

It is unlikely that large numbers of Romanians will flock to the UK, but those that do migrate will benefit both countries.

Blog Admin

In December of this year, the UK's restriction on the free movement for citizens of Bulgaria and Romania will be lifted. Many UK commentators have predicted a 'flood' of new migrants from the two countries as a result. Looking closely at Romania, [Clara Volintiru](#) finds that the present debate ignores the relatively positive economic situation in the country and the strong likelihood that any migrants to the UK will be temporary and well educated.



Before the fall of communism, those who lived under its rule had an intense yearning for the liberty and wonders of the west. The Pet Shop Boys song "Go West" became an unofficial anthem for all who secretly hoped to travel abroad someday. For a chance to realise the way of life of people in western countries, many chose to make major sacrifices – leaving behind family, friends, and not least, their possessions, to be confiscated by the state. The powerful restrictions on traveling abroad often created an adverse reaction, and consolidated the stubborn pursuit of the values of Western Europe. It is this cultural background that is mostly ignored when we talk about immigration in the EU today.

Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007: until Croatia's accession in the summer of 2013, the last members to join the Union. The many unresolved issues around reform in the two countries led to them being labeled "laggards". With the recent economic turmoil in the Eurozone, much scrutiny has been turned towards the South European member states such as Greece, and worries about Romania and Bulgaria have been mostly set aside. However with next year's expiration of transitional controls on immigration, the UK has triggered a new wave of debates on the present situation within the two countries.

The argument is essentially that the economic conditions in Romania and Bulgaria will cause a flood of immigrants – with panicked [estimates predicting up to](#)

[50,000 persons a year](#) – which will put strain on the British social welfare system. In both countries this argument seems to be unsupported, but I will detail only the Romanian situation, mainly because it has the 7th largest population (over 21 million) in the EU, and is thus the more serious risk to immigration dynamics.



Credit: Thomas Hackl (CC BY 2.0)

The first major problem with the current debate on Romanian immigration is the lack of proper representation of the actual figures. The biggest share of migrants from Romania to other countries consists of [temporary workers, in such domains as construction](#), most of which have no intention of

residing permanently abroad. Thus, not all entrants from Romania will be a strain on the system, but merely an infusion of new labour when and where the market demands it. Even the young professionals that have been joining major companies in the UK are much more flexible than in previous decades. As one young Romanian professional living in London puts it: “I hate it when my dad asks me whether I will move to Britain or not – these days you work in one country, one year, and move to another the next”.

The second problem with the debate is the argument that the economic environment back home will send people in search of jobs abroad. In reality Romania’s general unemployment rate, at around 7 per cent, is one of the lowest in the EU. Furthermore, even though austerity measures have hit the pay packets of public employees, much of the Romanian economy is based on small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Here again the figures show relative stability, as the self-employed – usually the owners of SMEs in Romania – make up around 20 per cent of those employed in the country, which is one of the highest levels in Europe.

Finally, another issue is the non-specificity of the discussion. Apparently, the argument refers only to low-skilled labour, because students and the self-employed already have unrestricted movement within the EU. However restrictions also apply to those graduates who try to find a job after they finish their studies (in the UK, or other countries). Whereas the general unemployment rate in Romania is close to the EU average, the educated youth is one of the hardest hit groups, with unemployment currently around 30 per cent – double the EU average. In addition, according to a report by the [League of Romanian Students Abroad \(LSRS\)](#), OECD figures show that of 34,605 students abroad, 4,553 have chosen the UK, making it the most popular destination. It is educated youth that are most likely to look for jobs in the UK, and not the low-skilled, seasonal workers who mostly prefer the Southern countries (Spain, Italy) for multiple reasons, including language fluency.

Ironically, the same year that Romania joined the EU, [Alessandro Barbero published a book—The Day of the Barbarians](#), which attributed the fall of the Roman Empire to its decision to deny access to the Goths: who, as the author claims, initially came not as invaders, but as immigrants looking for a more civilised life. This should serve as a lesson for all of Europe. It is important to understand that for many Central and Eastern Europeans the quest is not for economic perks and subventions, but for the privilege of belonging to, and becoming infused with, a higher-quality of education and professional life. And some will in fact opt to return back home, once they’ve achieved this.

Many of the failings of the institutional system in Romania are attributable to the mentalities inherited from the communist system. With growing openness from Europe, there is a real chance for current generations to change their behaviour and shape their actions according to an improved set of values. One of the issues which stands to benefit most from such a change of mentality is corruption. More and more young professionals, many of whom are educated abroad, are joining the ranks of civil society groups to fight the corrupt practices to which their parents yield without question.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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