



COMMENTARY

Romania and Bulgaria: The accession guessing game

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On 1 January 2013 the European Union began a one-year countdown to the end of labour market restrictions on Romania and Bulgaria (the 'A2'), when citizens of these countries will have the same right as all other EU citizens to live and work in any country in the union. The end of these restrictions creates an expectation of increasing rates of immigration, which in turn has created a flurry of press speculation in the UK about what this will mean for Britain.

In a recent television interview (January 2013) Communities Secretary Eric Pickles claimed to have seen estimates of how many Romanians and Bulgarians might arrive. But he was criticised in the media after he did not reveal what the estimates were or who had produced them, saying that he was not confident in them.

MigrationWatch, a group that campaigns for reduced immigration, produced a report soon after Mr Pickles' interview suggesting Romanian and Bulgarian immigration would add between 30,000 and 70,000 to the UK population each year for five years – with a central estimate of 50,000 – as measured in the Annual Population Survey. However, they believe that only half of this migration will be reflected in official immigration and net-migration statistics derived from the International Passenger Survey.

The MigrationWatch report's numbers were substantially lower than some recent speculation, and the report was explicitly critical of Conservative MP Philip Hollobone's claim that the population of Romanians and Bulgarians in the UK will triple to 425,000 in two years. Some media have implied even larger numbers might arrive while other organisations have suggested that MigrationWatch's central estimate may still be 'rather high'.

But regardless of how accurate or otherwise any of the predictions turn out to be, they remain no more than informed guesses. There is, at present, no sound method for working out how many Romanians and Bulgarians will come.

The desire to predict future inflows and net migration of Romanian and Bulgarians is not surprising – government needs to plan for impacts on key services such as housing, health and education as well as on the labour market, benefits and the emergency services.

But previous efforts to predict migration from accession countries have been wrong, and have subsequently been heavily criticised by both politicians and the media. Attempted forecasts of A8 accession before the 2004 EU expansion, based in part on previous accessions of Spain and Portugal to the EU, turned out to significantly underestimate A8 immigration to the UK.

For this reason, predictions of A2 immigration in the coming years based on the A8 experience need to be treated with caution. Although there are strong parallels – both are groups of post-communist economies, and the income disparity between the UK and Poland in 2003–2004 was very similar to the current disparity between the UK and the A2 countries. But drawing too close a parallel between A8 accession in 2004 and A2 accession in 2014 misses some important differences. Even enumerating the differences leaves no sure method for weighing each factor relative to the others.

Factors suggesting relatively low immigration

A number of factors suggest that lifting labour market restrictions in 2014 will have less impact on the UK than the simultaneous opening of borders and labour markets to the A8 in 2004.

First, in 2004 borders and labour markets were opened at the same time, but Romanian and Bulgarian nationals have already had open access to the UK, if not to its labour markets, for six years, so many of those who would be interested in travelling to and living in the UK have already come. An estimated 141,000 people born in the A2 were already living in Britain as of 2011, while APS estimates from 2006, though very uncertain because of small sample sizes, suggested that fewer than 34,000 were here.

Second, in 2004 only three EU states – the UK, the Republic of Ireland and Sweden – opened their labour markets to A8 workers without restrictions. Britain, with its large economy and flexible labour market, quickly became a leading destination. In 2014 the entire EU will be obliged to open labour markets fully to Romanian and Bulgarian workers (for those countries which still have restrictions, including Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands and Spain). In this scenario, the UK might not be uniquely attractive to migrants who would have similar labour market access in other major EU economies like Germany and France, possibly leading to the UK drawing a smaller share of A2 migration.

Relatedly, Romanians and Bulgarians who have emigrated to EU countries up to this point have not been especially likely to choose the UK. The majority of Romanian-born emigrants in Europe are concentrated in just two countries: Spain and Italy. Established personal and economic networks are a ‘pull-factor’ that may continue to lead A2 migrants to Spain, Italy and elsewhere.

Finally, the combined populations of Romania and Bulgaria is around 29 million whereas the combined populations of the A8 countries is around 70 million, meaning there is considerably less potential supply, at least by this rough indicator.

Factors suggesting relatively high immigration

On the other hand, high unemployment rates in Italy and Spain may make these countries less attractive as destinations. Employment opportunities are not the only factor determining migration, but they are certainly important.

Even further, the large number of Romanian and Bulgarian workers in Spain and Italy countries may have an incentive to move again if those economies continue to struggle. As MigrationWatch notes, the UK has lower youth unemployment rates than Italy and Spain, making it a possible destination for secondary migration of A2 nationals, although Germany and the Netherlands have still lower unemployment rates.

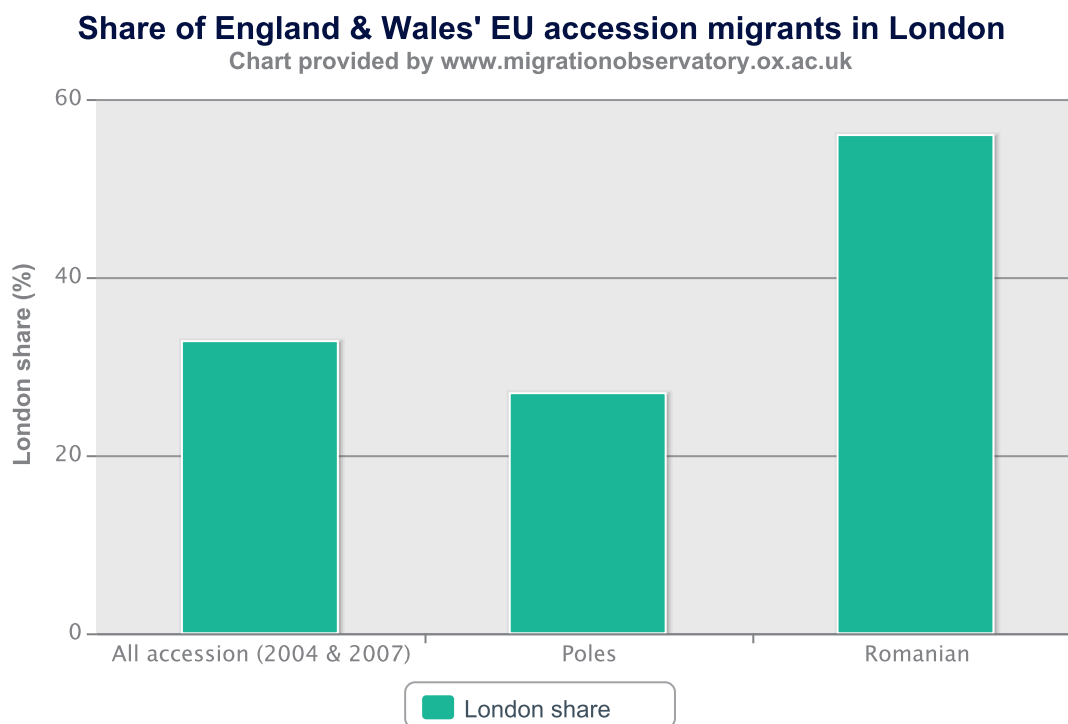
Managing uncertainty

So there is enormous uncertainty about what sort of numbers of Romanian and Bulgarian migrants Britain might expect in the future. There are numerous differences from 2004, and in looking toward the future it is not clear how much weight to give to each of these factors relative to the others.

Aside from numbers, another major uncertainty is where A2 migrants will go within Britain and what sorts of jobs they will do. Again, there are significant challenges in comparing Romanian and Bulgarian migrants to A8 migrants.

In particular, it is worth noting that Romanian and Bulgarian migrants in the UK are currently concentrated in London (more than 50% live in the capital according to LFS data, which appears to be supported by the census). Polish-born migrants, who make up the majority of those from the A8, have spread more widely around the UK, with only 27% of those in England and Wales living in London, according to the 2011 census.

Figure 1



Source : Office for National Statistics, 2011 England and Wales Census release

These differences in geographical distribution may result from the labour market restrictions currently in effect, as these restrictions may have affected both the number and type of migrants coming from the A2 to the UK. For example, they may also have led to more highly skilled Romanians and Bulgarians working in the UK than might be expected in the long term. We cannot know if these differences will remain after the expiration of transitional restrictions.

In short, policy makers face uncertainty about A2 migration in 2014 and beyond. There is no sound method to tell us in advance the number of migrants who will come to the UK, what work they are going to do, where they will live, the wages they will earn, and to what extent (and where) they will use public services.

Uncertainty is a very difficult thing to plan for but the current situation appears to leave little opportunity for much else. Predictions of immigration or net-migration numbers, even if they prove correct in retrospect, cannot be certain enough prospectively to provide a clear, solid basis for policy. In the absence of any basis for predicting migration numbers and regional impacts with any certainty, policy-makers might do well to prepare for a broad range of potential eventualities about the number, type, and regional and local distribution of migrants.

Of course, the task would be easier if we could predict the future, but governments must prepare for contingencies in all sorts of policy areas all the time, and migration is no exception.

Related material

- BBC news - Eric Pickles: New EU 'influx' may add to housing problems
- MigrationWatch report - Immigration from Romania and Bulgaria
- Daily Mail - A million migrants from East Europe now live in Britain
- Daily Mail - We're on our way to Britain
- BBC news - Migration Watch warning on Romania and Bulgaria immigration



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Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



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