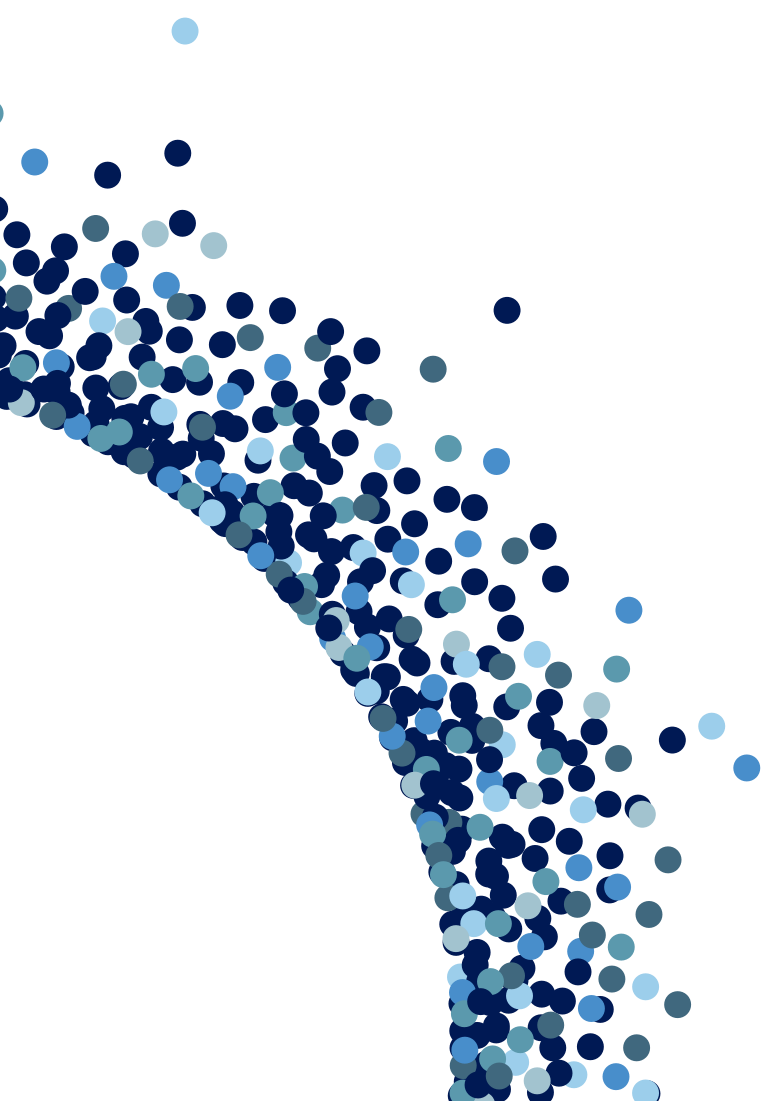




COMMENTARY

Jumping the gun: Waiting for the facts before estimating Romanian and Bulgarian migration



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On January 1st 2014, Romanians and Bulgarians will have full access to the UK labour market. It is a subject that has been the focus of much media attention – attention which has been, at least in part, stimulated by the lack of official estimates about how many migrants from these two relatively low income EU member states may arrive in the UK. But it will be several months before any official data shows the actual level of migration from these countries.

Since the start of 2013 the British press has featured a regular drum-beat of stories about the up-coming end of transitional controls on migration from Romania and Bulgaria (the A2). These stories have, largely, focused on the potential of a sudden large-scale arrival of migrants from these two countries when the transitional controls come to an end on January 1st 2014.

Speculation about the scale of potential migration was increased in January when communities secretary Eric Pickles told the BBC that he had seen estimates of the expected number, and warned of “influxes” in some areas affecting pressure on housing stocks.

Notwithstanding Mr Pickles interview claims, the UK government has not made any official estimate of how many people will come in 2014 and beyond from the A2 countries, and the Migration Observatory has been keen to highlight the fact that there is currently no robust methodology to make accurate predictions. However it has become very clear during this period is that the British media abhors an information vacuum, and with no solid information available, journalists have pounced on unofficial numbers – sometimes little more than informed guesses – to fill the empty space.

This is not to say, of course, that none of the numbers that have been put forward will prove, in the long term, to be correct: the most commonly cited estimate in the media over the last year has been MigrationWatch’s estimate that the UK’s population will be increased by between 30,000 and 70,000 per year (central estimate 50,000) as a result of the migration of A2 nationals for five years. The Labour Force Survey (LFS) indicates that the number of those who were born in these two countries and now live in in the UK has increased by about 20,000 on average over the past five years even before the end of labour market controls. So the lower bound estimate is not far above the current figures.

If the MigrationWatch upper bound proves to be too low, there are several other individuals who have been happy to offer higher numbers, such as Conservative MP Philip Hollobone (“a third of a million within two years”) and American think-tank the Democracy Institute (385,000 in five years). So – whatever happens from January 2014 it is almost inevitable that someone will be able to claim to have been right about how many people were going to arrive.

Unfortunately the press, fuelled by these speculative numbers, has created an expectation among the public that it cannot deliver on: that after January 1st the real scale of Romanian and Bulgarian immigration will become clear. But it won’t for quite some time.

Despite all of the speculation, for several months after January 1st 2014 there will be no official data about how many people have arrived from the A2 countries. For journalists this will mean no official data from which to extrapolate what impact this immigration may have on public services, welfare, housing and a raft of other policy and social issues.

For clarity, this is when various different types of information about A2 migration will start to become available:

- May 14 2014: Data on employment levels by country of birth and nationality from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) for the first quarter of 2014 to be published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). These data will

provide the first information about the size of the population of A2 migrants working in the UK during January–March 2014, and their employment rate. The limitation of these data is that it will not be a reliable measure of immigration or emigration because it will not show how many have arrived or left, only how many are currently working on the UK.

- May 22 2014: Data on the number of National Insurance Numbers (NINOs) allocated to adult overseas nationals from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for the first quarter of 2014 This is a useful indicator of the immigration of A2 nationals to the UK. But it will only provide a limited snapshot, providing no information about the applicant's date of arrival in the UK.
- August 28 2014: Provisional estimates of Long Term International Migration (LTIM) to and from the UK for the year ending March 2014 will be published by the ONS. These are the first solid official indicators of migration to and from the A2 countries to the UK. There is still some question about how data on A2 migrants will be presented, current indications from the ONS suggest that it will form its own category rather than be included with either the A8 category or in any other EU category, which should be useful. Nonetheless, as this only provides data on a full year (April 2013 – March 2014) that includes the first quarter of the year following the end of labour market restrictions it will not provide a clear picture of annual net migration from the A2 countries. Presuming the current publishing schedule continues the provisional year to December 2014 data will be published in May 2015.
- August 2015: Data on the population by nationality and country of birth from the Annual Population Survey (APS) for the calendar year 2014 will be published by the ONS. These data will provide an opportunity to assess the year on year increase in migrants from the A2 countries.
- November 2015: Final LTIM estimates for net migration to and from the UK for the calendar year 2014 will be published by the ONS. These estimates will provide the best data for immigration, emigration and net migration of A2 migrants.

The data vacuum is again likely to be filled with unofficial estimates of varying quality, along with anecdotes from communities concerned about new arrivals and photographs of Romanian and Bulgarian people in Britain.

These anecdotes and photographs may well tell perfectly true stories about impacts on particular streets and even particular towns, and as such they can be valid and important – so long as they are not used as a substitute for actual evidence of larger scale change.

Conversely, when the actual numbers do start to become available they don't provide evidence of what is happening at a local level. What this all comes down to is a simple, and fundamental point: anecdotes, pictures and guesses cannot be the bedrock of an evidence-based policy debate.

It is understandable that a thirst for evidence about the scale Romanian and Bulgarian immigration is heightened at the moment – it is a period of uncertainty, and recent history has left the UK nervous about the scale of EU migration. But until the official data starts to be published it is important that the UK's media and political establishment check their desire for numbers.

Related Material

- BBC News – Eric Pickles: New EU ‘influx’ may add to housing problems www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21002988
- Migration Observatory commentary – Romania and Bulgaria: The accession guessing game www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/commentary/romania-and-bulgaria-accession-guessing-game
- MigrationWatch UK report – Immigration from Romania and Bulgaria www.migrationwatchuk.org/briefingPaper/document/287
- The Telegraph – Strict benefit rules would deter a new wave of migrants www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/9812780/Strict-benefit-rules-would-deter-a-new-wave-of-migrants.html
- Huffington Post politics blog – Pseudo-Research Pulls 385,000 Migrants Out of a Hat www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/the-conversation-uk/immigration-statistics_b_4425268.html
- Office for National Statistics – Long-Term International Migration Estimates Frequently Asked Questions www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/specific/population-and-migration/international-migration-methodology/long-term-international-migration---frequently-asked-questions.pdf



The Migration Observatory

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.



COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

www.compas.ox.ac.uk

Press contact

Rob McNeil

Senior Media Analyst

robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk

+ 44 (0)1865 274568

+ 44 (0)7500 970081

