

Ending restrictions on Bulgarian and Romanian migration

Since accession to the European Union in 2007, restrictions have been placed on Bulgarian and Romanian migration to the UK (so-called 'A2' migration). In 2004, when eight other Eastern European member-states acceded to the EU, the number of migrants from these countries was higher than the government had predicted, and as a result it opted to impose temporary restrictions on A2 migration. For almost seven years, A2 migrants have not been entitled to full free movement rights. Rather, they have only been permitted to migrate through specific migration quota schemes, and have only accessed full EU citizenship rights on completion of 12 months of continuous employment.



From January 2014, this picture will change. The restrictions on A2 migration will come to an end, and A2 migrants will be entitled to full rights of free movement that are a core component of EU citizenship. A2 migrants will be permitted to migrate to the UK regardless of quota schemes or other restrictions on non-EU migration.

For some, these changes have set alarm bells ringing. When the restrictions end, just how many are going to migrate from the A2 countries? The anti-migration group Migration Watch has been predicting numbers as high as 50,000 every year for five years – the Government thinks that the number will be much lower however, at just 13,000. In reality, it is very difficult to make predictions of this kind. Experiences of Eastern European migration in 2004 do not offer a useful comparative case, because in the case of A2 migrants, many have already migrated to the UK over the seven years using the available channels.

Numbers are not the only factor in this debate. Right-wing media and political parties often cast A2 migrants as 'benefits scroungers', coming to the UK for the welfare state and nothing else; and claim that ending restrictions on A2 migration will mean that thousands of migrants push already over-stretched public services to breaking point.

Yet these kinds of views overlook the contribution that EU migration has made to the UK economy – both at a national level, and also in supporting local economies. And research also suggests that ending the restrictions will prevent the undercutting of British workers' wages – a problem that is often referred to in debates about EU migration – because it will leave A2 migrants less vulnerable to exploitation. The benefits of A2 migration to national and local economies are therefore likely to outweigh costs to the welfare state – particularly as we know that migrants actually make very little use of public services and social security benefits compared to the wider population.

The debate about A2 migration restrictions is clouded by often unsupported assumptions that migrants claim benefits and put untenable pressure on public services.

Despite this, Government is still keen to impose continued restrictions on the extent to which Bulgarian and Romanian migrants can access basic public services such as the National Health Service. Such measures may be a contravention of EU free movement laws which are based on the principle of non-discrimination regardless of nationality.

It is the case that changing populations mean adapting services to meet new needs; but until we are able to move beyond stereotypes about A2 migrants and the welfare state, a realistic debate about how best to support service providers in meeting the needs of their diversifying populations is out of reach.

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