

Saving the strays of Sarajevo?

Animal welfarists travel from Bosnia to Brussels, highlighting the plight of stray dogs to the European parliament

When you first meet Milena Malesevic, you cannot help but be consumed by the overwhelming compassion that she has for animals. She is a vibrant, welcoming character, but behind her eyes sit shadows of sadness – testament to the atrocities she has seen inflicted on the dogs of Bosnia.

Milena's journey began in 1988 when she rescued a puppy from the streets of Sarajevo. They were companions for 18 years. Since 2006, Milena has rescued more than 1,000 stray dogs.

The stray dog problem in eastern Europe is not exclusive to Bosnia; Romania has a policy of capture, hold and kill; in Croatia, the ministry is working to combat the alarming situation in settlements in Medimurje Country where there are over 3,000 stray dogs mainly used for dog fighting; and Bulgaria has a documented history of abject cruelty to stray dogs.

Within the picturesque country of Bosnia, war-torn ruins are a constant reminder of the



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devastation that befell the country during the Bosnian conflict of the 1990s. Among the ruins you will find groups of stray dogs, but the numbers have reduced greatly over the last decade, as dogs on the street are rounded up by dog catchers and taken to government killing stations. Nobody knows how the dogs are killed or what happens to the bodies. The 'lucky' few end up in unregulated shelters.

One such shelter is Praca. Over 400 dogs are incarcerated here in the most inhumane conditions imaginable. Across the country,

groups of volunteers fundraise to feed dogs in shelters such as this.

When Peter Egan, Dr Roger Bralow and I arrived at Praca, the distorted sound of barking dogs in distress echoed around the concrete walls and punched at our chests. The floors were covered in excrement; puppies lay next to dying dogs. Some dogs came up to say hello, tails wagging; others, so full of fear of the human hand, hid in dark corners. To see the spirit of many of these dogs crushed was devastating. They had forgotten how to be dogs.



Meeting some of the dogs Milena has rescued

Peter and Roger were unable to talk to me on camera as they left the shelter; they asked for time to process what they had seen. Later Roger told me, "It was overwhelming, what I saw in there. Many of the dogs that jumped up to see us had faeces impacted in their paws from walking on it all the time."

Peter said, "We have no right to treat any living animal in the way these dogs are treated. There is no welfare, no humanity and no kindness. What I found particularly penetrating was the hopelessness that these dogs felt."

Bosnia introduced its animal welfare act in 2009. Shock collars were banned and debarking made illegal. Experiments on stray animals were prohibited and the killing of any healthy dog, or a dog that can be treated and cured by a vet, was outlawed. On paper, the act appears to protect the stray dogs of Bosnia – but in practice, it has no effect, as it is rarely enforced. >



Left to right: Peter Egan, Milena Malesevic, Dr Roger Bralow and Maria Slough arriving at the European Parliament

< In 2010, a not-for-profit organisation called Saving Suffering Strays Sarajevo (SSSS) was set up by a dedicated group of women in the UK, who work tirelessly to support the work that Milena Malesevic does on the streets in Bosnia. SSSS employs local people in Bosnia with private kennels to look after the dogs that Milena rescues. The dogs are well cared for and start the socialisation process ready to find their forever homes.

A VOICE FOR STRAYS

Milena is devoted to every stray that she saves, seeing each one as an individual with a right to their own life. Her 12th-floor home in an apartment block houses the puppies that she rescues that are too young for kennels. It is also home to the very sick that need constant attention outside of veterinary care.

We met one such dog named Ozzy, who was found in a death shelter, starving and unable to walk from malnutrition. His body was covered in open sores; fleas and mites had eaten through his skin to the bone. Milena was slowly nursing him back to health. While we filmed the puppies in Milena's flat, Ozzy maintained his position under the table, only popping his head out when given a treat by Peter.

"These dogs want to survive," said Milena. "They respond to my kindness and get better, and hundreds are living wonderful lives now."

So several weeks later, Peter, Milena, Roger and I – together with some of Milena's team – are standing in front of the European Parliament, invited guests of Davor Skrllec MEP and EuroGroup For Animals, for the premiere of *A Dog's Life – Saving the Strays of Sarajevo*. From the streets to the EU, it seemed the dogs were with us, as we passed posters on every wall of Milena's dogs.

Reineke Hameleers, director of Eurogroup for Animals, opened the evening and introduced our



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Photo © Saving Suffering Strays Sarajevo



Ozzy © Saving Suffering Strays Sarajevo

host, MEP Davor Skrllec. The film played out to faces that registered shock and shame at what they saw. Then Milena spoke with controlled emotion about the horrors that she witnesses every day.

INTERNATIONAL SOLUTION

"Kill pounds are not a solution; large well-organised shelters with adequate numbers of people and volunteers working together, constantly overseen and appropriately built, would provide a solution. Rescuers should connect and work together to start to be more effective. The general population desperately needs widespread education to eradicate the myths around these dogs and to start seeing them as sentient beings and not dangerous vermin."

After questions from the floor, the host invited MEPs to sign the pledge for change for stray animals.

"Promoting the development of



guidelines on humane management of stray animal populations and advocating for their application in the EU and beyond should be a priority for the European parliament," said MEP Davor Skrllec.

Reineke Hameleers added, "Members of the European parliament are calling on the European Commission to formulate guidance on responsible and comprehensive humane stray pet population management, and encourage the EU and neighbouring countries to consider and implement them."

Keith Taylor, British MEP and animals spokesperson for the Green Party of England and Wales, said, "The plight of stray animals across Europe is one that rightly evokes strong emotions. We need pan-European progress on this issue and a standard approach that respects not just public health, but the health and well-being of the all too often forgotten animals

condemned to a life of misery on European streets."

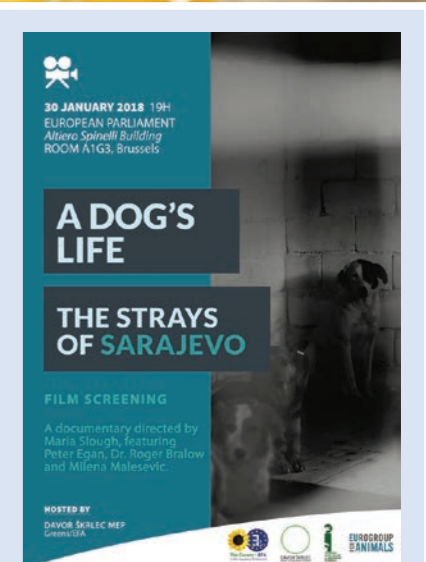
Back at the hotel, we reflected on the evening.

"I feel a sense of great hope from tonight," said Peter. "It seems that the idea of animal welfare throughout the world is often predicated by the parallel need for human welfare. I believe that these concepts are morally and ethically interdependent. Of course, we need infrastructure, but most importantly, we need the commitment of care and compassion."

MILENA'S MISSION

With the currency of compassion an evident part of a successful evening and step forward for the strays on the streets of Europe, Milena's parting words to me hung in the air.

"As long as the dogs have the want to fight for their lives, I will fight daily for them and dedicate my life to them. They are my life: and I their lifeline." ☐



FIND OUT MORE

- To learn more about the work of Milena Malesevic and Saving Suffering Strays Sarajevo, visit www.saving-sufferingstrays.com
- Follow the campaign's progress at www.eurogroup-foranimals.org and search online using the hashtag #Act4StrayAnimals