

Economic asset or welfare tourists? Political reactions to Eastern European migrants in the UK



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In this article, it is argued that Eastern European migrants have become the focus of critical migration discourse in the current Conservative-led Government in the United Kingdom (UK), after the more welcoming period of the preceding Labour Governments. From the 1990s, the Labour Governments have favoured the enlargement of the European Union (EU) and the free movement of Eastern European migrants within the Union by appealing to economic benefits. The speeches and statements made by the British Ministers for Europe will be used as the main empirical material of the article, complemented with other political documentation. The analysis addresses the period from the 1990s until the current decade, when people from the new EU Member States have been able to move freely to the UK. While both Labour and Conservative parties have restricted migration from non-EU countries, there are significant differences with regard to their approach to EU migration.

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Introduction

Eastern European migrants have recently become the focus of migration policy in the United Kingdom. The last 15 years in particular reveal how Eastern European immigrants have become the source of much political attention: in the 21st century, after 10 Eastern European countries joined the European Union, Eastern Europeans have become the focus of migration policy and discourse. After the enlargement of the EU in 2004, EU migration has garnered an increasingly large amount of attention in political campaigning, and differences between the Labour (more pro-European) and Conservative (more Euro-sceptical) parties can be observed. It will be argued that the Labour Governments from 1997 to 2010 tried to make the image of Eastern European migrant workers more positive in terms of their economic potential in low-skilled work, but the effort did not succeed very well, as we can currently observe.

The main objective of the article is to assess the relevance of Eastern European migrants in

the UK policy, although it is acknowledged that the reasons for different approaches may vary. The EU migration brings an additional flavour in the picture: free movement is a fundamental right in the European Union, already prescribed in the Treaty of Rome in 1957, and further enlarged by the 2004 Free Movement Directive. Free movement in the EU presents a type of post-national dilemma, where the fact that countries have open borders in the EU has resulted in more nationalist stances voiced in different parts of Europe (cf. Tonkiss, 2013: 500), which we can currently observe in the UK.

The table below shows the overall picture of the migration from Eastern Europe during the period being examined. The table takes into account the years in which migration acts were passed, and it reveals the observed relevance of migration from Eastern Europe at different times.

As Jürgen Habermas has pointed out, laws reflect the collective good of a society and they are cre-

Table 1. UK migration laws, government power and migration from Eastern Europe.

Year	Act	Government	Eastern Europe	Relevance
1993	Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act	Conservative	Refugees from the former Yugoslavia	Low: refugee focus
1996	Asylum and Immigration Act	Conservative	Refugees from the former Yugoslavia	Low: refugee focus
1999	Immigration and Asylum Act	Labour	Refugees from the former Yugoslavia	Low: refugee focus
2000	Immigration (Leave to enter and remain) Order	Labour	Refugees from the former Yugoslavia	Low: refugee focus
2002	Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act	Labour	“Safe country” concept introduced	Low: economic focus
2004	Asylum and Immigration Act	Labour	Eastern “A8” countries joined the EU	Low: economic focus
2006	Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act	Labour	Large flows from the “A8” countries	Intermediate: economic focus
2007	UK Borders Act	Labour	“A2” countries joined the European Union	Intermediate: economic focus
2009	Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act	Labour	Financial crisis made migrants return home	Intermediate: economic focus
2014	Immigration Act	Coalition (PM Conser.)	Croatia joined the Union in 2013	High: aim to control entry

ated in the historical context of each society (Habermas 1994, 125), which makes it fruitful to examine their evolution while analysing the UK’s migration policy. Although the connection between migrants from Eastern Europe and UK migration policy is analysed, the aim is not to make causal inferences that migrants from Eastern European are the sole or the main factor affecting migration policies. Instead, the focus is on assessing the centrality of Eastern European migration on the political agenda.

As a member of the European Union bound by the Free Movement Directive, the UK is not able to effectively control migration from Eastern European EU countries. Still, only in recent times has the EU free movement gained more attention in the UK, as David Cameron has expressed his willingness to limit the number of EU migrants. This includes demanding a job offer and granting benefits only for those who have been in the country for four years. Cameron has also promised to renegotiate British membership in the European Union and to organize a referendum on EU membership in 2017, if the negotiations do not result satisfactory (Cameron, 2014b). The development of the migration policies until this point will be analysed, beginning from the period when the Eastern European countries gained their independence. First, however, a quick glimpse will be made at the Europeanisation of the UK migration policy.

The Europeanisation of the UK migration policy

Although the UK became a member of the European Community in 1973, it did not participate in drafting the Schengen agreement in the 1980s and was opposed to the initiatives of the 1990s concerning the development of a supranational immigration policy. Only in 1993, when the European Union was established and led to greater freedom of movement, did Justice and Home Affairs, including immigration policies, receive attention at the European level. But it was only in the late 1990s that supranational legislation was established. (Ette & Gerdes 2007, 95–96.)

The Europeanisation of the UK’s migration legislation was launched as a result of the Amsterdam Treaty, which came into effect on 1 May 1999. In the Treaty, the UK and Ireland were the only EU Member States who refused to participate in the Title IV provisions on visas, asylum and immigration and the incorporated Schengen acquis. Still, the UK has an “opt-in” option, where it can decide on a case-by-case basis whether it wants to join measures based on Title IV or Schengen (Ette and Gerdes 2007, 97). Therefore, Britain did not abolish border controls but is still bound by the Free Movement Directive adopted in 2004, which further enlarged the rights of citizens of the European Economic Area (EEA; the

EU, Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein) to move and reside freely within the European Union.

In this Europeanised context, we analyse the responses of the UK Ministers for Europe with regard to immigration from Eastern Europe in order to trace changes in attitudes. The Ministers for Europe have been particularly vocal both in Britain and abroad about Eastern European migrants, and therefore the statements provide interesting insights into the issue while at the same time reflecting the approach of the government. Except for the current Prime Minister David Cameron, the PMs in Britain have not addressed EU migration very often (Heinikoski 2015). For example, choice of not to participate in the Schengen agreement was justified by Minister for Europe Joyce Quin as follows: “We will keep our border controls — we feel as an island that this makes sense — but we will make sure that our immigration systems do not hinder the movements of European peoples” (Quin 1999b). This also reflects the positive attitude of the Labour Government towards free movement in Europe at the turn of the millennium.

Migration legislation before the 2004 enlargement of the EU

After the Soviet collapse in the 1990s, Association Agreements with the former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe were concluded, which made it possible for people to obtain self-employment visas and for workers from Eastern Europe to travel to the UK under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Scheme (Markova & Black 2007, 1). The exact number of Eastern European immigrants in the 1990s is not known, but it is suspected that a large proportion of them were illegal, since the migrants had to have an invitation from the United Kingdom to arrive legally and even still officials could reject the application if they chose to do so. In addition, restrictions made it difficult to obtain a legal job. (Galasińska 2010, 943.) Most immigration in the 1990s consisted of Commonwealth migrants, while migrants from Central and Eastern Europe became more numerous after many of these countries joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 (Bloom & Tonkiss 2013, 1070).

In addition to work-based immigration, in the 1990s the UK had quotas for asylum seekers from the former Yugoslavia and from Kosovo; indeed

the largest number of asylum seekers in the 1990s was from the former Yugoslavia. In response to the number of asylum seekers from Eastern Europe and other parts of the world, the UK introduced new asylum legislation intended to restrict the conditions: the 1993 Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act, the 1996 Asylum and Immigration Act and the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act (Bloch 2002, 44–50). Moreover, the UK introduced visa restrictions in November 1992, which ended legal entry from the former Yugoslavia (Kelly 2003, 37).

All in all, a total of approximately 12,000 refugees arrived in the UK as a result of the wars in Yugoslavia, which displaced a total of 3.7 million people. Despite the relatively small number of refugees that were accepted, they still faced hostility from the media, which may have been one cause for tightening the asylum policy in the first place (Manz & Panayi 2012, 130–131). Nevertheless, it has been argued that the UK set refugee quotas for those from the former Yugoslavia mainly as a result of international pressure (Guild 2000, 75–76). No significant difference in the policies between the Conservative (1990–1997) and the following Labour Government.

Although reluctant to take refugees, the UK has been very pro-EU-enlargement, and negotiations with the countries from Central and Eastern Europe started during the British EU presidency in 1998 when the Labour Party was the governing party. On the other hand, when preparing for the enlargement of the EU, the UK restricted entry from third countries via several immigration laws. In July 2004, the UK Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants etc.) Act entered into force, constituting the third phase in the reform of the immigration system, following the Immigration and Asylum Act of 1999 and the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act of 2002, all of which were established by the Labour Party. The 2002 Act introduced a “white list” system to the country’s asylum policy, where certain countries were declared safe and asylum applications from those countries were not considered. The safe country system was enlarged with the 2004 Act, which made it possible to reject all of the applications from EU Member States and other Eastern European states. With these laws, the UK did not permit refugees’ entry from Eastern Europe: their asylum applications were automatically rejected.

In conclusion, before the 2004 enlargement the UK's reactive measures were mainly directed at asylum seekers and originated for the most part as a result of the conflicts in the area of the former Yugoslavia. At the turn of the millennium, the European Union enlargement was still not estimated to provoke large migrant flows, as illustrated by the Minister for Europe Joyce Quin: "Better job prospects at home suggest that we will not see enormous movements of workers" (Quin 1999a). In addition, her successor, Peter Hain, promised in 2001 to the Czech government that "the UK will — closer to the time of accession — look at whether we can open our labour markets even earlier", referring to the fact that the UK would not impose any transitional restrictions on the new Member States (Hain, 2001).

In a similar vein in 2003, the Minister for Europe, Denis MacShane, stated that, "[i]n terms of expected labour flows, a series of research studies have shown that enlargement will not have a significant or a detrimental impact on the UK's labour market" (MacShane 2003a). In addition to labour issues, equal rights were also highlighted by him in 2003: "[w]e need to create a Europe in which all citizens, regardless of race or ethnic origin, will have equal access to the Single market, including all goods and services and freedom of movement throughout Europe" (MacShane 2003b). These statements show the unequivocal support by the Labour Government for the principle of free movement.

Relevance of Eastern European migrants increasing after the 2004 enlargement

In 2004, ten countries (A10 countries) joined the EU, increasing the number of Member States to 25 countries. In addition to Malta and Cyprus, eight countries from Eastern and Central Europe joined the Union (A8 countries: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia). In 2007, Bulgaria and Romania (A2 countries) joined the Union, and Croatia became a Member State in 2013. In 2004, Britain was, together with Ireland and Sweden, one of the three countries not to place any transitional restrictions on the countries that accessed the Union (they only had to register for the Worker Registration Scheme). However, nationals from Bulgaria and

Romania, which joined the EU in 2007, were subject to restrictions until 2014, when the restrictions had to be ended (see Rice & Angus 2012, 15.) In addition, a worker authorisation requirement was introduced for Croatian citizens for the period of five years, and the Croatian transitional restrictions will remain valid until 2020 (Glennie & Pennington 2014, 19–21) and, judging from the maximum period utilised for Bulgaria and Romania, Britain will take full advantage of this option.

Although the Labour Government introduced transitional restrictions to Bulgaria and Romania, its Ministers of Europe have given positive statements about the benefits brought by the Eastern European migrants. At the eve of accession, Minister for Europe Denis MacShane further assured people that, "[t]he UK lives off international trade and accepts the logic of globalisation with all its problems. That's why we are opening our labour markets to Poland immediately on accession — the only large EU country to do so." (MacShane 2004b.) It was obvious for him that the EU and the UK have a duty to open their borders to the new states. He has also stated that: "[t]hose who want to put up new frontiers in Europe need their head examined. Europe has completed its historic duty to those who lived under communist tyranny" (MacShane, 2004a). For Minister MacShane, free movement is a natural aspect of the EU: "The EU allows 25 nations and 450 million people to live together in peace, prosperity, with open borders and respect for Europe's social, environmental and cultural obligations" (MacShane, 2004c). As can be seen from these comments, the Labour Government of the time considered free movement a duty and a natural issue.

Also after the accession in 2005, Minister MacShane was optimistic about the number of immigrants from the new Member States: "Since May 1st 130,000 workers from the Eastern and Central European States have come to Britain to find work. Of that 130,000, just 21 are claiming welfare benefits. Britain believes that there should be no protectionist corners of the European economy, and that both capital and labour should go where it makes most economic sense." (MacShane 2005.) The same tone continued in 2006, when his successor Geoff Hoon was also optimistic about the benefits of free movement: "But we need to be winning the arguments on why enlargement and a larger single market and

greater movement of labour has a positive effect on jobs and is good for the EU and for all of our citizens” (Hoon 2006). Moreover, in 2007 he also stated that, “The Polish community in Britain is growing fast and making a valuable contribution to the British economy” (Hoon 2007). However, the change of Prime Minister from Tony Blair to Gordon Brown in 2007 made the tone slightly more critical. For example, Gordon Brown stated with regard to the Bulgarian and Romanian transitional restrictions that “Where the rules allow us to limit migration within the EU, we will also use them where appropriate -- as we have imposed restrictions on migrants from Romania and Bulgaria, in particular their access to our labour market” (Brown, 2008). Still, the Labour Government stuck strictly to EU rules.

Although before the 2004 enlargement, the British government expected anywhere between 5,000 and 13,000 migrants annually from the new countries, there were in fact approximately 711,000 migrants in total between 2004 and 2011 (Glennie & Pennington 2013, 2.) Despite the large number, according to official statistics, the employment rate of A8 migrants is higher than that of an average person born in the UK: they work longer hours and very few claim benefits, and the combined economic effect has been positive for the country as a whole (Dustmann & Frattini, 2014; Pollard, Latorre & Srisankarajah 2008, 5). In addition, migrants from A8 countries made a positive contribution to public finances because they paid proportionately more taxes and used less public services (Springford 2013; Salt et al. 2011, 47). Therefore, no adverse effects from the A8 countries have been detected on aggregate claimant employment, on the young, on low-skilled workers or on wage distribution (Salt et al. 2011, 4–5). In total, EEA migrants paid 34 per cent more in taxes than benefits they received between 2001 and 2011, while those born in the UK and non-EEA migrants received more benefits than they contributed (Glennie & Pennington 2014, 15).

Even still, UK citizens have the most negative attitude towards any immigration in the EU, which to a certain extent must affect the British immigration policies (Herlitz 2004, 76). The fact that UK residents have a negative image of immigration may also be partly due to the hostility of the print media, which covers immigration issues almost daily, whereas immigration authorities are not able to rebut claims on the grounds of data protection

restrictions (European Migration Network 2010). There have also been studies on the media image of EU migrants, and a study conducted by the Migration Observatory suggests that especially Bulgarians and Romanians are often depicted as criminals in the British press (Migration Observatory, 2014).

Immigration from third countries has been restricted several times also under the Labour Government. After the 2004 enlargement, the 2006 Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act, the 2007 UK Borders Act, and the 2009 Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act were introduced by the Labour Party, while the current coalition government led by the Conservatives introduced the latest 2014 Immigration Act. All these acts are especially targeted at restricting the number of migrants from non-EEA countries, and the amount of immigration legislation implies that EU migration has, for a large part, substituted third-country migration. The most drastic change occurred in 2008, when the concerns of the public and employers is argued to have contributed to a change in policies towards a Points-Based System, with five tiers intended for different migrant groups from outside the EEA: high-skilled, skilled, low-skilled, students and temporary migrants (Wiese & Thorpe 2011, 13). Still, the Tier 3 quota for low-skilled workers has never been implemented because there already were a sufficient number of workers from the EU (Rice & Angus 2012, 34). Therefore, although the Labour Government had a positive reaction towards EU migrants, they too restricted the entry of third-country immigrants.

The Conservative-led Government questioning free movement inside the EU

Since its entry into office in 2010, the coalition government of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats has had a critical attitude towards Eastern European migrants, especially in the last few years. In the beginning of his term, the current Conservative Minister for Europe, David Lidington, praised the arrival of workers from the new Member States, but still he stated that he would be willing to apply transitional restrictions also in the future: “In Britain we have committed to applying transitional controls as a matter of course for all new Member States, and these could include - if necessary - imposing temporary controls on the movement of

workers and their families as we have in the past” (Lidington, 2011.)

More recently, the Conservative-led government has started to discuss migration more in terms of national interests, and as a result of the enlargement of the EU, the Home Office stated that “the UK needs to [...] ensure that migration continues to meet its needs”, and that currently EU nationals substitute for non-EEA nationals in the labour force (Pendry, Dowling & Thorpe 2012, 54–55). In addition, the fact that transitional provisions for Bulgaria and Romania ended at the beginning of 2014 gave rise to concerns about immigrant flows from these countries. Especially the issue of EU citizens claiming benefits has been brought up, for example by Minister Lidington, who argued that the EU should do something about it because of public discontent: “Freedom of movement should be about freedom to work and not freedom to claim benefits [...] These will be difficult discussions, but sticking our heads in the sand and hope that public discontent in many Member States on this issue will go away is simply not a credible option” (Lidington 2014). Prime Minister David Cameron has been even stricter in his statements concerning EU migration:

“Immediate access to our welfare system. Paying benefits to families back home. Employment agencies signing people up from overseas and not recruiting here. Numbers that have increased faster than we in this country wanted ... at a level that was too much for our communities, for our labour markets. All of this has to change – and it will be at the very heart of my renegotiation strategy for Europe.” (Cameron 2014b).

Although Lidington saw public discontent as the main problem, Cameron paints a picture of European migrants as welfare tourists who should not be let into the country.

Moreover, Cameron has announced new restrictions for EU migrants:

“EU migrants should have a job offer before they come here. UK taxpayers will not support them if they don’t. And once they are in work, they won’t get benefits or social housing from Britain unless they have been here for at least four years. Yes, these are radical reforms. But they are also reasonable and fair. And the British people need to know that changes to welfare to cut EU migration will be an absolute requirement in the renegotiation. I am confident that they will reduce significantly EU mi-

gration to the UK. And that is what I am determined to deliver.” (Cameron 2014a).

Restrictions to welfare benefits have also been made prior to this, although some measures may be in breach of EU anti-discrimination legislation, but have not yet been contested (Glennie & Pennington 2014, 20). These are indications of the proactive measures taken by the UK to end the A2 transitional restrictions in 2014, but also reflect a concern over the rise of the nationalist UKIP party towards the general election of 2015. Here, we can observe that although the UK has not been able to restrict the entry of EU citizens, it has made it more difficult for them to claim benefits, thus aiming to reduce their willingness to enter the country.

Conclusions

When comparing the two governments in the analysed period, the current one has adopted a clearly more restrictive tone, putting migration from Eastern Europe in the political spotlight. Both Conservatives and Labour parties have restricted immigration and asylum-seeking from third countries, but the approaches towards EU migrants differ greatly. The Labour Government, already starting from the EU accession negotiations, saw the economic benefits that could be gained from migrants from the new EU Member States, and it did not impose any transitional restrictions in 2004. It did impose restrictions in 2007 for Bulgaria and Romania, but the coalition government has been more critical, which may also be partly due to the fact that the EU-critical UKIP party has enjoyed much success, and the Conservatives are willing to appeal to EU-sceptical Brits in order to achieve better success in the 2015 general election.

The preceding Labour Government paid a great deal of attention to trying to put the image of Eastern European migrants in a more positive light by appealing to the economic benefits of migration. The positive attitude can be partly explained by the time of economic boom, when the number of migration was not that large and it did not face very tough criticism. However, as can be observed in the Conservative rhetoric, the effort was not successful. The coalition government is reinforcing the public image that migrants from Eastern Europe are welfare tourists. In addition to the public opinion, the

growing numbers of immigrants and the unsecure economic situation in Europe is probably reflected in the rhetoric.

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