huge success of alcoholism in this country. What I hear is that in Poland it is perfectly normal to go after work and have a can of beer in the park; where as here people won't do that; here people would be moved on. This is the very obvious difference. You wouldn't go and sit on the bench in the park and have a couple of cans after work. If you see men in the park drinking cans of beer – almost always they turn out to be EE. It is a different way. English people go to the pub because the pub is like club [SP2]*

Drinking in public spaces such as park, can thus be seen as way people occupy social space and assert their presence as a group. For most of homeless respondents crucial skill and knowledge concerned the ability to escape the eyes of authorities where drinking was prohibited. One of favourite themes of discussion related to the ways people broke those rules. This theme is vital in casual conversations as it reaffirms and reproduces the boundary between 'us', the homeless, 'the Eastern Europeans' and 'them', 'the cops', 'the authorities'. Without romanticizing drinking as identity marker, it can be said from this study that drinking in public acts as a political statement of defiance of people with none or little power to influence their social and economic position.

### **3.7. Alcohol and women**

The cultural acceptance of public displays of drunkenness by men in some Eastern European societies, particularly Poland, means that women's drinking patterns are subject of taboos and strong prescriptions and social control. In fact, the distinction between public and private, delineating the male and female spheres of social dominance results in women's alcohol problems being much less visible, intimate and pushed from the public eye. As this AA female member states:

*I think it is because of the women's role in society; there is a different morality towards women and different towards men. For men it is their right, their privilege to drink, drunken woman is a whore and scum; for a man a reaction is: "oh, it just happened to him, let's understand him; he may drink but he works; at least he drinks from his own money...or maybe he has some problems...his wife is awful to him probably". And a drunken woman hasn't got any problems... or this is not the way for women to deal with problems...There is a huge difference in treating drinking and alcoholism among men and women. Maybe because in Poland there is still such a difference between gender roles, what men and women can do or not. [R3]*

Although less represented in the sample it is clear that women' pattern of drinking and addiction is much less publicly displayed and confined to their homes. One female respondent describe her problem drinking in following way:

*I had periods of intense drinking at home; I'd close the door, switch the phone off, buy a case of vodka and stay for days, a week drinking on my own. Nobody knew, I was alone and then after that I was going back to work, back to life...and it carried on like this... [J4]*

Drinking and homelessness of women from Eastern Europe seems much more hidden and harder to reach. On the other hand, it is clear that it is much easier for women to find shelter through an agency for homeless, even without the recourse to public funds. This isn't to say that the problem described doesn't affect women – on the contrary, it is safe to say that the high profile and visibility of single male Eastern European homeless migrants masks the difficult situation of women, who may be exploited or victimised in other ways. This study due to its focus on the intersection between alcohol abuse and homelessness had looked in particular at the situation of people using Day Centres and women were a small minority within that group.

However, that gender dimension bears strongly on patterns of recovery and self-help offered for example by the AA meetings. This respondent acknowledged that as a woman she finds it difficult to talk about herself and her experiences in front of other men:

*There is a difference; especially during AA meetings it is quite clear. In general women are less open and less willing to talk than men. Precisely because of that sense of shame due to men being allowed more than women. When my friends with whom I quit drinking were celebrating some anniversary of abstinence it was always a subject of praise and joy – mums and wives were proud and were talking to each other: “oh, Janek doesn’t drink for a month now, oh, Franek is dry since New Year”; there was always someone close who boasted about it and was making it into a hero-like accomplishment. But non-drinking and abstinence of women was never a subject of joy. She shouldn’t have drunk in the first place, she broke rules and there is nothing to be happy about. One should be silent about this, hush. So it is harder for women to dry up because there isn’t that support; it used to be said in Poland that women do not sober up, that they can’t be cured. A common perception was that women, once they are alcoholics will always remain so. Women are at home and they should be there; Poland is so patriarchal, especially with the cult of virgin Mary, the notion that she is clean, untouched and so feminine. You can’t be a virgin Mary and an alcoholic can you? No way to match these two...*

A problem is also, that male-dominant view on alcohol and its related effects and problems means that for some female participants their drinking and behavioural patterns may be seen as not as serious in comparison. So in effect females’ participation in AA meetings may be sometimes counterproductive, as they may have an impression of not being ‘real’ alcoholics compared to hardened men in the group, especially those with histories of rough sleeping. Therefore it has been frequently mentioned to me by female respondents that ideally, a women-only AA meeting would be the way to establish more open and supportive setting for AA meetings. The idea was also strongly supported by one service provider with an experience in dealing with substance abuse issue, recognizing the gender tensions that may occur in mixed AA groups.

### 3.8. Economy of alcohol and homelessness – power of the powerless

Stating that the respondents from the homeless group are unemployed would be a misconception. After all they manage to get funds to feed their drinking habits and there are numerous strategies employed to acquire money and survive on the streets of London.

1. Scrap collection. One of means to get funds is through scrap collection. Respondents were very eager to describe in detail how, when, where they go and collect scrap and on two occasions I was able to observe the process from the start to the beginning. Usually, scrap is collected from skips or building sites. This practice requires considerable skill and know-how and most of respondents were boasting about their skills of dismantling housing appliances and selling copper or other valuable metal parts for cash. Scrap collection is a social activity with at least three to five people involved although there are individuals who prefer to collect on their own. Usually it starts with someone indicating that in a place x he has spotted a washing machine or a fridge in a skip. Copper parts in these can fetch up to £30 which for a group of four is enough for one day/night drinking. The team doesn't seem to collect scrap more than they need; on both occasions, the migrants stopped after collecting £50 worth of metal and proceeded to sell it in a scrap collecting point. Asked whether they don't want to collect more for savings, I got the following reply:

*What for? It will be here probably tomorrow; we collect for a drink, not to get rich...*

2. Shoplifting. Shoplifting is usually done under the influence of alcohol and is a subject of constant story-telling and boasting of ones' skills and ability to deceit the owner of the shop or security personnel. There were respondents who were strongly condemning this, but overall it was regarded as something migrants in search of alcohol did. Interestingly, shoplifting in supermarkets is regarded as more acceptable than in the small corner shops.
3. Begging – begging is usually regarded as the 'last resource' and many respondents stressed that they would never 'lower themselves' to do this. However it is a quite successful way to obtain immediate funds to buy alcohol. In

Polish homeless slang it is referred as *strzelać kogoś* [to shoot someone] offering another war-like metaphor for life on London streets.

4. '*Streets paved with gold*'. When referring to life in London, apart from the 'war' discourse one common feature is the role of luck and finding objects on the streets of Central London. Almost every respondent recalled an instance of finding belongings on the streets, especially after Friday or Saturdays night. Mobile phones, wallets, clothes, jewellery, money, watches were reported as found on the streets, parks or public transport. These are then sold in pawn shops and money for alcohol acquired. It is interesting to note that in some paradoxical way, the British pattern of lavish, binge drinking of the middle classes in Central London bars is supporting a whole class of homeless migrants who sell things people loose under the influence of alcohol to feed their own addictions.
5. Sponsors. In some drinking groups we may identify someone who acts as a sponsor, someone usually with a more or less regular source of income who sustains groups' alcohol needs. Here the social bonding function of alcohol consumption has a clear psychological advantage for one particular individual who can be regarded as the 'leader' of a group and who is highly popular among other homeless migrants with alcohol problems. The case of S. and P. can be regarded as typical in this case:

*S. works in a bar and is a squat dweller; he lives with four other migrants (Polish, Czech) near Chelsea and he is the only one who works. Others drink and take drugs heavily but S.; seems happy with the setting, he acknowledges that he spends his own money all the time on others drink but says that 'these are my mates, we are having a long party'. [notes January 2010; Chelsea]*

*P. works as a gardener in one of local Churches in Deptford and is being paid cash-in hand around 100 pounds per week. He feels lonely there however, and frequents a local Day Centre where a lot of homeless street drinkers congregate. He is usually the sponsor of the drinks as he seems to be the only with steady stream of income [notes; March 2010, Deptford]*

This picture of the economy of alcohol and homelessness shows that many Eastern European migrants with whom this research was conducted tend to have a vast amount of street knowledge about various aspects of living rough and street drinking. This knowledge is crucial for their survival and also carefully guarded. There is however additional psychological benefit of that knowledge. Respondents were usually eager to stress that resourcefulness and the fact that they 'can make it on our own' was often cited with pride. The 'street knowledge' or 'real life' as they often call it referred to all strategies and tricks of the trade that a rough sleeper need to employ to survive. Boasting about it and treating it with value seem to be the way a homeless person maintain some degree of self-respect and autonomy in a situation of powerlessness, extreme poverty and depression. The theme of ability to 'find stuff' and 'arrange' things and general pride in survival skills is very important for someone living rough and should not be treated as pure fantasies. Combined with perception of the man-the-worker and eagerness to show that homelessness/rough sleeping doesn't mean 'doing nothing' but involves a lot of skills, this culturally embedded attitude helps not only in day to day practicalities, but assist psychologically in coping with harsh reality. It is the power of the powerless, hence it is frequently referred as to a 'school of real life' something that 'normal' people do not have.

Again, this is not to romanticize their lifestyle but show what coping mechanism they employ which further entrench them in their positions. Because on the other hand, homeless people interviewed for this study asked whether they want to change their life answered unconditionally yes, and did not claimed to chose it as a lifestyle (except few cases); their attitude of pride in their survival skills was simply a way of preserving some remains of control over their lives – something they often have really lost.

This vignette from the fieldwork notes captures these dilemmas and problems people face on a daily basis:

*"One day, the Polish guys at the [name of the Centre] came to me straight after I came in and told me that the day before they were drinking heavily with W. – a hardened drinker living on the streets for years - and they lost him and now he is probably in hospital after he suffered a fit. They were typically boasting about it with*

*pride and accounts of mischief they got into... we decided to pay W. a visit in hospital. W. was there, half of him compared to when I saw him last week; pale, shaky looking more like 70 than his 40 something, tubes coming out from his arms, blooded nose – he wasn't boasting about his drinking sessions, anymore, he looked very scared and ill; his mates' attitude changed drastically also; they were quiet looking really scared. When W. told them that he tried to commit suicide in ward, their mood got even darker. 'this life sucks; this is bad... how did we got there' – D. told me later with visible sign of depression”*

Ability of W. to survive sleeping rough and his skills in finding funds, alcohol and dodge the authorities were often the topic of discussions among the homeless observed. The visit in hospital put all this in real life perspective, although a short lived one.

### **3.9. Quitting drinking**

In general migrants I talked to demonstrate a mixture of willingness to change their situation with a sense of pessimism and helplessness. In moments of reflection they realize that their current lifestyles are risky, an obvious health-hazard and destructive psychologically. At the same time, the value they put in maintaining current friendship links and problems related to their solitude impedes them from making long term plans. This dilemma is obvious in the case of A. who in the course of fieldwork decided to quit rough sleeping and received a temporary accommodation. He also began a job training scheme at one of the Methodist Day Centres. He also stopped drinking. After several weeks however he was back drinking and clearly reversing on his commitments. The main reason he pointed was a strong sense of loneliness and being cut off from his previous network of friendships:

*I drink not to think; I drank on the streets to forget that I live rough; in the house now to forget that I am all alone there. Drinking is a way of thinking; silly thinking of course but somehow helping you to survive. I drank recently because I think that I made it good to move out of rough sleeping and to the hostel; I accomplished it now, look for work, wear clean clothes I am a normal bloke now... but what the fuck is it*

*for? What do you I need it for? I need someone, I don't need money or clean clothes; I need someone so I do not feel alone. [A2]*

From accounts of those respondents who stopped drinking majority have done so due to personal trauma or strong willingness to improve their relationships with their families. The trauma range from near-death experience, when their health rapidly deteriorates, when they fall victim of assault or some of their friends die or is being hospitalized. For female AA members, this trauma related to abuse and injuries suffered by their children or unacceptable level of violence from the partners who were also heavy drinkers. For others it was the fact that they underwent successful forced therapy in their countries of origin. Overall the pattern emerging is that people stress that it is their own willingness – sense of asserting control over ones' life – that is crucial for successful therapy and recovery.

However bearing in mind how functional – despite its obvious negative outcomes for health and wellbeing of individuals - for many reasons alcohol abuse may be, this study argues that strong cultural factors prevent people from quitting drinking altogether. The association of drinking with manhood means that it is 'unmanly' to admit to a problem and coward-like behaviour to show that your body cannot take any more. As one service provider working with Eastern European for many years observes:

*A lot of it is about breaking their cultural taboo; like the admission of having a drink problem is seen as a weakness... They don't think they have a problem; people would have a wage pack of 250 quid on Friday afternoon and then in the evening they have nothing because they gambled it all away and got drunk; and if you asked them whether they think they have a problem - they would look at you with disbelief...[SP2]*

This attitude probably explains why for many of the interviewees quitting drinking altogether was a matter of individual strength only, not services at hand, an attitude which made increasingly difficult for agencies working with migrants to engage them into help, something that we shall be looking at in more depth in next chapter.

Overall, however, it seemed that the state of homelessness and accompanying alcohol abuse reinforce each other and it is extremely difficult for people to move on and change their situation. Cases described in this study do not offer an optimistic picture as it is clear that it is much easier for an Eastern European to become a substance abusing homeless person than to stop being one.

### **3.9. 'Us and them' reinforced – services and the dilemma of engagement**

The findings and accounts in the sections above are crucial for understanding the relationship between staff at many agencies working with homeless and Eastern European street drinkers – the users of these services. These relationships and attitudes to each other give an important insight into the quality of the service, what works and what doesn't, and also what may be improved in the future.

First, it has to be stressed that the study did not try to survey/evaluate all types of services available to Eastern European migrants, who are homeless and suffering from substance abuse. The interviews carried out were with staff of various agencies, which had a range of aims and goals, and the intention was to spell out the perceived difficulties and cultural barriers to offering adequate help from both sides. Hence any generalisation to all agencies needs to be treated with care. Nevertheless, as we shall see, some patterns and commonly shared difficulties and impressions came out strongly.

As noted above the participants in this study using Day Centres spend their normal daily routine commuting from one Day Centre to another for meals, clothes and to meet friends. Their awareness of various institutions offering help is grounded on personal experiences as well as widely shared information among homeless. They seem to master well the London geography of local centres, knowing well the staff by name, the street workers, the quality of food in each centre, and so on. Despite that, it is rather clear that this is mainly a passive use, focusing on getting a meal and meeting friends or catching up with news – so important for their perception of community. From time to time, they use advice services for tax or employment purposes or visit a GP or nurse at the centre. However – as acknowledged by some

service providers - it is a minority that gets involved in a prolonged and coherent route to employment via training/English classes or engages in a treatment of their alcohol problem.

From one side it is clear why this is so – their inability to access welfare assistance makes the whole process much harder. As this service provider states:

It is ten times more difficult to help an Eastern European with an alcohol issue than it is for a UK national – there is simply less for them out there [in terms of welfare] [SP8]

However, there seems to be something much deeper and more culturally specific that sets the Eastern European users apart from the other clients of these agencies. Structural problems aside, all service providers stressed that this is a group, which is very hard to work with due to their inability or unwillingness to engage. ‘Lack of engagement’ seemed the key phrase throughout almost every interview with service provider and various explanations were given. Language was obviously one reason, but one should not overestimate this issue, since even Day Centres that do have native-speaking case workers or advisors, shared the same view. Service providers most often referred to certain state of ‘passivity’ and ‘helplessness’ that the Eastern Europeans homeless and street drinkers suffer from and which, in turn, prevents the staff from successfully engaging with them:

***M: do they engage?***

*Very little really; comparing to clients from this country or others; very little engagement. I don't know why; maybe because we don't have an Eastern European worker who would engage, I know other centres have got a full time worker or advisor...or a particular session aimed at them. We have some access to advice, but it is very little used by them... I would like to say that we helped them find work but realistically we don't. Most people who move on, do so through their own means really...[SP1]*

Another worker directly engaged with Eastern European street drinkers finds it increasingly frustrating and incomprehensible; at the same time he acknowledges

that this attitude results in a huge waste of resources, time and energy of agency workers:

*My problem with response is that from the Polish guys who are desperately in need of help; you'd think they need it and they'll grab it with their both hands... and they don't. There is something very deeply entrenched in their culture. In terms of unwillingness to engage. We made seven appointments for Polish people to come to [name of organisation]; to be assessed. Every one of them had a very hard drinking problem and was begging us for a detox. One turned up. One person. And that one person didn't turn up for his second interview. That is really entrenched in their culture; they want everything and they want it now; they want everything done for them, they don't realize they need to do an effort; if you could do their detox for them they would be most happy [laugh]. They want you to do everything. With these guys there is an eagerness to scream out of help and to demand help right now - but to ask them to do anything; like to attend a meeting to turn up somewhere... they are really pronouncedly bad at doing anything. You need to make a huge effort to reach them and almost guide them by the hand... [SP4]*

Another worker contrasts her Eastern European clients' attitude with that of her British clients in seeking for an explanation. She finds it in the 'pro-active' ethos of British society:

*Lot of passiveness; here [in Britain] people are trained to be pro-active to stick their necks out, that you must ask for help; this is how this society works; if you sit there quietly, no one is going to do it for you...Our culture is increasingly a self-help culture and I noticed that with people coming from Eastern Europe that is a very different thing; we have people moaning all the time about their work and then if I ask: did you speak to your line manager, they will say: no; they simply wait until he comes up to them and speak to them.[SP]*

One charity worker, who has worked with Eastern Europeans for years, explains it in the following way by acknowledging that self-esteem and pride of many homeless Eastern Europeans may play a part in the entire process. He first confirms other provider's impressions that this group is particularly 'passive' and then shows how

important self-reliance is for them. At the end, he accepts that behind this also lies their formal visibility to the state bureaucracy, which is an additional burden for homeless:

*Eastern Europeans, generally speaking are very placid and passive; comparing to Scots, Irish, these guys are cake walks, they are much easier to control [...] I know people like that: they survive and they're happy; I know people who have been here for five or more years and don't have a NI; there are thousands of them; they don't even want to have benefits; it's just doesn't come across their head. They have their food today, their little job, they have their squat, small room, they just lead their quiet life... it just never crosses their mind to enter into the system...they don't feel disadvantaged because basically they just very passive people and very self-reliant*  
**M: Passive and self-reliant? Sounds contradictory...**

*Passive in that they are avoiding trouble and self-reliance in that they don't need your help, 'I'm on my own' kind of stuff. And that's how they survived. And this is a very strong mentality...They rely at the same time on who they know on their networks; this is how they survived in Poland and this is how they survived here... they don't want to get engaged in red tape, they don't care...They don't want to make themselves visible as well; 'the state needs not to see you' - that's why they like to stay out of the system, staying invisible is the best course of action. [SP3]*

The 'I'm my own' mentality referred to by this worker describes the strong will to present oneself as self-reliant, independent and street-wise, something that as we saw people like to be proud of and is also associated with manhood and ability to survive the hostile environment. On the other hand the willingness to stay 'out of the state's eye' is the anti-institutional response to the structural discrimination at the same time drawing on a tradition of anti-institutionalism of many Eastern-European societies, especially Polish.

In the eyes of the homeless respondents all this further entrenches the division between 'their' world and the world of charities, day centres, churches and institutions. It is unsurprising then that not all, but a majority of Day Centers users with whom I spoke to tend to be critical of the services they use. Most common criticism refers to their impression that staff often differentiate between 'us' and 'the

English' or 'locals' and assume that that the staff treats them differently from others. In contrast to what the staffs says, the impression of users is that there is 'no help' for them and they simply give up asking.

Lack of English skills and sense of hostility and fear towards 'the system' and abovementioned sense of group identity deepens that sense of alienation. It seems clear that the criticism towards some centres is a logical outcome of their group construction mechanisms which depends on a strict boundary between them – friends, mates, drinking companions - and the 'system' which is alien, incomprehensible and wants to 'get rid of you'. In fact, the respondents want to present themselves as a group as it offers them a sense of security and power over a particular centre and in turn this is the impression staff at the centres has as well. As this staff member in one of the Day Centres notes:

*Eastern Europeans come often as a group; while clients from elsewhere don't, they come on their own. Usually the Eastern Europeans come in a large group and for other clients this may seem a bit like pack mentality...it can be intimidating to others...[SP5]*

Or this one from other side of London who has exactly same impression:

*In my centre I had a couple of incidents; when they come in here, they come through the door, six of them, in the rush, with their bag, speaking their language and they stand up together in the passage... and it is a bit intimidating for the clients... and they bring their own energy with them... it is also an attitude like they say: 'I want a shower, shower' and the staff thinks like: 'oh my God, they gonna go in the shower and others may take something...As soon as they come, other clients are a bit wary and careful...things get stolen. [SP1]*

For some homeless respondents there seems to be a deep flaw in the entire philosophy of service provision for homeless and, paradoxically, they acknowledge that the system where they are given 'everything on a plate' spoils them and acts as

a de-motivator for changing their habits and lifestyles. As one migrant state with a bit of irony:

*...it is real socialism here really; I don't work, I drink and live. The less money I have the more they take care of me. [R2]*

Others are far more critical:

*You are just a number here... I don't get any real help; I'd need a psychologist or someone who may help with my addiction, but they just need me here to show to their superiors that they help people... [Z4]*

Another respondent argues:

*This just keep people floating, without actually giving them a proper hand of help...if they would really fall on hard times, feel the pain, they would wake up and go to work... [D1]*

Polish street workers for a charity working with Eastern European migrants shared this criticism of the British system of help as essentially creating a dependency culture in which people are unwilling or unable to turn around their lives:

*They have these services they are proud of; they are glad to have all these day centres, shelters, free food, free clothes... because this is a rich country so they can afford this. But England will wake up one day, because they simply make so many people dependent on the system; they simply make people even more helpless... [SP\_6]*

It is a paradox that same service users that seek food, shelter and clothes at the centres, often regard this as not addressing the core issue, rather treating symptoms than the disease. It shows not only a rather distorted view of what the centres are for but also a somewhat cynical recognition that it is the homeless that give a rationale for these centres existence. These attitudes act as an additional source of sense of control, which the homeless often seem to crave for:

*They simply need us – the homeless; without us they won't get funding...* [D1]

In general when asked about the immediate help in terms of shelter and assistance, people were generally sympathetic. However, they were immediately eager to stress that deeper problems are never addressed. It also includes emergency service as detox, which many clients think they can get straight away. In cases when they cannot get it, migrants sometimes turn to drastic measures such as drinking themselves into a state of deep unconsciousness in order to be picked by the A&E services.

As we can see there seems to be a lot of contradictions in the dynamics of the relationship between the service users and staff, and in general institutions that help the homeless and those with drinking problems. An unwillingness to engage, to move on, to change their habits and reshape their life has many cultural, social and structural reasons and it needs to be recognized by people working with this difficult sector of population. On the other hand, people themselves need to understand the extent of help available and proper routes of service delivery in order not to have unrealistic expectations.

### **3.11. Excluded further - 'you're not one of us'**

There are various ways of being excluded and one important aspect of the problem described in this study refers to exclusion from ones' own ethnic group. Although this wasn't the object of the study, it is clear that formal Polish organisations and, most specifically, the Polish Catholic clergy is unwilling to recognize the problem or engage in any long term meaningful action to offer assistance. From both this study as well as others (Garapich 2007) a picture emerges of ethnic, mainly Polish institutions fearful that attention to social problems, such as alcohol abuse, homelessness and unemployment, could tarnish their reputation and shed a 'bad light' on Poles as a group.

This class-based exclusion is clear from Polish priests' attitudes towards the issue, interviewed for a separate study in Waltham Forest. The Polish priest would not acknowledge that there is any problem, stating that: 'this is for the authorities to deal

with' and that his main focus is pastoral care for young people. This attitude is found everywhere and although there are some initiatives from individual parishes organising Christmas Eve celebrations in Day Centres or making parish premises available for AA groups, there is an underlying reluctance to engage with the issue head on. The informal Polish Catholic Church policy seems to be to outsource this problem to other institutions they know about – the Salvation Army, Methodist Church and other institutions.

This attitude is also reproduced by the Polish state through consular offices which, according to some charity workers, regards Polish homeless essentially as criminals who need to be put into prison or sent back to Poland, since 'they are giving them a bad name'. This study has not interviewed members of the consular staff, but the impression from charity workers was that there is a strong hostility towards that group from Polish institutions. On the basis of other research, I can confirm this, although there are some exceptions can be found and there are individual priests, who seem to be genuinely preoccupied with the issue offering help or are helping to establish new AA groups.

For some staff working with homeless people this indifference and even hostility is very disturbing and a sign that something isn't right within these communities:

*[Polish] Community shuns them; they see them as failure and those that give the community a bad name; it is cruel, they just say: stay away; you're out, you are a disgrace, we are probably not liked very much anyway [by British locals] and you give us bad name.... Polish organisations seem to be very unsympathetic; there may be something [help] here and there...but overall they are shunned...crime... homelessness... it is pretty harsh. It is a bit cold, we can't understand that, we British people, we're bit more compassionate, since it is understandable that you've fallen on hard times; that you need to have a found. It is along the lines: 'it is your fault; you've let us down and by letting yourself down you let us down... we already have a hard time; so you gotta go'. [SP4]*

This distance and hostility towards fellow-countrymen is reciprocated. Interviewees demonstrated strong distance and hostility towards ethnic institutions; for example, no Polish migrant I spoke to for this study had received help from the Polish Catholic

Church and the general opinion was that: *they do not care about us; they would not open their doors.*

*The Polish Church doesn't help anyone; I went to four of them and nothing; no one was interested in helping me...[N1]*

Things seem to be different with reference to other ethnic groups, which have a much less dense organisational structure and are more open to social problems facing by their co-ethnics. Although based on previous studies, this is the case for the Hungarian Church in Hammersmith which seemed to be much more welcoming and also the Lithuanian Church in Newham, which also appeared to be much more sensitive.

### **3.12. What's next? Reflections on the future**

On the basis of this study a number of assumptions and conclusions for the future need to be made. Despite the prolonged and intensive work undertaken by charities that aim at reconnecting homeless Eastern European migrants to their societies of origin by sponsoring a return ticket and attempting to offer them treatment or employment in the home countries<sup>4</sup>, the vast majority of interviewees in this study do not plan to return to Poland, Lithuania or Slovakia in the near future. It is even safe to say that the majority of them will remain in London. It is time local authorities recognize this and aims to think ahead taking into account that many of these people will not be easy removed. In the light of this report documenting the resilience, survival strategies, group formation, information networks and anti-institutional ethos of Eastern European migrants, the recent operation undertaken by the Council of Westminster in conjunction with the UK Border Agency aimed at deporting homeless and jobless Eastern Europeans<sup>5</sup> is bound to fail and will not change anything on the ground substantially. Homeless street drinkers will simply move on to other boroughs, will refuse to present IDs, will learn to navigate through interrogation not to rise suspicions from UKBA, will avoid confrontations with police (all options described to me by homeless) etc. and the whole operation will probably end with huge bills to pay by the taxpayer.

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<sup>4</sup> Two most active organisations working in this area are Barka UK and Thames Reach

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23839212-east-europeans-face-deportation-in-london-rough-sleeping-crackdown.do>

On the other hand, due to economic downturn, cuts in public spending and services for homeless likely to suffer from this, it is safe to assume that many more Eastern European migrants will find themselves on the streets or in squats of London. As this study shown, it is much easier for someone to find him/her self on the street than it is to move on. This will mean that the figures will accumulate and the authorities will have to confront it sooner than later. At least this is a major concern for people working with homeless. As this worker sums up:

*We're heading for a huge problem; come 2012 this will have to be dealt with; the penny starts to drop and the authorities will have to do something; the authorities realize that these people can't be moved, scared away, pushed as authorities tried... they are still here. And it will get worse. And the money would need to be thrown at it. [SP4]*

To sum up, the following factors contribute to the conclusion that we are likely to see the growth of the problem:

- Uncertain and shaky economic recovery in the UK
- Likely downturns and sluggish growth in the economies of sending states (Poland, Lithuania, Hungaria, Latvia)
- Rising unemployment among migrants
- Persisting exclusion from some aspects of the welfare state
- Cuts in public spending in the areas of fighting poverty and homelessness
- The unwillingness of many migrants to return
- The ability of migrants to learn quickly the survival strategies of living rough/in squats in London; turning homelessness into alternative lifestyle for younger migrants
- The function and role of group ties between Eastern European males and strength of the 'we' and 'them' divide which is a survival coping mechanism
- The function of alcohol consumption as a coping mechanism in uncertain times and as a tool strengthening bonds within a group
- The anti-institutional ethos of Eastern European homeless; their avoidance of state administrative system – both home and UK - seen as hostile and alien.

- Their unwillingness to engage into addiction therapy (due to various factors)
- Their exclusion from formal ethnic institutions, such as the Church, diasporic organisations

## **Conclusions**

This study sought to explain a fragment of social reality happening in front of us and on the streets of London. The influx of workers from the EU new Accession States brought fiscal and social benefits to the British society, but it also imported challenges and problems of its own. As many scholars note, macro-level factors and individual actions interact in complex ways to lead to homelessness (Fitzpatrick, 2000). One may regard problematic abusive drinking, poverty, unemployment and homelessness as the result of the uneasy and ongoing transition period, which Eastern European societies had to make, shifting from state controlled command economy to free market and capitalist mode of production which, in turn, affected welfare, social relations, and peoples' sense of security and future (Sztompka 2000, Buchowski 2001). This is certainly true but the structures of economic order and welfare in the destination country – the UK – also play a big part in this process.

Furthermore, we will not be able to understand individual behaviour – hence help those suffering from destitution – by focusing only on the structures and macro-economic forces that contribute strongly to where people end up – on the streets, unable to seek treatment because they haven't got documented history of employment and hence are at risk of deportation. We need to look at how people respond, react and ultimately contest these structures. People need to cope with their state of destitution, poverty, ill health, risk of death on a constant daily basis and this study showed various ways people do that – by sticking together, by drinking, by viewing the outside world with deep mistrust, by creating strong male bonds, by constructing elaborate justifications of their current plight which aim at lifting their low self-esteem.

Problematic drinking needs to be treated in connection with other problems experienced by migrants – homelessness, lack of social networks, unemployment, uncertainty of the labour market and family breakdown. People engaged in heavy drinking do so mainly to forge and sustain a sense of togetherness and community; they compensate the lack of

familiar social networks and sense of belonging with short lived, but intensive participation in groups with strong sense of collective plight. At the same time, it is clear that these coping mechanism act as barriers and obstacles to successful treatment, recovery and eventually return to the world of work and family responsibilities. These high levels of destructive or negative bonding social capital (Putnam 2000) are part of the problem but at the same time, in the eyes of many respondents, are the only things they have in a hostile environment.

## **Recommendations**

In times of public spending cuts it is difficult to make any recommendations to authorities in relations to funding and extra resources being invested to deal with the very likely growth of homelessness and alcohol abuse among Eastern European migrants. However because this report argues that one way or another, the public will be affected it is crucial to make specific plans and provisions for the future to deal with the problem most effectively. This study, with the support of the Southlands Methodists Centre at Roehampton University is well placed to offer authoritative advice on how best to deal with this issue in coming years.

The complexity of the issue needs to be further highlighted. There is a tendency in public perception to picture the homeless as either the only ones responsible for their plight either blaming just the society. Homelessness is much more complex than that and a need to understand peoples' behavior in the context of their cultural traditions and responses to new situations need to be highlighted. Besides the academic dissemination of this report on the basis of this study an active media campaign should be organized – both in the British press, press of the countries of origin and immigrant press in the UK.

One of the most frequent immediate needs voiced both by respondents and service providers has been the necessity of employing or recruiting a volunteer that is fluent in native language of service users. It seems however that pure technical translation isn't the whole purpose of employing a bi-lingual staff; it is their capacity to act as a mentor, friend and someone who deeply understand their problems and issues that makes a difference. Therefore a network of volunteer mentors from Eastern Europe would need to be engaged to frequent Day Centres and maintain a continuous contact with migrants in question. This can take many forms but the goal is to engage members of ethnic group to help deal with the issue. The booming number of AA groups from Eastern Europe can be a crucial pool of potential mentors and role models for day center users. In addition services would need to make contact and lobby institutions which are reluctant to engage but which have a moral obligation to help people in questions – like to Polish Catholic Church.

There is a need of a network of native speaking translators that would offer their help to the Day Centres or have a set hour when they can offer translations over the phone.

There is an urgent need for trained native speaking councilors and psychotherapists dealing with substance misuse issues among Eastern Europeans at hand at the most frequently visited Day Centres. Although some centres have them, with the increase of homelessness there will be an increase in demand for professional psychotherapy.

There is a clear need for a much stronger recognition that the problem of destitute and homeless migrants does concern societies and states where migrants come from, it isn't only a 'London' problem. This recognition lies at the heart of cooperation between London councils with some Polish NGOs (notably Barka Foundation) but there is clear need for constant engagement on local level with local institutions in sending countries. On the other hand the London based embassies of the sending states need to be constantly reminded of the situation and lobbied to engage in the problem.

There is a need to address the wider issue of rising right awareness among migrants and continuous publicity of various forms of help for those with alcohol abuse and addiction – at the moment people are simply unaware of various avenues in the voluntary sector that offer help. The numerous projects dealing with alcohol addiction and homelessness need to be more publicised among various services catering to homeless Eastern Europeans.

The gender context with regards to homelessness among Eastern Europeans needs to be recognized by service providers and alcohol abuse treated as having qualitatively different social meanings and consequences in case of women and men from the area in question. This also affects the recovery or participation in AA groups.

The Methodists Church would need to publicize this report during the Poverty&Homelessness Action Week in 2011. The next year's theme is 'Who counts' and will focus on politically and morally charged issue of counting the homeless population.

This report's finding apply also to other groups without the recourse to public funds, most notably undocumented migrants whose plight is much less visible than those of Eastern European migrants and whose structural exclusion results in even deeper social and personal problems.

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