

# Compared to its neighbours, open migration to Britain has been a success story

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*Eastern European migration to the UK is deplored by many Britons. Yet, argues **Adrian Favell**, comparing Britain's experience with that of other member states shows just how well it has done out of freedom of movement. The UK has a flexible, well-educated migrant workforce at its disposal – unlike other countries, some of which have lost qualified workers or are struggling to deal with inflows from outside the EU.*



Amid all the debate about the costs and benefits of open EU borders, and its crucial role in the Brexit vote, it is remarkable how little attention is paid to thinking *comparatively* about UK migration trends in a European context.

For all the negativity about the “immigration crisis” in the UK, and political calls for an “emergency brake” on EU migrants, there is [little to suggest](#) that Britain is doing worse from the effects of this migration than any of its close neighbours.

The UK, as an island, is insulated from some of its most difficult consequences. It has nothing like the Roma population present, say, in France. The Syrian crisis is remote, and an exaggerated issue in the British imagination: the UK has received only around 30,000 Syrian refugees (less than 0.05% of its population), whereas Germany is struggling with around 1 million asylum seekers (well over 1%). Meanwhile, probably the most significant stream of underquantified migrants in the UK – the Chinese – barely ever raises an eyebrow.

For sure, British hostility is focused squarely on Eastern Europeans: lured to the UK, according to some government ministers, because of the unparalleled generosity of the British welfare state. Amid austerity and budget cuts, this sounds a peculiar claim. It is true in one respect: as a universal system, newcomers in the UK are able to access the minimalist British safety net in benefits, as well as routine access to medical and public services, as soon as they are resident; in Germany or France, access to many benefits is linked to employment and past contributions. As research has consistently [shown](#), though, EU migrants in the UK are more likely than natives to be in employment and not claiming benefits, and are net contributors to the system.

By the same token, were jobs available and the economy as buoyant elsewhere in Europe, Britain would hardly be the top destination of choice for migrants pursuing strict economic logic. Britain has been by far the most open, welcoming and well-paying labour market for migrants in Europe looking for work. This has given it a profile of EU migrants that is younger, better qualified, better matched to work, and more successful over time – i.e. a vastly better *selection effect* – than elsewhere, while also being more numerous.

While this selection was left to employers and open competition it produced the most attractive and dynamic job market in Europe at all levels of the economy; attempts by the current government to now regulate and wrap up even EU migration in the restrictive bureaucratic control of visa regimes and quotas are anti-liberal and fly in the face of economic good sense. Ironically, too, it is also clear that the only way demand for foreign labour might be suppressed would be to implement higher levels of regulation and stricter wage and job protection on low end jobs – a [social democratic argument](#), more like the German system, that is unlikely to appeal to Messrs Cameron and Osborne.

## The UK chose migrants – and migrants chose the UK

The period since the 2004 accession can be seen as a kind of natural experiment in migration policy towards the

East. Countries could choose between open doors or (time limited) barriers to full accession, set against differences in labour market regulation and welfare state provision which would offer a variety of incentives and restrictions on mobility and protection in employment. Migrants then self-selected with their feet. In 2004, only the UK, Ireland and Sweden opened their doors at first, and it was Britain's globally open economy which received the overwhelming majority of Eastern European migrants; well over half a million recorded in the first two years. Sweden, in contrast, where restrictive union practices block access of foreigners to many sectors of employment, was a much less attractive destination. Britain now has over two million foreign EU residents; only Germany has more.

While Eastern European construction, household, care and hospitality sector employees and entrepreneurs readily found work and advanced in Britain, in France a negative debate raged over a phantasm of Polish plumbers, amidst fears of service sector liberalisation destroying labour market protection for French nationals. This directly contributed to the 2005 vote against the EU constitution. At the same time, a flood of young and mobile French were leaving the country for work in London's booming banking, media, educational and creative sectors. One French minister ruefully complained that free movement in the EU meant that Britain was sending France its ageing retirees and holiday makers, and receiving in return all its most educated and talented young workers.



A woman begs outside the Sacre-Coeur cathedral in Paris, 2010. Photo: [Zoetnet](#) via a [CC BY 2.0](#) licence

Comparative welfare states and varieties of capitalism scholars often rate Britain's liberal "anglo-saxon" economy negatively in comparison to the "organised" capitalism of the Netherlands and Germany, and the "social democratic" bastions of the Nordics. It is by no means sure, though, that to be a migrant in Denmark or the Netherlands is preferable to the UK. These once progressive, tolerant countries have tarnished their reputations with strident anti-immigrant politics, led by openly racist politicians. Numbers of foreign EU residents in absolute and percentage terms are much less. In both, informal linguistic and cultural barriers make negotiating the labour market or public services very difficult. In Denmark, sectoral regulation which matches jobs to credentials renders foreign qualifications and experience illegible to employers. The joke is that you need a Danish degree and appropriate union membership just to be able to grill hot dogs in a street food van.

In contrast, strong implementation of EU norms of non-discrimination by nationality in the UK has seen British employers readily employing better qualified, more motivated foreign workers, across a full range of employment opportunities, in a much more competitive and mobile environment.

Which leaves Germany: in reality, alongside the UK, the only other serious competitive large scale economic model. For many years after 2004, Germany kept its large Polish workforce out of the open labour market, exploiting them

through segmented, secondary status employment and temporary resident status. This has improved, with accession barriers coming down, and a liberalisation of employment, towards a more “flexisecure” system. At the same time it has maintained job and wage protection levels, and preserved manufacturing jobs. Germany has also become more open to younger migrants from Southern Europe, and more positive to immigration generally which it sees as a solution to its longer term demographic decline. Yet it now faces the brunt of the refugee crisis in Western Europe and its own resurfacing anti-immigrant demons.

## **United States of Britain**

In the light of these straightforward comparisons, it is perplexing why much of the British press and – it is assumed – British public has such a negative view of how well the country has absorbed and accepted intra-EU migration and free movement accords. With open labour markets, high levels of in-migration, and a low but universally accessible welfare safety net, Britain boomed as an attractive migrant economy in Europe before 2008, and continued to do better than its neighbours in the years since. London and the South East have been transformed by its Europeanisation; on an everyday level, the “superdiversity” of these new migrations blends in to Britain’s well-established, and well-recognised, multiracial immigrant heritage.

Ironically, the one comparison that anti-EU campaigners love to underline is how similar they think the UK is to the US; and therefore how far it is from being “European”. It is true that in the 2000s Britain became more like the US as an economy and society driven and transformed by migration. London indeed matched New York from 2000-2005 in terms of its incoming populations, their role in the labour market, and their effects on the city. America relies on immigrants at every level of employment, in far greater numbers than anywhere in Europe. Closed borders and zero immigration, the fantasy of UKIP and others, would in fact remove these similarities.

## **Migrant diversity and dynamism is what makes these two societies comparable**

These comparative arguments are often lost because of the insularity of debates on Europe in the UK. Public debate, focused on the negatives of migration, and a narrow range of cost-benefit issues, is ignorant of what can be learned from the UK’s experience when compared to others. This is exacerbated by a lack of knowledge among academic specialists in Britain about the varieties of language, culture, economy and political system of even its closest neighbours. Britain is discussed as if it was a unique, exceptional case. Yet Britain is not unique in its Euroscepticism; nor is it unique in its awkwardness towards the European project. By looking outwards it may learn to know itself better.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of BrexitVote, nor the LSE.*

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