

Brexit will lead to more, not less immigration

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/07/28/brexit-will-lead-to-more-not-less-immigration/

28/07/2016

*As the implications of the Brexit vote sink in, one of its few positive effects is that suddenly the debate around immigration, freedom of movement and EU citizenship has matured. **Michał P. Garapich** argues, however, that Brexit will in fact lead to more, not less immigration because migrants tend to think strategically. Freedom of movement guarantees that migrants can respond to economic demand quickly: they come for work, leave when it's gone. He underlines that any future harsher migration regime is bound lead to more undocumented migrants getting stuck in the country.*



The first effect is that millions of Britons realise now that there is a clear link between their own rights of roaming around Europe, settle in Dordogne and work in Rome or Warsaw, and the rights of a Polish builder, a Romanian fruit picker or a French nanny to come to the UK and to work or to study. Subtle, class based distinctions embedded in language (British in Europe are 'expats' but Poles in Boston are 'immigrants') began to lose their meanings and sense. Vast sections of the British population see now that the presence of immigrants from the EU in the UK, and opportunities the British have to work, travel and settle in the EU are parts of the same package. And the loss of their European citizenship rights, with inevitable arrival of harsher vis and work-permit regimes and passport controls will come as a shock. It is a shame it came so late and at such a cost. The recent stampede of Brits to seek some family connection in Europe to acquire EU citizenship shows that people are genuinely worried and seek to take matters into their own hands securing rights that a small majority of the British electorate has denied them.

Second, the honest acknowledgement of Theresa May that it is highly likely that the looming end of the free movement will lead to a rise in immigration from the EU highlights what some scholars, myself included, predicted. It is reasonable to say that Brexit in fact, will lead to more, not less immigration. Migrants are not numbers or categories. They are real people making strategic choices in a fast changing reality. If urgent discussions on Brexit and its consequences take place now in boardrooms of the City and Whitehall offices, imagine what goes on in the hundreds of thousands of households in the UK and Europe which were the beneficiaries of the freedom of movement. And this happens across the board – from bankers, academics, artists and doctors to builders, plumbers and fruit pickers.



Gdańsk Lech Wałęsa Airport Departures board

One – given the uncertainty – obvious strategy is to speed up settlement or migration plans. So if you are here, apply for British citizenship, if you are not, come to Britain now before it gets harder. As a social anthropologist doing research among Polish migrants since the times before the EU enlargement, I believe I know how migrants tend to think. And they are thinking very strategically. For example, not a lot of people know that hundreds of thousands of Poles began arriving in the early 2000s, before full freedom of movement began applying to the CEE countries. But the door was already widening then, and in anticipation of opening of the labour market, people began to migrate in larger numbers. These were these flows that convinced British policy makers not to impose any restrictions on new arrivals, since many were already here. Today, in anticipation of harsher times to come, lot of people adjust their plans and begin their route to the UK.

Also, migrations are facilitated by social networks. In a restrictive immigration regime, these count as important assets, facilitating further migration flows. If you think that a British citizen with a family connection in Slovakia or Spain will not invite his or her cousin on a tourist visa to work in a bar or farm – think again.

The second reason why a Brexit will lead to rise of immigration from the EU is that freedom of movement relies on the labour market demand – it was particularly beneficial for casual, seasonal labour. Not all migrants, come to Britain to settle. In my research among Poles, it is clear that a large chunk of that group – at least 25% – move between UK and Poland on circular or seasonal basis. Famous research by the American migration scholar, Douglas Massey, shows that the harsher the migration regime, the more undocumented migrants get stuck in the country of destination. Freedom of movement guarantees that circular migrants can respond to economic demand quickly, they come for work, leave when it's gone. But restrictions increase the costs of that circular strategy, since for a rationally thinking migrant it may become too risky to leave Britain if you are not sure if you will be allowed back in. This will inevitably give rise to an already massive number of undocumented migrants in the UK (some estimates hover around 1 million) with all its negative consequences, fuelling the black housing market, the grey economy, and the abuse of workers' rights and general misery of these people afraid to go to the GP or to register their children at a local school. This will certainly put further pressure on the public services dealing with the difficult situations these people find themselves in.

So, Theresa May is right – Brexit, in contrast to the bullish and plainly demagogic nonsense served to the British public by the Leave campaign, will lead to a raise in immigration. But, the sooner someone starts communicating this to the local communities in Britain that overwhelmingly voted to leave the EU and deals with it, the better.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE. [Image](#): CC 2.0.

Dr [Michał P. Garapich](#) is a social anthropologist, senior lecturer at the University of Roehampton. His book on Polish migrants [London's Polish Borders](#) is published by Ibidem.

- Copyright © 2015 London School of Economics