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“Benefit Tourism” Migrates into Mainstream British Politics

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A few MPs from Britain’s Conservative Party offered the media a rare opportunity for ridicule, when they lined up on the morning of January 1 at one of London’s airports to fend off the invasion of millions of poor Bulgarians and Romanians. Only one new migrant showed up; after two weeks, that number grew to 24.

In months of fearmongering, defamation, and stereotyping, right wing parties such as UKIP along with Conservative Party politicians (PM David Cameron included) focused their rhetoric on “benefit tourism,” portraying Eastern European migrants as “lazy” who come to Britain “for the wrong reasons,” that is, only to collect welfare benefits. Britain’s Channel 4 aired several episodes from a controversial show called “Benefit Street,” showing 90% of residents of the James Turner Street in Birmingham living on state welfare. The residents are of “thirteen nationalities,” and the show depicts them as depraved and heavy drug users.

Reality Check

Existing migrants from Romania and Bulgaria contribute in taxes more than they take in benefits and services (35%). According to a study commissioned by UK’s Department of Communities and Local Government, most migrants from the two countries are young (75.9% are aged between 17 and 35), employed (85.3%), and hard workers. Only 15.4% of them claimed benefits, as opposed to 40.4% of UK-born citizens.

In comparison to Sweden, where the contribution of Romanian and Bulgarian migrants in the fiscal year 2011 was “substantially positive” and amounted to “one-sixth of public sector turnover per capita,” Britain and Ireland are positioned to gain even more from these migrants due to the differences in the welfare sector, concludes a study released in January 2014 by the University of Gothenburg.

UK Legislation and EU Context

Nevertheless, Cameron was swift to rush through new legislation aimed at delaying social benefits for new migrants. EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, László Andor, accused Cameron of stirring up...
“hysteria” and turning Britain into a “nasty country.”

The scare was not limited to Britain. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders’ pro-business, anti-immigration, Eurosceptic Freedom Party has on its platform a point guaranteeing the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people, except people from Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland. The French government passed new regulation for “posted workers” (inter-EU migrants), while Germany appointed a committee to come up with recommendations. And this January, the European Commission released new rules clarifying social security payment responsibilities for inter-EU migrants.

Immigration control is the basis of anti-EU rhetoric of populist parties such as UKIP, Front National, Dutch Freedom Party, Austrian Freedom Party, and others.

“Romanians should be working on farms, not as dentists”

Romanian doctors who have been working in Britain for years (Labor Department figures show 2,140 Romanian doctors currently in the UK) experienced an upturn in hostility in the past few months, according to letters received by Romania’s ambassador quoted in The Guardian.

Most Romanian and Bulgarian migrants work as construction workers (30.2%) and in health related professions (12.2%). UK-born residents primarily work in public administration and education (17.2%), manufacturing (14.9%) and retail (14.1%). The education gap (47.1% of UK residents under the age of 34 have a college degree compared to only 21.8% of Romanians and 26.9% of Bulgarians) also explains why Romanian and Bulgarian migrants tend to work in low skilled jobs.

According to a study conducted by the University College in London, migrants caused a mere 0.6% drop in wages for the lowest paid workers in Britain (3 pennies less an hour, for someone working just above the minimum wage).

Why All that Fuss?

The British fears are rooted partly in the 2004 experience, when over half a million Poles migrated to the UK after Poland and seven other Eastern countries had joined the EU. Conditions were different back then, as only three countries (Britain, Ireland, and Sweden) had opened their labor markets without restriction for new members. In addition, Britain had a growing economy and was experiencing labor shortages.

Of course, migrants are attracted to the UK by higher salaries. Britain’s minimum wage of €1,190/month is six to eight times higher than the Bulgarian and Romanian minimums (with €159 and 179/month, respectively). For Romanian and Bulgarian citizens wishing to work in the UK, the last work restrictions expired in January 2014. Now the door is open, but not many are running through it, and those who do, are contributing to their chosen workplace and country.

EuroPoint: Misconceptions generated by UKIP’s propaganda are getting into mainstream politics, thanks to conservative copycats. Using Eastern European migrants as an argument for Euroscepticism, seems to be working. And that does not bode well for the upcoming EU Parliament elections.