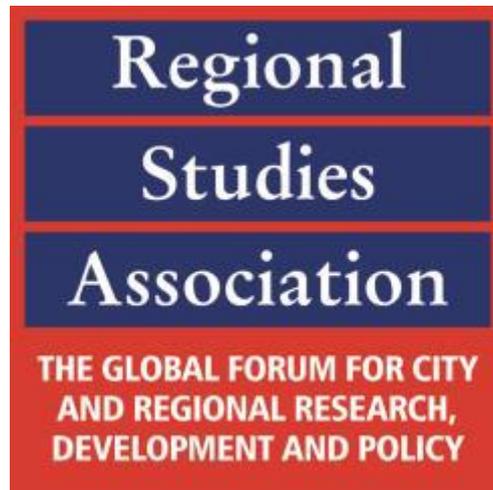


# **A Philosophy of New Regionalism**

## **Crossing the Bridge from Both Sides**



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## 1. Introduction

The opening up of country borders in the European Union (EU) for people, goods, services and capital marked the start of European integration. Aside from the intended benefits this also brought new challenges: the opening up of the European market has emphasised and reinforced lived differences among different European nationalities. It has touched upon the identity of citizens and has provoked a new discussion on European citizenship. In order to truly benefit from European integration, a new perspective on new regionalism is needed. Throughout the paper we will use the term transnational cooperation as our interpretation of new regionalism. We will focus primarily on the challenges of this type of cooperation. How should bridges across Europe be built? In this paper we emphasise the role of cities and regions in this process.

The role of cities in dealing with transnational challenges is becoming more important because of the declining meaning and influence of the nation state. Furthermore, cities are the governing entities closest to where societal issues arise and take shape. They are the suitable actors to cooperate on the issues of identity, citizenship and lived differences. In our view for transnational cooperation to be successful, local authorities should establish new types of symmetric non-hierarchical coalitions. What are the elements to establish successful transnational collaboration? Our objective is to identify these elements and to provide our vision on how cities should establish this. We will analyse this by scrutinising the case of the Polish Barka Foundation.

The Barka Foundation was originally developed in Poland to provide shelter to homeless citizens suffering from addictions that are uprooted from their families and society. Over the years, its working method has proven to be successful in European cities coping with Eastern-European migrants that got into low water. Cities in Western Europe are usually very confident about their own vision on how to deal with societal issues. However, we will argue that when it comes to dealing with problems in one country that involve citizens from another country, it is necessary to rely on knowledge and experience from citizens, organisations and authorities in both countries. An analysis of the Barka case will show that bridges need to be crossed from both sides.

In the next chapter we discuss the case of the Barka foundation. This case shows the importance of establishing horizontal transnational relations to solve challenges that go beyond country borders. In the third and final chapter we provide our vision on how cities and regions should cooperate transnationally if we want to truly benefit from European integration.

## 2. Case

In this section we describe the case of the Barka foundation and its collaboration with the City of Utrecht. As we will argue, this case serves as an example of successful transnational cooperation that contributes to building bridges within Europe. To explain how it did, we will start by describing a consequence of Poland's admittance to the EU for Dutch citizens. Next, we will introduce a problem that involves Polish citizens and the City of Utrecht. Finally, we will explain how the working method of the Barka foundation and the attitude of the City of Utrecht proved to be a successful formula in solving the local problem, and at the same time contributing to building bridges between Western and Eastern Europe.

Poland became a member of the EU together with a number of other former Soviet satellites in 2004. Consequently, Polish citizens started moving to Western European countries for jobs. These jobs would earn them significantly more money than similar jobs back home, allowing them to support their families still living in Poland. Despite these new economic opportunities, however, a part of the Polish migrants got into low water. Arriving in Western Europe, high expectations of a better life were soon shattered due to a number of issues. Polish workers did not speak the foreign language, could not find jobs and were denied access to housing. Struggles with drug and alcohol addictions were added to the list. Increasingly, local governments were confronted with homeless Polish suffering from addictions that were causing trouble and inconvenience in public spaces.

One of the ways cities dealt with this issue is by taking in the assistance of organisations from the country of origin. Realising that the relevant skills and tools were lacking to deal with local issues with Eastern Europeans effectively, coalitions were formed between local governments in Western Europe and civil society organisations from Eastern Europe. Before we analyse this form of cooperation we will elaborate the working method of the Barka foundation.

### *Barka Foundation*

In 1989, a number of psychologists and other individuals created the Barka foundation in Poland. This organisation was the answer to an increasing need to deal with the issue of homeless citizens that were uprooted from their families and society. The foundation established several communities throughout the country in which homeless people could find shelter, regain strength and rehabilitate. These Barka communities were attracting people from all corners of the country, suffering from addictions, some of them coming straight out of prison.

The Barka working method is based on a pragmatic, grassroots, bottom-up approach used to solve issues of social inclusion in Poland. Over the years, the Barka method has proved successful, allowing hundreds of Poles to regain their dignity as human beings. In the late 1990s, the Barka network had expanded abroad and communities were started in France as well. After the entry of Poland into the EU, the United Kingdom (UK) was one of the first countries to receive economic migrants from Eastern Europe. With that, it was one of the first countries to experience local problems with homeless addicted Poles. It was in London where for the first time the Barka foundation was approached by the local government to help them

solve the problem. Based on this example, in 2011 the City of Utrecht went to London to witness Barka's working method and decided to adopt its projects locally.

One of these undertakings is the Reconnection project. Part of the Reconnection project is the selection of a leader and an assistant. The former is often a person who once came to one of the Barka communities looking for shelter and rehabilitation possibilities. Because these people have gone through the exact same process as the migrants, the leaders can connect and level with them more easily. The fact that leader and migrant speak the same language makes it quite a natural process in which it is relatively easy to build trust. The assistant is tasked with the administrative and practical issues because they know how to get access to the right institutions. A team always consists of one man and one woman. Part of the Barka philosophy stipulates that the tough approach of a man combined with the soothing influences of a woman make for the right formula to help someone in the most effective way.

The main goal of this project is to get Polish migrants off the streets and deal with their addictions. The term reconnection refers to the process of bringing them back to Poland. Without any job prospects, Polish migrants in the UK did not have any access to housing and social security. In addition, because of linguistic obstacles and practical issues such as insurance, the ability to reintegrate them to society and give them a future perspective are simply higher in the country of origin. A second project involves the Social Economy Centres, a place where migrants abroad that do have a job are supported to get rooted in the foreign society.

#### *Cooperation between Barka and the City of Utrecht*

In the years leading up to 2011, the City of Utrecht was confronted with homeless Eastern Europeans, mainly Poles, wandering the streets of Utrecht. They were contributing to a feeling of unsafety among citizens and regularly getting into fights with groups of people from different nationalities. The city government was looking for a solution, but did not know how to approach the homeless Polish people. In its search to determine the right approach, one of Utrecht's civil servants stumbled upon a newspaper article about the work of the Barka foundation in London. Soon after, civil servants of the City of Utrecht paid a visit to the Barka projects in London.

Barka's working method spoke to the civil servants in Utrecht because of its humane approach. Civil servants in Utrecht realised that local aid workers lacked the social compass to deal with the homeless Polish migrants effectively. They figured that the help and expertise of the Barka foundation could be helpful in overcoming cultural and linguistic obstacles. Subsequently, in 2012 the ideas of the Reconnection project and a Social Economy centre were adopted in Utrecht. These projects have proven to be successful in Utrecht. Until today, on a daily basis the leaders and assistants go around the city to visit shelters and well-known hide-outs to look for Poles and other Eastern Europeans that can benefit from the Barka treatment. With help of the local authorities, the foundation has set up an official Dutch affiliate in Utrecht that is still operating.

In the meantime, the City of Utrecht has been consulted by other major cities such as the Hague and Rotterdam who are facing similar issues with homeless Eastern-European migrants. Based on recommendations from Utrecht, the Barka network in the Netherlands spread to other cities. This year, this resulted in the creation of mobile teams that offer

support to homeless Eastern-Europeans all across the Netherlands. These teams are the result of a collaboration between Barka and several Dutch ministries.

Since the late 1990s when Barka first became active outside Poland, the Barka network expanded across the European continent as well. The organisation's expertise and working method is now applied in numerous major European cities, such as Dublin, Hamburg and Copenhagen. Despite differences in local conditions, circumstances and situations, the common denominator is the cooperation between Barka as a grassroots organisation and the local government. The next chapter will explore the corollaries of this type of cooperation further.

### *Effectiveness of the Barka working method in European cities*

Over the years the Barka Foundation has solved problems in cities beyond its country borders. Alliances between Barka and local governments across Europe were established and insights were gained that could prevent such problems in the future. The next paragraphs will consider ingredients of the Barka working method that have made it applicable for adoption in cities across Europe.

These ingredients cannot be treated separately. Instead, the foundation is effective because of an interchange and combination of different ingredients. It is like baking the traditional Dutch Pancake: all it takes is milk, flower, and a grain of salt. Nonetheless, as soon as one of the elements is missing, the pancake will never be as delicious as you wish.

First, Barka works from a need-based approach with a strong orientation on solutions, making it a very practical approach. As many grassroots organisations are often created to work towards certain values, the Barka foundation acted in response to an acute problem in Poland that needed to be solved. When the issue later emerged in other parts of Europe, this locally designed approach could easily be transferred abroad because of its practical basis. Through the working method of the teams consisting of leaders and assistants, the subject matters are approached naturally and with care, making the process very humane. In addition, the combination of empathy and experience on the one hand, and practical skills and knowledge on the other has proven to be very effective in motivating the homeless to seek help. Thanks to the success of Barka's working method in Poland, the foundation was being noticed abroad and received international media attention. This helped civil servants elsewhere in Europe, charged with solving local irregularities involving Eastern Europeans, to notice the Barka foundation and its unique method.

Second, an important element is the focus on reconnection and rehabilitation: Barka aims to find a job for people in the host country, or to reintegrate them in the home country. Since the first aim is often difficult to achieve, the primary focus lies with reintegration in the country of origin. During this process the primary focus lies with giving people back their self-esteem and a sense of belonging. It is important to note that this does not mean 'just sending people back to their countries'. It is about taking citizens from the home country that are causing inconvenience in the host country out of a situation where the citizen is in a hopeless situation, to a situation where the citizen is reconnected to the home country and the host country relieved of the issue.

A third ingredient is the attentiveness and willingness of individuals. This element is necessary to make sure that the first two ingredients can contribute to solving the problem. When local authorities want to effectively solve local issues concerning migration, the individuals in charge need to be open-minded and attentive towards creative solutions. Even more, they need to think outside of the box, take risks and go beyond the usual approach. For example, in the case of European migration, this includes taking into account cultural differences, keep an open attitude, and be open to form flexible, horizontal alliances with non-governmental actors.

### **3. Vision – how to build transnational bridges?**

As mentioned earlier, the working method of the Barka Foundation has proven to be successful in other cities across Europe: London invited members of the foundation to come over to discuss how the working method of Barka could be used to solve the problem of Polish people wandering the streets of London. When the ‘Barka model’ turned out to be effective, other European cities started to invite the Polish foundation as well, applying their working method to their own situation. Eventually, this cooperation between local governments and the Barka foundation created an interesting dimension.

Although the Barka foundation never aimed to build bridges across Europe and to establish transnational cooperation, this turned out to be a positive side effect of its work. Rather than expanding the Barka network and to share its practices with cities all across Europe, the objective of the foundation simply is to help homeless and addicted Polish people building up a life again. However, it is interesting to look at this side effect when providing a vision on transnational cooperation.

Chapter two was finalised by analysing the ingredients of the effectiveness of the Barka method across Europe. The major question remains however, which elements that characterise the cooperation between Barka and several local governments contribute to building bridges? These elements will be included in our vision as it provides us with information on which facets are necessary to be taken into account by local and regional authorities if they want to solve local issues with help of transnational cooperation.

#### *Acknowledge and make use of cultural differences*

The rationale behind the creation of the EU is primarily one of economic advantages. Initially people did not think about how the EU would affect the relations between citizens, or how it would affect citizenship at all (Meehan, 1993). Citizenship has been and still is mainly associated with the boundaries of the nation-state. While this opens up the borders for trade, this does not mean that borders are also opened up socially and culturally.

In the nineties, in the midst of globalisation, people got conscious of the changing world that became increasingly transnational. Scientists, policy practitioners and philosophers wrote about the challenges of globalisation, European integration and decentralisation with regard to national sovereignty in Europe. Already during those years people spoke of the (re)emergence of a new regionalism (Keating, 1998). Now, more than two decades after the establishment of the EU, discussions on these challenges and expressions of visions on a new regionalism still occur. These discussions often touch upon the issues of (cultural) identity, citizenship, and integration of ‘others’ in our society.

If we want to build bridges and decrease lived differences across Europe, acknowledging cultural differences is crucial as the Barka case has shown. For example, an important pillar of Dutch culture is the assumption of free will. People are responsible for their own lives. Whereas the Polish Barka Foundation based its working method on the assumption of self-empowerment through latent support: an approach that turned out to be more effective when dealing with Polish homeless in European cities.

As our case study has shown, to solve problems in one country that involve people from another country, it is valuable to gain insights in these cultural differences. By building

bridges between host and home countries, problems in cities have a higher chance to be solved. Building such bridges is enhanced when local authorities take on the right attitude. This attitude should include a willingness to new experiences and to make changes, an openness towards other cultures and approaches, the gut to take risks, and to think pragmatically and practically. This attitude is further explained below.

### *Symmetric horizontal relations*

In our opinion, transnational cooperation is often done with an inappropriate attitude. By this we mean that too much focus is placed on our own point of departure, our own knowledge, convictions and belief systems, without taking into consideration the other's point of departure. Cities in Western Europe can be quite confident about their own vision on how to deal with societal issues. As a result, an asymmetry in relations between countries of the EU emerged. However, as the case of the Barka Foundation shows, Western Europe should not take a dominant and pedantic attitude towards Eastern Europe (asymmetry), but rather be open to learn from them and cross the European bridge from both sides (symmetry).

When it comes to dealing with problems in one country that involve citizens from another country, it is necessary to deploy knowledge and experience from both countries. This realisation or awareness seems to be missing. Subsequently, the lived differences that people from different nationalities experience when confronted with each other can result in growing alienation. Furthermore, this lack of understanding between different nationalities within Europe obstructs the process of integration and the building of bridges.

Ideally, if done with the right attitude, we can go from the current situation where the differences between European nationalities are part of the problem, to a situation where these differences are appreciated and deployed as part of the solution.

### *Conclusion: a new philosophy of transnational cooperation*

The collaboration between the City of Utrecht and the Polish Barka foundation serves as an example of the importance of acknowledgement of cultural differences and of crossing the bridge from both sides. Cities in Western Europe opened themselves up to input from an Eastern European foundation. They were confronted with an issue that involved Eastern European citizens. Instead of applying their own methods that depart from their own point of view and perceptions, they took in the ideas and vision of a foreign foundation. Moreover, in the case of Barka, local governments across Europe deliberately included an organisation that prioritises cultural differences and uses these as part of the solution. This attitude not only helped solving the problem, it has also established a new form of transnational cooperation that unintentionally contributes to building bridges across Europe. This new form is characterised by symmetric, horizontal relations, whereby flexible alliances between political institutions and civil society are formed. By developing a process of transnational cooperation with the right attitude, the bridge can be crossed from both sides.

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