

Challenging hysteria over Romanian and Bulgarian immigration statistics

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This week's ONS labour market statistics data release, which showed an increase in the number of Romanian and Bulgarian (known as A2) workers in the UK, prompted a wave of media coverage. This included a front-page story in the Daily Telegraph telling readers that the "New wave of immigrants begins", numerous other newspaper reports and a piece on the BBC's Today programme. Most of the stories argued that this was an indicator of a forthcoming bigger wave of A2 migration when labour market restrictions on migrants from these countries are ended in January 2014.

The data is certainly interesting – if subject to margins of error – and it does show an increase of some 37,000 A2-born workers in the UK compared with the same period last year (second quarter 2012 to second quarter 2013), but this doesn't provide any real evidence of what will happen in or after January 2014. It simply shows what is happening now.

Firstly, rather than showing that the new wave of immigrants has suddenly begun, what the data actually shows is that increasing immigration from A2 countries has been taking place regardless of the labour market restrictions – Romanians and Bulgarians have had the right to come to the UK without a visa for seven years already and since 2007 the number working in the UK has increased steadily by more than 100,000 (from 33,000 in the second quarter of 2007 to 141,000 in the second quarter of 2013). But will the lifting of labour market restrictions lead to a sudden increase in immigration from these countries? It's simply not possible to say, and this latest data doesn't provide any answers to that question.

The ONS data also shows several other interesting factors that are worth considering. The number of migrants in the UK workforce from the A8 countries – Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia and Slovenia – has declined by more than 10,000 compared with the same period last year. Also, the number of migrants from the EU14 (the pre-accession countries) now in the UK labour force has increased by 60,000 to its highest level since at least 1997. Neither of these data-points, however, is leading to front-page newspaper claims about what this means for the future.

The new ONS figures are certainly useful, and they confirm that there has been a consistent increase in the number of Romanian and Bulgarian workers in the UK every year for the past seven years. That doesn't mean imaginary floodgates in Sofia and Bucharest are currently primed to be opened on 1 January. Neither does it mean that all the Romanians and Bulgarians who want to come to the UK are already here. It simply means that the trend over time has been one of increasing numbers, regardless of the labour market restrictions.

We cannot know what will happen on 1 January, and attempting to extrapolate this future outcome from the available data is misleading. Even if we could know how many people might arrive, we would not be able to anticipate where in the country these migrants might settle – and therefore where investments in public services would need to be increased to accommodate them. If we are concerned about potential future levels of migration from Romania and Bulgaria we need to consider how to plan for the uncertainty, rather than speculate wildly.