

Romanian and Bulgarian migrants: don't forget about the fruitpickers

Even by MigrationWatch figures, the numbers of Bulgarians and Romanians in Britain could actually fall over the next few years



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Strawberry pickers in Kent: MPs and the NFU have been pressing the home secretary to keep open the seasonal agricultural workers' scheme under which 20,000 Romanians and Bulgarians have been coming to work in Britain for several months a year. Photograph: Frank Baron for the Guardian

Politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum, and in the absence of any official estimate of how many Romanian and Bulgarian migrants might come to Britain to work from the end of this year, an almost hysterical auction has taken off.

Campaign groups such as MigrationWatch have rushed to predict that 250,000 will come over the next five years. One Tory rightwinger, Philip Hollobone, has claimed that Britain's countryside will have to be built over to make room for a trebling in the size of the Romanian and Bulgarian communities to 425,000 within two years.

But even he can't match the warning from the Ukip MEP Godfrey Bloom, who claims 1.5 million from the two countries will come looking for work. This from a party that makes no bones about its willingness to put fears over mass immigration at the heart of its

campaigning over the next year.

All these "predictions" are based on the criticism that far more Poles and other eastern Europeans came after 2004 than was foreseen by the official estimates. But MigrationWatch and co are themselves now in danger of making a similar mistake.

The original estimate that only 13,000 Poles, Czechs and others would come each year after they joined the European Union was based on projections from what happened when Spain and Greece joined the EU in the 1980s. The study also assumed that every EU country would open their borders to workers from Poland and other new member states. In the event only the UK, Sweden and Ireland were prepared to do that, with the now well-known result.

One of the authors of the study, Professor Christian Dustmann, has said that he is "absolutely sure" that if Germany had opened its labour market to the Poles and others, the numbers coming to Britain would have been much lower.

Well, this time it will be different. All the other 25 EU states will have to lift their labour market restrictions on Romanian and Bulgarian migrants from 1 January 2014 as the seven-year transition period since the two countries joined runs out. This time Germany, a lot closer, will be opening its borders.

But there is another important difference between Romania and Bulgaria and the eastern European countries that joined in 2004. More than 1.7 million of the 2.2 million Romanians who live in another EU state live in Italy and Spain. At the last count 82,000 Romanians were resident in Britain.

Italy, where 880,000 Romanians already work, scrapped its remaining labour restrictions on Romanians and Bulgarians in January last year. In Spain, where a further 820,000 have been working in the struggling construction industry, the situation is more complicated. In the face of unemployment hitting 21%, the Spanish re-imposed work restrictions on Romanians and Bulgarians a year ago. This has led MigrationWatch and others to predict that there is now a "significant risk" that hundreds of thousands will move from Spain to Britain.

But as the home secretary's migration advisory committee has pointed out, this is only a real possibility if Britain is the only country to open its labour market to the Romanians now in Spain. This is not what is going to happen. It also took evidence from the Romanian community that those working in Spain were unlikely to come to Britain because they were low-skilled, probably didn't speak English and would face much higher housing costs.

Both the Romanian and Bulgarian embassies in London have argued that there is unlikely to be a significant increase in the flow of migrants from their countries to Britain at the end of this year. The Romanians say that everyone who wants to move to the UK has already done so after getting a right to residence, but not work, in 2007.

They also point to the declining number of young Romanians.

You wouldn't know from the headlines, but there is actually a group of Tory MPs who are worried about there not being *enough* Romanians and Bulgarians in the UK come 2014. Backed by the National Farmers Union, which represents the fruitpicking industry in Worcestershire and Herefordshire, they have been pressing the home secretary to keep open the seasonal agricultural workers' scheme under which 20,000 Romanians and Bulgarians have been coming to work in Britain for several months each year – before going back home again.

The Romanians and Bulgarians who come next year are not expected to help out with the British strawberry crop. It is thought they will head for better-paid and higher-skilled jobs in London and other cities when they will be able to take a permanent job as well as living in Britain. But the MPs are concerned that there might not be any British strawberries in the shops for Wimbledon fortnight next year without the insurance of temporary migrants under a reopened scheme – 60,000 Bulgarians and Romanians have been coming to work in Britain under such temporary work schemes every year since 2007. Most have gone home but the combined strength of the two resident communities has grown to about 140,000.

So MigrationWatch's prediction of 50,000 a year over the next five years actually starts looking like a potential fall in numbers. It is not likely that fewer Romanians and Bulgarians will end up here but it is a possibility and one that is as worthy of consideration as all the "invasion" predictions that have more in common with astrology than demography.

so stop the negative campaign

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