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Ed West

What the experts got wrong about migration

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On New Year's Day, 2014, during those sunny, innocent times of Cameron, Clegg and Miliband, [Labour MP Keith Vaz](#) headed down to Luton Airport to greet new arrivals coming off the planes.

There he met a rather bemused young Romanian man, Victor Spirescu, who had no idea he was going to become the face of migration on the day that citizens of Romania and Bulgaria were allowed free movement within the EU.

It was a sort of mini-publicity stunt by Vaz, but all for a good cause: a response to fear mongering by the Right-wing press who warned that we'd be 'flooded' by Romanians, and predictions by MigrationWatch that'd we have 50,000 new arrivals a year from the A2 countries (as Romania and Bulgaria were called).

Twitter that day was full of journalists and other public intellectuals laughing about how we were going to be 'swamped'. Why would Romanians, after all, want to come here, to this miserable rainy island?

'We've seen no evidence of people who have rushed out and bought tickets in order to arrive because it's the 1st of January,' Vaz concluded.

Various publications, with the ill-founded confidence so often found in the journalist trade, soon declared that the Romanian influx was a conservative fantasy.

'Eastern European invasion comes to nothing,' the *Independent* declared on the day, just a tad prematurely you might say.

A *Guardian* commentator suggested [the year](#) before that the number of Romanians and Bulgarians arriving might actually fall following accession, and that 'all the "invasion" predictions... have more in common with astrology than demography.'

The Open Democracy think-tank declared that notions that 'people will move to richer countries to earn more money' are too simplistic. 'Serious migration studies, however, are aware that the drivers of migration are much more complex and that migration systems, migration networks, migration politics, opportunity-constraints structures, social and human capital, perceptions and imaginations, individual characteristics and emotions play crucial roles.'

You, an idiot: people will move if they're offered loads more money.

Me, a think-tanker: opportunity-constraints structures, social and human capital, perceptions and imaginations...

In the summer of that year Migration Matters, a campaign chaired by Tony Blair's Migration Minister Barbara Roche, predicted that the number of Romanians and Bulgarians [arriving would peak at 20,000 per year and that 'the anti-immigration lobby have cried wolf once too often.'](#)

They accused opponents, chiefly MigrationWatch and Ukip, of 'pursu[ing] a partisan and divisive political agenda.'

As it turned out, in the year to September 2015, 206,000 [Romanians and Bulgarians took](#) out a National Insurance number, meaning they were registering to work here. By [late 2017](#), there were 413,000 Romanian and Bulgarians living in Britain, suggesting 90,000 had arrived each year since January 2014, while just 6,200 Britons had made the opposite journey.

By mid-2018, there were more than [400,000 Romanians in](#) Britain, making them one of the largest national minorities in England. The real figure is hard to tell, because the British state has lost the capacity or will to count the number of foreign residents, [and it may be higher.](#)

I visited Romania in September, travelling across the seriously beautiful region of Transylvania, from the Hungarian enclave of Sfântu Gheorghe (or, if you want the considerably more challenging Magyar name, Sepsiszentgyörgy) to the dynamic, very Habsburg city of Cluj. I was excited, at one point, to see a bear by the side of the road, but then the bear population here has been expanding for some years, in part because the human population is in freefall.

In much of this region the Germans have all left, many of the Hungarians have left, and now the Romanians are leaving, too; many are now to be found along a bus route from Luton Airport to central London, congregating in parts of Haringey that were once heavily Greek and Turkish Cypriot. They work hard, [often live in very Dickensian conditions](#), and grind away to improve their lot; many have settled happily in England, although poor [Spirescu](#), [tragically](#), was not one of them.

The experts had been wrong about migration before. In 2004 the government vastly underestimated the numbers coming from A8 countries, chiefly Poland. The same thing is happening today with Albanian migration, and the inability of commentators to appreciate the potential numbers involved, and why this is a big problem.

The scale of immigration in the [2000s and 2010s led to](#) the rise of Ukip, the referendum and the political chaos that followed; what follows now we can't yet say, but no one has seemed to have learned the lesson: that in the 21st century, because of easier travel, smartphones, smuggling networks and establishment communities in the West, the sheer scale of potential migration is astronomical. Yet people often have a very 20th or even 19th century understanding of how much people are able and willing to move, which makes them vastly underestimate the potential numbers arriving.

The Turkish Cypriots of north London are a case in point, the example [Paul Collier used in Exodus](#) to show the huge extent of potential migration between countries with different levels of wealth.

Because of colonial links, North Cyprus had free movement with Britain and so

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provided a test case: as a result, there are now more Turkish Cypriots in Britain than in Cyprus. In fact, not only did the majority of Turkish Cypriots move, but back in their homeland they become outnumbered by arrivals from a third, even poorer country, mainland Turkey, who are permitted to settle there.

In a theoretical world of open borders, Britons would be outnumbered very quickly; infrastructure would start to buckle under the strain, and governments would find it difficult to increase the necessary number of houses, schools, hospitals and other services for this expanded population, because society would now lack the social capital and cohesion to make the personal sacrifices. People would begin to lose faith in the police, a difficult role in such a transient and diverse society, and politics would become increasingly unstable and aligned along ethnic lines.

Of course, almost no one is in favour of open borders — that would be insane. But many people, and a disproportionate number in the commentariat, are opposed to almost any measure that will reduce numbers, and will denounce or aim to toxify any policy which might slow down the pace of migration, including illegal migration across the Channel.

Yet Britain's immigration restrictionists already have huge disadvantages in trying to keep numbers down, due to immigration being very path dependent. The more immigration from country A to B, the more demand and pressure for further migration from A to B, because it becomes far easier for an individual to migrate to a land where he has friends and family, somewhere to stay and job opportunities.

The more migration you have, the harder it becomes to slow down, including politically; more and more vested interest groups lobby for more migration, either to increase their share of compatriots, or on behalf of businesses which have become dependent on foreign workers.

It's why the Brazilianization of the US into a super-diverse society with low social capital, very high inequality and higher risk of political instability is now unstoppable. As time goes by the population tends to become less resistant, partly because their fear of migrants has been eased by meeting them (contact theory certainly has a lot of merit) but also because of social desirability factors — and because a larger share are now descended from recent immigrants, and the social pressure to identify with the majority has declined.

Britain is unusually attractive as a destination, in part because we have dozens of established migrant communities already; in part because the prevailing atmosphere is very tolerant; and in part because of the English language, which has now become dominant even in formerly Francophone parts of the Middle East and Africa. We also, almost uniquely in Europe, have no ID cards, weak labour laws and plenty of low-paid work in the grey economy.

For that reason, Britain is more attractive to migrants than its relative wealth merits. Even as wages have flatlined, homelessness has massively increased and public services have started to collapse, the numbers willing to come are still enormous. It's why parts of London have become quite dystopian where, as one [Twitter user put it](#): 'You now compete with the world's richest on the housing market and the world's poorest on the labour market.'

Since the introduction of free movement between eastern and western Europe, there has been a [colossal brain drain from the east](#), dwarfing those of 1933 from Germany and 1453 from Constantinople. A lot of places in the former Eastern Bloc are [emptying of medical staff](#). Latvia has lost [30 per cent of its population since independence from the Soviet Union](#), and that loss is set to continue. Huge numbers of [Albanians have left for the EU](#). Half of Albania's remaining [population wish to leave](#).

In part this is because of unemployment and poverty but in the case of Albania they are also fleeing political and social dysfunction — and it tends to be the case that migrants bring [their culture to their new homeland](#).

Path dependency explains why, without a state willing to stop them, illegal immigration will grow [exponentially](#); it's why the number of people crossing the Channel has gone from 299 in 2018 to 8,466 in 2020 to more than 40,000 this year. They come because they reason, quite correctly, that it will be worth it; [only 21 foreign nationals](#) were removed from the UK in the year to June 2022 under supposedly tougher asylum rules introduced after Brexit. Albanians also come to Britain because [they get sent home by France or Germany](#). As long as this remains the case, more and more will continue to arrive, in even greater numbers, where they will continue to be housed [in poor areas](#).

The government finds it hard to resist, partly because its hands are tied by refugee conventions, human rights laws and modern slavery legislation. There is

also a whole infrastructure of organisations, [including charities](#), which lobby for easier immigration, [and try to stop deportations](#). Of course, people must do what they feel to be right, but they should also be aware of the potential numbers involved, and the political consequences in Britain.

New immigration figures this week show the total now running at 1.1 million a year — and that's not including the Channel crossings. [Net migration is 504,000](#), beating the pre-Brexit record of 336,000. This is far higher than the peak under Blair, when the economy was booming, and house prices had not yet reached their current levels. Meanwhile many Tories [are determined to stop the building of houses](#), meaning that the pressure on younger people grows ever more unbearable.

The numbers will continue to rise because, as Collier explained, migration is a self-fulfilling and accelerating process, with increasingly lower material costs and risks for travelling encouraging poorer or more risk-averse people to follow compatriots.

In his book [Whiteshift](#), [Eric Kaufmann](#) looked at the potential numbers willing to move, citing studies by Gallup World Poll suggesting that 700 million people worldwide would migrate to the West, including 31 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa. But even that might rise if people saw others moving, he suggested.

He quoted one study looking at five neighbourhoods in Dakar, Senegal, a country which has been at peace for some time and is far from being the worst place to live. Of those polled, 92 per cent said they would consider migrating, and of these, 40 per cent said they would consider migration illegally.

Most were men, and 77 per cent were willing to risk their life to go. Half were willing to risk it *even if their chance of dying was 25 per cent*, because there were huge rewards for their families if they were able to settle in Europe and send remittances. The only thing that would prevent them going was knowing that they would not be allowed to stay, and migrants understand that if they reach Britain, the odds are good.

They will continue to come for the same reason that you or I would do the same in their shoes; that life is better for them here than it is back home, and better for their loved ones. And the more of their compatriots and family and friends who come, the more attractive their new home becomes. Until the point when the strain on social cohesion becomes too great, at which point everyone loses.

The path-dependent nature of migration means that Britain either becomes far more restrictive — something that might entail immediate economic costs when we are least able to bear them — or the rapid change that triggered Brexit in the first place is going to speed up. If the Tories can't prevent that, indeed if they can't manage the basic state function of controlling the border, [there are others waiting in the wings promising to do so](#).

This article first appeared on Ed West's Wrong Side of History [Substack](#).



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