

By Emilia Marchelewska

FIANNA FÁIL'S Ala Olsevka has caused a stir in Portlaoise with an election manifesto some call "controversial".

But the Lithuanian – who works as a chef in a local hotel, and speaks an incredible six languages – is taking it in her stride, referring to her programme as "a bit different but concrete", and is very assured and passionate about her ideas.

One of the main issues Olsevka plans to tackle is the Irish health care system, which she describes as very expensive and not sufficiently staffed by specialists.

"Reform is badly needed and it will happen soon, but it doesn't solve the immediate problems, problems of people who are sick now, without private health insurance and who are put on the long waiting lists."

When her son became ill some time ago, the family were asked to wait a whole year for proper treatment. "I was so shocked, I cried," she recalls.

Olsevka's solution to this problem is to organise treatment trips abroad for local people in need. Her idea is that those requiring specific medical treatments and check-ups could easily be treated in other EU countries where medical care is more efficient.

Could this audacious plan attract votes? She admits that younger people have described her idea as medical tourism, but "people who suffer health problems, who don't have work, don't have money say 'Yes, help us now.'"

Indeed, she was initially surprised by the positive response. "I think it is a good idea for this very time."

Olsevka's other plans include a call for the development of a large-scale solar energy system to reduce fuel costs and pollution. She admits that this requires a major change in people's thinking, and might not make her very popular, though she maintains it is an important issue for the future, and could even lead to job creation.

Further points on Olsevka's programme revolve around children and culture. With long term experience as a professional dancer and choreographer in her native Lithuania, she says she recognises "the bug in people that makes them want to dance, to sing and to draw."

She dreams about starting a multicultural centre where people could engage in all forms of cultural activity and experience the cultures of the many different nations represented in Portlaoise today.

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