

"Poles in Ireland. I love you, unemployment."

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(...)

The sound of the ocean

It's six o'clock in the morning and we're walking in complete darkness through a golf course.

I travelled to Ireland to see what life is like for Polish people who've lost their jobs. I thought that when you're unemployed at least you don't have to jump out of bed so early in the morning, but no such luck.

Magda (36 years old, almost 2 years on unemployment benefits in Ireland): *"I always start my days in the same way: I go down to the beach to see the sunrise. It sets me up for the rest of the day. I used to sleep until noon, but now I don't want to waste my life."*

It's a five minute walk to the nearest beach. She had only one wish when she was looking for a house: she wanted to be able to hear the ocean. Then she thought that there had to be light and space, so she wouldn't feel suffocated; fireplace for those cold evenings and a maximum rent of 85 euro weekly – otherwise she's not going to get the rent allowance, the benefit from the social welfare office.

"What's my life like? It's great. I'm developing as a person, I can live. I get an unemployment benefit – 188 euro weekly and 59 euro for my rent. During the winter I get 20 euro fuel allowance. It's 267 euro weekly. It's enough for a quiet life if you don't live extravagantly."

Donegal, a county on the Northern tip of Ireland, for some it's the most beautiful place in the world, for others – biggest nowhere. Wherever you look, green hills and beaches stretching towards the horizon, just like on a postcard.

On the other hand you can be walking on a beach for an hour and you'll only meet one elderly man wearing a rain jacket.

"There's everything here, but jobs", laughs Magda. *"Half of Donegal has gone away, the other half is on benefits."*

It takes 4 hours to get from the village D. (tourist folders describe it as 'The Pearl of Donegal') to Dublin. At weekends, representatives of the middle class come here to play golf, in the summer it's the tourists. You can walk around the centre in 10 minutes: there's the church, café, two tourist shops and a pub. In front of the pub, there's a bench with a view of the bay and the famous Donegal sheep munching on the grass across the water.

A surfing school has been opened on the square where young people, who haven't left to look for jobs in Australia or the US, meet. Just around the corner there's an office which is supposed to help the local community. This month they're advertising sign language courses. Their job-related advice? Ask in the hotel or in the café.

"It doesn't make sense to work earning the lowest rate. In the hostel I earned 200 euro weekly and I was busy morning till night. First it was breakfast for the guests, then reception,

between 2 and 3 cleaning the rooms and then phone duties. On one hand it was fun, you get to meet people from all around the world, but when they knock on your door at 11pm, you want to murder them.”

“You can earn more waitressing, but how long can you be running with a tray? There were times that I was the only person working at a wedding looking after 2 tables of 36 people. I didn’t even have the time to go to the toilet. When I finally managed to convince them to give me some help, they gave me a cleaner – plates kept falling from her hands and she didn’t have a word of English.”

(...)

The nerves were getting to her, she had no regrets leaving her job.

Hawaiian massage

She admits herself that unemployment helped her to live again.

First of all, she goes to the beach two times a day. It’s the best place to think. There are nine beaches around where she lives, every day she chooses a different one.

Secondly, she does yoga. She gets her sessions for free because she has an agreement with (...) her instructor – that she would give her massages in return.

Magda can do a basic massage, a Hawaiian one and a hot stone one that she’s learnt at a free course organised by the social welfare office. You move hot stones across the back until the tension is gone. Sometimes people feel so heavenly that they fall asleep.

She barter other things too. *“At the moment I have an agreement with a carpenter, who’s going to put some shelves up for me and I’m going to give him a back massage, as the lad has a bad back.”*

Not so long ago she got picture frames in a similar way (she looked after an art gallery at lunchtime), a pair of thick socks (helping out in the surfers’ shop) and an hour of meditation (Hawaiian massage).

Thirdly, she surfs. For the first week her muscles were so sore that she couldn’t turn at night. Now every day she waits by the phone: if the waves are good, the boys from the surfing school pick her up in their van. In Donegal you can surf all year round, even in winter.

If the waves are too big, she does surfwatch: looking at people who surf. Sometimes she takes photos. She’s got a good eye and knows when to get the best shot.

Fourthly, at last she cooks healthily. *“I buy my milk and cheese from my neighbour, vegetables at the market, (...) I get tofu and organic muffins.”*

She doesn’t turn on her fridge as she prefers to buy daily and eat fresh.

Her friends tell her that she’s lost weight and is looking better than ever. *“Before I would always comfort eat: to deal with stress, with the problems with my boss. Now I’m not in a hurry anywhere, I don’t have to do anything. I live frugally, but I am true to myself.”*

In addition: she's decorating her house. It's 200 square metres, 3 bedrooms downstairs, upstairs living room and a dining room. The owner wanted 110 euro, they settled on 95 (...), because she doesn't have a job or children, (...). She's managed to re-paint downstairs blue. In the future that's where the massage room is going to be.

"The unemployment benefit is there for you to have the time to re-think your life. I've discovered that I don't want to work for somebody else anymore. I like to do things my way."

Finally: she meets her guardian angel, her name is (...), she's 40 and she's got a mobile phone you can ring any time.

Use your head

The rate of unemployment in Ireland is at 14.3 percent. The people looking after the unemployed are: the social welfare, which pays the benefits; FAS, which doesn't give out money, but advises on how to start your own business and sends people on free courses if they want to learn. There's also local development office which assigns a guardian angel to every unemployed person.

A year ago, when Magda wanted to open a massage business, her guardian angel whispered in her ear: the time is not right. What if – God forbid – there won't be any customers? Business will fail, benefits would be gone and she will have to slave away in some hotel.

You have to use your head to get out of the unemployment, you do it through the back to work allowance scheme. It's a special offer for those who have been on the unemployment benefit for at least two years. The way it works is that the unemployed who opens up their own business, gets a full unemployment benefit for the first year and then half of it for the second year. You say goodbye to the benefits only after two years when – thanks to the State's help – your business can stand on its own two feet.

927 Polish people were taking part in the back to work allowance scheme in December last year. 465 took advantage of the back to education programme aimed at those who want to continue learning.

Magda has almost half a year to go to qualify for the back to work allowance scheme. In the meantime she's going to get a driver's licence, do up a businessplan, an accountancy course and one in marketing (all of them organised by the social welfare office).

"Do I have a problem with being on benefits? – she ponders the question. – Yes. I don't want to live off the state, that's why I treat the benefits as an aid, which will help me to start my own business."

And what's the reaction of the people around her to all of this? *"I was never faced with negative comments. Maybe it's because a lot of Irish people are also on benefits. One friend once told me that she prefers her taxes to be spent on me, rather than on some eejits from Dublin."*

Bills

In the afternoon we grab a 3 euro coffee. We could have a similar one at home, but it is important to help the local business, explains Magda. And to spend some time with people.

“After I pay my bills I have 172 euro for a week. 40 euro a month goes on the Internet and the landline, 35 on my mobile. Once every two months I pay for electricity, that’s around 100 euro. I cook at home, I don’t go out to restaurants. I go to the market where I can get local products cheaper than in a shop. I look for special offers in Centra – for example 6 rolls for 1.50 euro. They will last me over three days, all you have to do is to toast them.”

“ I buy my clothes in Penney’s (a shop with sale-like prices, referred to by Polish people as ‘penis’ [Penney’s sounds like penis when pronounced in Polish – translator’s note]) , but not too many, because I don’t have the need to glam myself up. My latest buys: yoga sweatpants for a euro, trousers for 7, pyjamas for, bed linen for 6. I buy my shoes in TK Maxx – max 10 euro per pair. In the autumn I get a winter clothing allowance.”

“I look for books in a charity shop. Look: ‘The Jungle Book’, ‘Robin Hood’, ‘Out of the Silent Planet’ by C.S. Lewis – all three for 2.50 euro. Friends from Poland send me new books.”

“My big ticket item last year was the surfing board. I bought it on hire purchase. When I pay it off, I’ll think about a car. At the moment I either hitchhike or use the bus.”

“What do I lack the funds for? Fun. Here, life happens in a pub. So when I go to one in the evening I get a glass of tap water.”

The translation by The John Murray Show RTE Radio 1