

‘At Least They Are the Right Colour’: East to West Migration in Europe, Seen from the Perspective of the British Press

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After the enlargement of the EU in 2004, immigration from the new EU Member States to the United Kingdom has grown into what the Office for National Statistics has called “the largest single wave of foreign in-movement ever experienced by the UK.”² To see this East to West migration process in Europe from the perspective of the British press reveals how the choices made by the media in their reporting can reinforce existing xenophobia, racism and prejudices and create a feeling of hostility among the population. Statistical characterisations like the above, for example, have been the perfect foil for sensationalist stories, which described an “invasion” of Britain by “floods” of immigrants who were going to “swamp” the country.³ Media reporting, however, can also encourage coexistence, by countering prejudices and fears and emphasizing the benefits that the arrival of the newcomers has yielded for the country. This article presents some of the most common perspectives that dominated in the British press regarding the Central and Eastern European newcomers who arrived after the EU enlargement in 2004.⁴

There has been a clear division in how the issue of immigration from Central and Eastern Europe after the EU enlargement in 2004 has been covered by the British press. There were notable differences in which topics were covered and how they were reported in the ‘right-wing’, traditionally anti-EU and anti-immigration newspapers, such as the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*, and the more ‘liberal’ ones such as the *Independent* or the *Guardian*. The division, however, is not necessarily straightforward. Press coverage has been ambiguous and the debate has gone beyond traditional divisions. The tabloid press, however, has predictably adopted an extremely alarmist tone.

The “EU immigrants”: Differences and similarities with previous groups of immigrants

The current immigration from Eastern to Western Europe is similar to numerous other migration movements in many ways. The newcomers left their country mainly for economic reasons, speak an unfamiliar language and have to grapple with being “different” from the majority population. The immigrants are met with some suspicion, and social strains can emerge in the host country.

The immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe are, however, different from other immigrant groups in Britain in several ways. Such factors include the high number of people arriving within a very short time frame, the relatively smaller cultural differences between the immigrants and the British, and the relatively high number of migrants who come as temporary or seasonal migrants.

This particular influx is also different from historical migration flows from Eastern to Western Europe. Not only does it involve far larger numbers, it is also made up by people from a much larger variety of professional and social backgrounds.

This difference is largely the result of technological progress and the rapidly increasing globalisation and internationalisation of societies. Media networks and information technology help spread news of migration possibilities more easily, and help create migrant networks. Along with cheaper and less cumbersome travel links, they create closer links between the countries of origin and destination and make the break with the country of origin less definite

and less complete. The major driver of the migration flow to Britain, however, was that the UK was one of only three EU countries that opened its labour market to workers from the new Member States completely. Not having to deal with the overly bureaucratic and administrative issues previous migrants faced made emigration relatively easy.

A battle of numbers: Where does the truth lie?

For all the above reasons, the migration of workers from Central and Eastern Europe to Britain in the first years after the enlargement soon involved much higher numbers than the British government had foreseen. Equally soon, these numbers started to play an important role in the way the British press framed the phenomenon. Counting the number of newcomers became a central focus of media coverage, and was often translated into alarmist headlines.⁵

The greatly differing numbers that were floated by newspapers as estimates of the likely number of immigrants often seemed to primarily reflect the views of the newspaper about the phenomenon. On the eve of the EU enlargement in May 2004, the *Daily Mail* predicted that four million immigrants would come to Britain;⁶ the *Daily Telegraph* pegged the number at 4.4 million.⁷ The *Evening Standard* estimated that "54,000 immigrants will seek work in Britain within a year of their countries joining the European Union."⁸ The Home Office estimate, meanwhile, was four times lower than this figure and about four hundred times lower than the predictions of the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*; it foresaw only 13,000 people moving to Britain.⁹

Even now that the original government assessments turn out to have greatly underestimated the number of migrants that were to come, the actual numbers still do not approach the initial alarmist warnings in the *Mail*. It is admittedly difficult to calculate the precise number of immigrants that came to Britain in the few years after enlargement, but the number of immigrants from the new Member States who registered on the Worker Registration Scheme between 1 May 2004 and 30 June 2007 was 683,000.¹⁰

The use of wildly varying numbers and the primary focus on the quantity of immigrants coming to Britain that characterised much of the press coverage has, at times, portrayed any number as alarmingly high. Headlines such as "UK lets in more Poles than there are in Warsaw", "Britain taking in 1,500 immigrants a day" and "One immigrant a minute enters the UK" appeared in the *Daily Mail*, the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*.¹¹ On February 19, 2004, the *Daily Mail* published a story headlined "4m 'Will Head From the East'".¹² Such a headline instantly invokes a feeling of panic in the reader. What are we going to do with all these people? The reader who continued reading, however, actually found that these four million people were expected to come to *all* the EU countries in the next 25 years. A far cry from the initial suggestion that four million people would come within a couple of months after accession, or even on May 2, 2004, to 'overrun' Britain.

The media also focused their attention on the Roma, who were "ready to flood in."¹³ A title of a poll in the *Daily Express* in January 2004 asked its readers: "Should we let Gypsies invade England?" This was part of a larger media campaign against the Roma migration to Britain led by the tabloids.¹⁴

Coverage framed in these terms did not lend itself for a rational assessment of the real numbers involved. Instead, the random numbers and disturbing statistics touted in the tabloid newspapers only sought to evoke the impression of an imminent 'invasion' of the country, fostering a widespread negative perception of the immigrants.

Are they similar enough?

The characteristics of the immigrants from the former communist countries and their *sameness* or *otherness* from the British population were also a hot topic in the press. Conflicting patterns could be observed in the characterisation of the immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe. Traditional modes of portrayal of the immigrant as being (dangerously) different were interspersed with characterisations in which the Central and East European immigrants were used as foil in an argument explicitly or implicitly aimed at other, less 'desirable' immigrant groups.

An article in the *Times* published a month after the EU enlargement in 2004, for example, emphasised the importance of the similarity between the Polish and British cultures: "They [the Poles] are people who want to work and learn English quickly, who dress like us and who are not prone to strange religious fanaticism."¹⁵ Such portrayals, though ostensibly praising the newcomers, mostly seem to speak to British fears of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism and aversions to immigrants from developing countries. The East European immigrants, at least, are white and Christian, and therefore thought to be 'less problematic', and to assimilate easier than other immigrants. As Dan Tilles suggests: "Although it is not politically correct to mention it, the fact that they are white, Christian Europeans also surely helps them avoid standing out and attracting hostility."¹⁶

Andrew Green, chairman of *Migration Watch UK*, summed up this concept in a rather racist statement: "We have no problem with immigration from Poland, which is valuable to all sides... The government must make a reduction in numbers from elsewhere. What they could do is reduce the number of work permits for the rest of the world."¹⁷ He emphasized this in an article in the *Daily Telegraph*, saying that EU immigration is "a distraction from the more serious problems stemming from a growing number of immigrants from the rest of the world."¹⁸

In short, in times of fraught relationships between the white majority population and some of the communities of immigrant descent, the perception on the part of the majority group that the immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe were less 'different' than other immigrants has helped the newcomers to be perceived as 'good immigrants'. Positive characteristics that were attributed to them focused on their perceived unassuming diligence. A Scotsman quoted in the *Independent* said: "They are just the same as us, except maybe most of them are willing to work harder."¹⁹

In fact, while the primary media focus in these first years after the EU enlargement was on the estimates of how many people have arrived or will arrive, it was counter-weighted by a more favourable focus which highlighted the economic benefits the immigrants brought to the country. Reports along these lines would emphasize the enthusiasm and work ethic of the migrants.²⁰ As one article in the *Spectator* put it: "The New Europeans are hard-working, presentable, well educated, and integrate so perfectly that they will disappear within a generation."²¹ This perspective was reinforced by employers, such as the one who was interviewed for a research project and stressed the importance of the origin of immigrants: "The Poles have a strong work ethic, they are northern Europeans, they are Christians, their whole ethos – not to be racist – it's a hard working culture that they come from. It's also a hard drinking culture."²² An alternate line of reporting reinforced this perspective as well from a different angle, with a number of articles describing the long working hours and poor living conditions of many immigrants.²³

Other articles, on the other hand, did emphasize the cultural difference of the Central and East European immigrants, warily describing how different the clothes the immigrants wear were, or how different the food they eat was. Examples include titles such as: "How Migrants Have Spiced up the Great British Dinner" or "Are Poles Apart or will we Take to this Tripe?"²⁴ Specific attention was paid to how most of the immigrants were Catholic, and thus presented a divergence from the traditionally dominant Protestant religion in Britain.²⁵

Notes of criticism

The most critical notes in the media coverage during the initial period, however, were not aimed at the Eastern and Central European immigrants themselves, but at the British government. As the numbers of newcomers did not correspond to the predictions, the government was said to have no control over immigration.²⁶

Other sceptical notes were sounded on the topic of the impact that the migration flow was having on the countries of origin. This impact is diverse in character, and includes both positive and negative effects. For example, money sent back home by emigrants can be of significant benefit to the economy of the country of origin. However, the British press emphasized the negative effects of the outflow of qualified individuals. The *Guardian*, for instance, reported about the number of doctors that were leaving Poland for Britain, and the

report emphasised that it was the best ones that were leaving, as doctors wanting to work in the UK had to pass a tough examination process.²⁷ A year later the *Guardian* published an article about a patient who had died in a Polish hospital due to the lack of anaesthetists, many of whom have moved to Britain.²⁸ In a similar tone, reports criticised 'greedy' parents 'abandoning' their children in the country of origin in search of riches in Britain.²⁹

Conclusion

Positive themes that were regularly emphasized in the British press coverage of the immigration of East and Central Europeans were the benefits that the newcomers bring to the British economy, their attitudes towards work (working long hours, doing jobs that British people do not want, etc.) and their similarity with the British culture. Negative themes, beyond the often sensationalist focus on the sheer numbers involved, were related to the struggle over public housing, sharing public space and schooling, language barriers and the perceived inability or unwillingness to be or become 'like us.'

A major flaw of the British press coverage of the immigrants from the new Member States is how they were often described and considered collectively, as one unitary mass of immigrants. Despite the range of educational backgrounds, and despite many of the immigrants already having been in Britain before, the immigrants became collectively associated with the iconic "Polish plumber". Often, no distinction was made between the countries of origin; it did not matter whether the immigrants came from Latvia, Poland or Slovenia, they were all simply East European immigrants.

Several articles did present the personal experiences of newcomers, introducing immigrants by name (if often misspelled) and recounting specific individual stories of workers who arrived after May 2004. Nevertheless the impression that prevailed was all too often of one common category of workers. The personal story of a Polish waitress or painter became an indispensable element in such articles, reinforcing the standard image.³⁰ In reality, although most immigrants work in low-skilled manual trades, Home Office figures from the Worker Registration Scheme show immigrants from the new member states working in an extraordinary variety of jobs.³¹ The *Independent* even cited "research showing that one in three immigrants from "new Europe" into the UK was taking up Office Managerial Posts."³²

In as far as the immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe were portrayed in a positive light this was largely connected to two themes, both of which effectively tied their portrayal to domestic debates predating their arrival. One focused on their 'usefulness' for the British economy. The praise for the work ethic and ambition of these enthusiastic new immigrants and their willingness to work even in low-paid jobs was often implicitly related to running arguments about the structure of the British labour market and the social problems associated with the "native" unemployed.³³ In the other, related, theme, the perceived personal characteristics of the immigrants were often reported in terms of how they were different from other immigrants. Their portrayal as 'hard-working' and not too different often suggested an implicit rebuke to other immigrant groups. But as Swiss writer and novelist Max Frisch noted regarding the Turkish guest worker immigrants in Germany: 'We called for a workforce, but we got humans.'³⁴ It is important to take their social and cultural identities into account when regarding the newcomers and their place and role in society, not to simply see them as 'labour units' that improve the country's economic figures.

The articles analysed for this study covered a broad sphere of topics, including both social and economic aspects and varying from praise to criticism of the immigrants. However, it is clear that there were dominant narratives in the media coverage, and that they have played a unique role in determining the perception of Eastern European migration in Britain. Initial alarmism about the imminent "flood" of immigrants has over time tended to give way somewhat to an emphasis on their role as hard-working contributors to the national economy. In as far as the British press came to reluctantly accept this influx of immigrants in such a way, however, it would be hard to argue that this would also have been the case if they had come from South Asia, the Middle East or the Caribbean.

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² V. Bauere et al. "Migrants from central and eastern Europe: local geographies," in *Population Trends*, Autumn 2007, p.8. http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_population/PT129.pdf (retrieved on 29 March 2008).

³ Some examples of headlines include: Tom Rawstone, "Invasion of Slough-Ski", *The Daily Mail*, 1 July 2006; Sarah Harris and Laura Clark, "Migration Flood Puts Huge Strain on Schools", *The Daily Mail*, 30 September 2006.

⁴ This study is based on the materials used for the author's graduate thesis: "At Least you are the Right Colour: The Coverage of the Polish Immigration in the UK Press", Institut Universitaire de Hautes Etudes Internationales, August 2007. The analysis was done through the examination of articles available through the Lexis-Nexis database and the online database of the individual newspapers. The articles were found through the use of the keywords 'Polish' or 'Poles' and 'immigrant(s)' or 'immigration' in searches of press articles from the United Kingdom. The time frame covered by this study was January 2003 - June 2007. The research included *The Daily and Sunday Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday*, *The Guardian*, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, and *The Independent*.

For the title of this paper, see Richard Ford, "Jobs Easier to Find as we're White, Poles Claim", *The Times*, 18 May 2006.

⁵ As Joel Best explains in his book *Damned Lies and Statistics*: "The media favour disturbing statistics about big problems because big problems make more interesting, more compelling news." Joel Best, *Damned Lies and Statistics. Untangling Numbers from the Media, Politicians, and Activists*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2001, p.18.

⁶ James Chapman, "4m 'Will Head From the East'", *Daily Mail*, 19 February 2004.

⁷ Philip Johnston, "4.4 million Immigrants will Boost Population", *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 February 2004.

⁸ Hugh Dougherty, Alexis Akwagyiram and Paul Sims, "54,000 - That is how many Migrants are Likely to Come Here for Work", *Evening Standard*, 19 April 2004.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ This number can, however, only serve as a tentative estimation. Many immigrants do not register under the Worker Registration Scheme at all, as they either do not know about it or do not want to pay the charge of £90 for a first application. It also does not include the self-employed or workers coming for less than one month, who do not have to register. See: Home Office, Border & Immigration Agency, *Accession Monitoring Report, A8 countries, May 2004 – June 2007*, p.5, http://www.bia.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/aboutus/Reports/accession_monitoring_report/report12/may04jun07.pdf?view=Binary (retrieved on 29 March 2008).

¹¹ Steve Daughy, "UK lets in more Poles than there are in Warsaw." *Daily Mail*, 25 April 2006; Elsa McLaren, "Britain Taking in 1,500 Immigrants a Day", *Times Online*, 2 November 2006; "One Immigrant a Minute Enters the UK", *Daily Telegraph*, 27 December 2006.

¹² James Chapman, "4m 'Will Head From the East'", *Daily Mail*, 19 February 2004.

¹³ "Gypsies You Can't Come in", *The Daily Express*, 5 February 2004.

¹⁴ Valeriu Nicolae, *Anti-Gypsyism - A Definition*, European Roma Information Office, 2004, <http://www.erionet.org> (retrieved on 29 March 2008).

¹⁵ Tim Hames, "What Alien Invasion? The Numbers Just Don't Add up", *The Times*, 31 May 2004.

¹⁶ Dan Tilles, "Polish Immigration to Britain. Poles Proving Popular", *Suite101*, 8 July 2006, http://britishaffairs.suite101.com/article.cfm/immigration_to_britain (retrieved on 10 June, 2007).

¹⁷ Andrew Green, *BBC Today*, 20 November 2005.

¹⁸ Andrew Green, "EU immigration is not the problem", *The Daily Telegraph*, 24 August 2006. This attitude could be likened to the infamous speech "Rivers of Blood" that Enoch Powell made on 20 April 1968. Powell said: "We can take no more coloured people. To do so is madness."

19 Paul Kelbie, "Polish Migrants Find a Welcome in the Under Populated Highlands", *The Independent*, 30 May 2006.

²⁰ Andrew Grice and Jonathan Brown, "How Immigrants Sustain Britain's Economic Growth", *The Independent*, 23 August 2006; Philip Thornton, "Employers Prefer Workers from new EU States to 'Lazy Britons'", *The Independent*, 1 May 2006.

²¹ Anthony Browne, "Invasion of the New Europeans", *The Spectator*, 28 January 2006.

²² Bridget Anderson et al., *Fair Enough? Central and East European migrants in low-wage employment in the UK*, Oxford, COMPAS, 2006, p.77.

²³ Sally Pook, "Council Pays Struggling Poles to go Back Home." *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 September 2006; Galen English, "Poles Head for Home as They end up Living on the Streets," *The Daily Mail*, 8 August 2006; Amelia Hill, "Homeless Poles too ashamed to leave UK", *The Guardian*, 10 September 2006.

²⁴ Martin Hickman, "How Migrants Have Spiced up the Great British dinner", *The Independent*, 16 November 2006; Chloe Rhodes, "Are Poles Apart, or will we Take to this Tripe?", *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 September 2006; Sean Pouter, "Pickle Your Taste Buds; Supermarkets to Cater for Poles With Range of Foods", *The Daily Mail*, 11 September 2006.

²⁵ See for example: Ruth Gledhill, "Catholics Set to Pass Anglicans as Leading UK Church", *The Times*, 15 February 2007; Martin Beckford, "Immigrants 'Overwhelm' Catholic Churches", *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 February 2007; Stephen Bates, "Christianity and the UK: Devout Poles show Britain how to keep the Faith", *The Guardian*, 23 December 2006.

²⁶ Toby Helm, "Migrant Numbers 'Wildly Underestimated'", *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 May 2007; Bronwen Maddox, "Ministers Haunted by Miscalculation on Polish Influx", *The Times*, 23 October 2006; "Blair's Immigration Solution is Far Too Little Far Too Late", *The Express*, 1 May 2004.

²⁷ Daniel McLaughlin and David Smith, "Doctors go West in Polish Brain Drain", *The Guardian*, 15 May 2005.

²⁸ Nicholas Watt, "Brain Drain Blamed for Hospital Death", *The Guardian*, 27 July 2006.

²⁹ Peter Dobbie, "Polish Children Dumped by Parents Heading for Britain", *Mail on Sunday*, 29 July 2006; Martin Delgado, "'I Dumped my Two-year-old for £3 an Hour'", *The Daily Mail*, 13 August 2006.

³⁰ See for example, Tom Utley, "The Poles - a boon for me and Britain", *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 November 2005.

³¹ Alan Travis, "Poles Top List for Work Applications in Britain After EU Expansion", *The Guardian*, 23 November 2005.

³² Susie Measure, "Immigrants Have Boosted UK Growth, Says Study", *The Independent*, 24 April 2006.

³³ Libby Purves, "What Can-do Immigrants Can do for our Dozy Youth", *The Times*, 10 February 2004.

³⁴ [Wir riefen Arbeitskräfte, und es kamen Menschen.] Quoted in the Information Kit on the United Nations Convention on Migrants Rights, <http://www.unesco.org/most/migration/convention> (retrieved on 1 July 2007).