

Bulgarian and Romanian migration to the UK: double dilemma?

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Concerns about intra-European migration and migrant numbers are once again at the forefront of political discourse with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Eric Pickles, and then Shadow Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, expressing concerns about the possible impacts of opening our labour market to Bulgarian and Romanian migrants in 2014. Some of this trepidation follows the un-anticipated and undeniably large numbers of Polish migrants who arrived in the UK after accession in 2004. Concerns are exacerbated by the increasingly anti-EU stance being adopted by the main political parties following UKIP's second placing in the Eastleigh by-election. After a decade of politicians competing to out-tough each other on migration, it seems we now have to be tough on Europe too, making the prospect of an inflow of migrants from the A2 countries, Bulgaria and Romania, a double dilemma.

While there is no doubt that the 2004 accession did change the face of the UK; bringing further diversity to our cities and new diversity to rural areas (Polish is now in the top five languages spoken in the UK and some areas have seen more than an 800% rise in residents from the 'any other white' ethnic category) the situation currently faced is different. In 2004 accession and the removal of labour market restrictions occurred simultaneously while the UK, Ireland and Sweden were the only countries to fully open their labour markets. A booming economy, and a history of migration to the UK as post war migrants and asylum seekers, made Britain the most attractive of the three countries. In 2014 all EU countries will open their labour markets to Bulgarians and Romanians offering a choice of 27 countries, some of which have lower levels of unemployment, are more accessible and have longer-standing connections to Bulgaria and Romania. Furthermore A2 migrants have had freedom of movement around the EU since 2007. Many who wanted to migrate have already done so using work permits to access employment. Thus it is unlikely that we will see movement on the scale witnessed in 2004.

We are also much more experienced in the UK at addressing the challenges and making the most of the opportunities associated with the arrival of accession migrants. The rural schools that had little experience of supporting children with English as a second language and the hospital and GP surgeries unfamiliar with providing services for migrants are now much more knowledgeable and experienced. Thus the culture shock that followed the 2004 accession is unlikely in 2014. We need to acknowledge that things are different this time round and ensure that we learn from those earlier experiences.

The EU Accession Migration: Taking Stock and Looking Forward conference being held at the Institute for Research into Superdiversity, at the University of Birmingham on 25th March in partnership with the Migrants Rights Network and the West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership will provide an opportunity to reflect on what we have learned in the past nine years. With sessions from academics, policymakers, business and community organisations as well as projects that have worked to support migrants and institutions, there will be plenty of opportunities to learn from experiences to date and to consider what lies ahead.

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Information about the [EU Accession Mitigation: Taking Stock and Looking Forward conference](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/superdiversity-institute/events/2013/03/eu-accession-migration-event.aspx) (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/superdiversity-institute/events/2013/03/eu-accession-migration-event.aspx>)

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