

# Coming in from the cold: transition in Eastern Europe and labour migration to the UK

needs migrants 'at all skill levels in the labour market' (Glover *et al.*, 2001) and the government has been active in ensuring that low-skilled vacancies in particular are filled by Europeans rather than migrants from outside the EU (Home Office, 2005). This is reflected by the fact, for example, that the British government was one of only three member states not to impose restrictions on migrants from the 'A8' countries that joined the EU in 2004.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Eastern Europeans have been incredibly pro-active in seeking employment in the west. This relates to the difficulties of transition from a planned to a free-market econ-

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Sam Scott helps us understand 'the most significant mass migration to the UK since the 1950s and 1960s' – from Eastern Europe. Students in schools all over England will be aware, in different ways, of its impact in their own localities. This article provides data, examples and references to enable teachers to develop the curriculum to include the study of this phenomenon and the study of a part of the world which is almost totally absent from the secondary school geography curriculum. *NB This article is being published to coincide with the transmission of 'Michael Palin's New Europe' on his travels in Eastern Europe.*

## Introduction

Winston Churchill's 1946 vision of a 'United States of Europe' has come closer to realisation with the accession of new member states to the European Union (EU) (see Figure 1), ten of which were under Soviet control or influence until the beginning of the 1990s.

In the UK an estimated 493,533 Eastern European migrants registered to work between May 2004 and December 2006 (Home Office, 2007). This migration represents part of one of the most profound movements of people within Europe since the Second World War, and is certainly the most significant mass migration to have affected the UK since the 1950s and 60s (when large numbers of Caribbean and Asian workers were invited to Britain from the Commonwealth to address post-war labour shortages). The UK

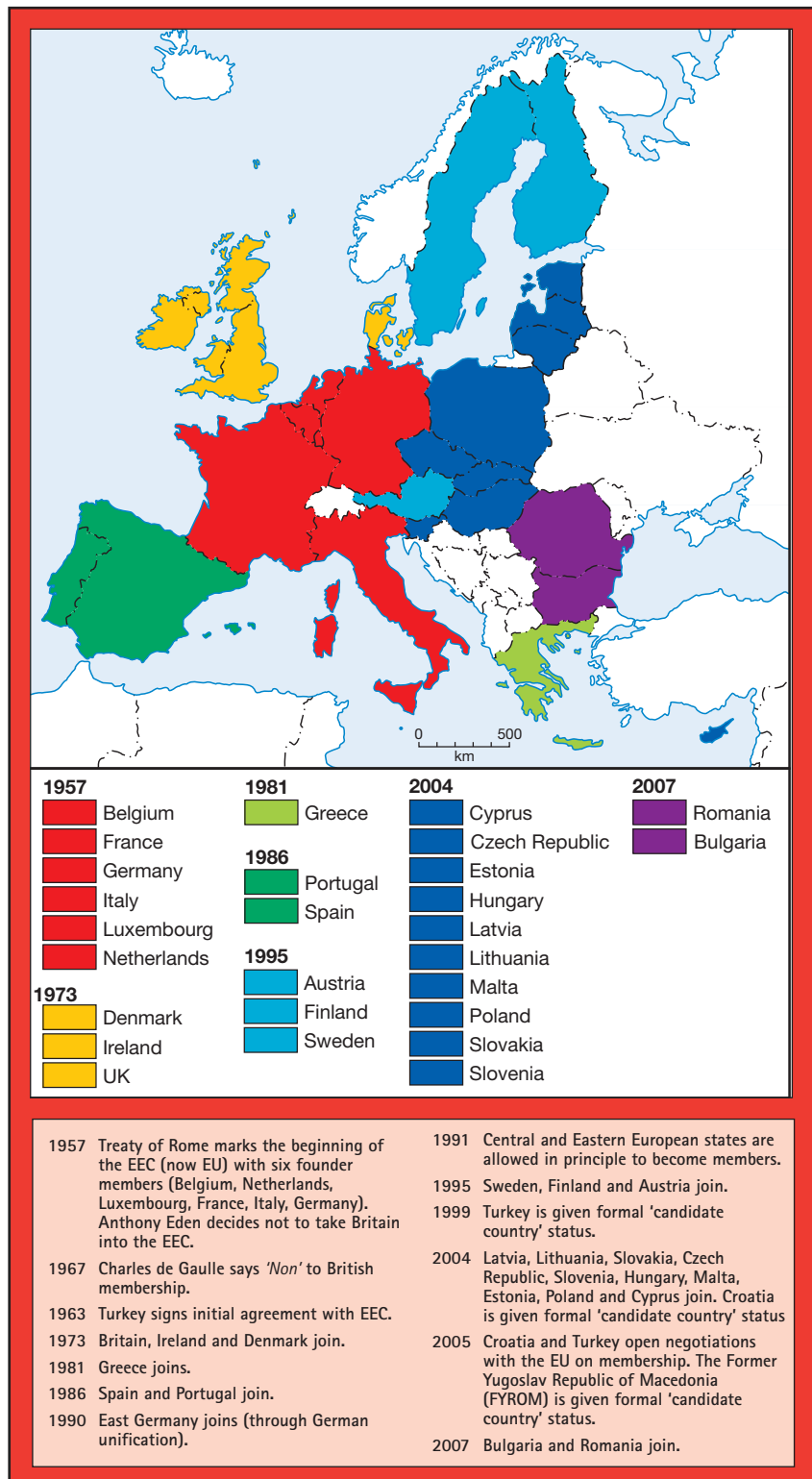


Figure 1: EU growth 1957–2007.

2002–2003		2003–2004		2004–2005		2005–2006	
TOTAL	349,240	TOTAL	370,750	TOTAL	439,730	TOTAL	662,390
India	25,040	India	31,330	Poland	62,550	Poland	171,380
Australia	18,870	S. Africa	18,370	India	32,690	India	45,980
S. Africa	18,640	Australia	17,130	Pakistan	20,320	Lithuania	30,850
Pakistan	16,790	Pakistan	16,780	S. Africa	19,340	Slovakia	27,420
France	13,770	Portugal	13,990	Australia	16,640	S. Africa	23,970
Philippines	11,790	China	13,300	Lithuania	15,780	Australia	23,820
Spain	11,680	France	13,060	France	13,290	Pakistan	22,270
Zimbabwe	10,260	Spain	11,870	China	12,620	France	17,170
Iraq	10,130	Poland	11,200	Portugal	12,250	Latvia	14,330
Portugal	9770	Philippines	10,680	Slovakia	11,450	Germany	13,350

Figure 2: National insurance registrations by non-UK nationals: top ten countries of origin (2002–2006).

omy, and the economic decline and unemployment growth that has been associated with this. It has also become easier for workers within the EU to realise the vision of 'free movement' outlined in the 1957 Treaty of Rome: the internet, e-mail, low-cost air and coach travel, and the development of global English, have all been significant in this respect.

This article attempts to explore and explain recent Eastern European migration to the UK following EU enlargement. Interestingly, from a geographical perspective, Eastern European migrants have moved to the UK to fill jobs across the country and have therefore settled in areas not traditionally associated with immigration. They have constituted one of the most diffuse mass-migrations that the UK has ever seen.

### Post-Socialist transition

From 1989 onwards, the physical and ideological Cold War divisions in Europe virtually disappeared. Many Europeans quickly realised that a new European vision was required to fill the resultant vacuum: EU membership became this guiding vision. 1989 was the beginning of a new Europe and the prospect of EU membership was an important 'carrot' to support states that might otherwise have become unstable. Given that one of the key principles of EU membership is free movement of all factors of production (capital, goods, services and labour), it was known from the early 1990s that some migration from east to west (and vice versa) would occur. The reason that this article has been written, however, is because the scale of this movement to the UK exceeded all expectations.<sup>2</sup>

### Historical antecedents

There is a long history of mobility between east and west: between the 1890s and the First World War, for

COUNTRY	YEAR			
	2002–2003	2003–2004	2004–2005	2005–2006
Poland	5980	11,200	62,550	171,380
Lithuania	1850	3850	15,780	30,850
Slovak Republic	980	1400	11,450	27,420
Latvia	410	730	6500	14,330
Czech Republic	1160	1190	7440	13,200
Hungary	730	980	3880	8600
Estonia	170	230	1720	3020
Slovenia	220	230	490	520

Figure 3: National insurance registrations by non-UK nationals: relative significance of the A8 accession states (2002–2006).

example, large numbers of (mainly Jewish) migrants sought refuge in the UK; while in the run up to the Second World War migration from Eastern Europe increased again.

During and immediately after the Second World War, reluctant to go back to *de facto* Soviet-controlled territory, large numbers of Eastern European workers were allowed into the UK. Around 300,000 Polish exiles, for example, entered the country during this period, forming one of the UK's earliest migration recruitment drives (Robinson, 2003). An important characteristic of this latter wave was its geographical dispersal: 'throughout the UK, well beyond the "usual" urban clusters' (Stenning *et al.*, 2006). This is evidenced, for example, by the vast but dispersed Polish infrastructure that emerged, with Polish churches, community centres and restaurants still visible today in places like Lancaster, Nottingham and Sheffield. There are, understandably, interesting generational dynamics between the established Eastern European communities and the post-Cold War arrivals.

### Contemporary migration

The contemporary flows of mainly young, educated Eastern European migrants to the UK, from countries like Poland, Slovakia, Lithuania and Latvia, began at the turn of the twenty-first century. The anticipation of EU enlargement led to significant migration: between 30 and 60% of A8 migrants recorded as entering the UK after May 2004 are believed to have already been working in the country (Bijak *et al.*, 2004; Home Office, 2004). In the three years since, the size of the eastern European presence has grown significantly, particularly from 2005 (Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> The number of Polish registered in the UK, for instance, grew from 11,000 in 2003/04 to 63,000 in 2004/05, and by 2005/06 it had reached 171,000. The significance of this influx cannot be understated from the perspective of EU integration.

As Figure 3 makes clear, there is considerable geographical variation in terms of where in Eastern Europe the new migrants have come from. The

Bank of England explains this through levels of economic inequality:

*'The propensity to migrate to the UK is higher the lower the GDP per capita in each of the A8 countries. The decision is also strongly correlated with life satisfaction scores and unemployment rates [in these countries]'* (Blanchflower *et al.*, 2007).

Thus, citizens from Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic (the four most significant A8 countries) are really what we mean when we talk in terms of an 'Eastern European influx'. The influx has revitalised some of the declining established Eastern European communities in the UK. Figure 4, for instance, shows the consistent decline of the Polish-born population in the UK (since 1951), but more recent National Insurance data in Figures 2 and 3 demonstrates that this decline has been reversed since EU enlargement. The speed of the turnaround has been dramatic.

#### *Demand for Eastern European migrants*

Most commentators agree that UK 'business needs managed migration' (CBI, 2005). There are job vacancies at all levels of the economy. There is also recognition that migrants, in filling these vacancies, bring a number of additional macro-economic benefits: keeping inflation down; increasing productivity; stimulating economic growth; facilitating employment growth; and reducing the average age of the workforce.

Unfortunately, many people still tend to think of supply-side factors when they hear the word 'immigrant': they think of migrants as parasitic; coming to the UK for individual benefit; their move principally the result of socio-economic and political conditions at home. The reality is very different: the UK economy has bene-

fited greatly from Eastern European migration and British citizens now rely on migrant workers to do jobs they themselves prefer to ignore (see below for an example from UK agribusiness).

The enlargement of the EU occurred during a period of prolonged economic buoyancy in the UK, which had led the government to realise (well before 2004) that businesses' reliance on foreign labour was set to grow. These economic pressures, allied with a favourable national policy towards labour migration from Eastern Europe, help explain the dramatic growth in migrant labour identified in Figures 2 and 3. Another significant demand-based pressure relates to the UK's ageing (though not declining) population and the dependency this creates. To put this in perspective, while 18% of Poland's population is aged between 15 and 24 years, only 13% of UK's population is represented within this age category (Eurostat, 2006). Furthermore, UK population growth has been extremely low by international standards – growing by 8% between 1971 and 2006 compared to 45% over the same period in the USA (Blanchflower *et al.*, 2007). There are, then, important demographic pressures, alongside economic ones, that explain the demand in the UK for labour migrants.

#### *Demand for migrant labour in UK agribusiness*

The demand for migrant workers has been particularly acute in low-status sectors such as construction, hospital-ity, social care and agribusiness. The latter sector is particularly interesting and will be the focus for this case study. The UK public now expects high-quality food at low prices, and wants fresh staples to be available year-round, irrespective of seasonality or fluctuations in demand. This is the benchmark established by the leading UK super-

markets, and to meet such requirements, food suppliers must have ready access to a pool of low wage labour. A hot summer's day, for instance, will lead to a peak in the demand for salads: information sent via the bar-code scanning system at supermarket check-outs will inform suppliers of this; supermarkets will then expect suppliers to respond; suppliers will need to hire more staff to pick, pack, and process the products; they may also need to sub-contract to smaller companies, who in turn must find additional temporary labour.

Labour is the key to cheap and flexible 'just-in-time' food production. The problem is that pay is usually at minimum wage levels and working conditions are tough, and so native workers avoid such work if at all possible. The solution has been to import workers from elsewhere in the world and/or to relocate food production outside the UK. Since 2004, large numbers of Eastern Europeans have been part of the first of these solutions, and Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian and Slovakian workers (the four most important A8 nationalities) have spread to 'parts of the country not traditionally associated with large concentrations of migrants' (Gilpin *et al.*, 2006) which can largely be explained by the geography of UK agribusiness. The distribution of Polish workers in the UK underlines this link between employment and immigration (see Figure 5), with significant concentrations in areas not traditionally attractive to migrants (Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Cheshire, Herefordshire).

#### *The supply of Eastern European migrants*

Classic economic theories suggest that migration is a response to an imbalance between different regions: people will move from region A to region B when jobs are more plentiful, and incomes higher, in region B. Mass labour migration from east to west can be understood within this context. GDP collapsed during the 1990s in many former Communist countries. The countries hardest hit – measured through variables such as income, unemployment, mortality, growth rate, per capita GDP and social wellbeing – have also experienced the greatest out-migration (Blanchflower *et al.*, 2007). As we saw above, it is the young Eastern Europeans who have shown greatest propensity to 'get on their bikes' and realise the EU's long-standing mantra of 'free movement'.

To put east-west inequalities in perspective: the GDP in Poland in 2005 was 11,600 Euros per capita; it was 27,100 in UK (Eurostat, 2006: 15). Similarly, unemployment in the same year was 18% in Poland, but only 5% in the UK (Eurostat, 2006: 67). Thus, even though many migrants are on the

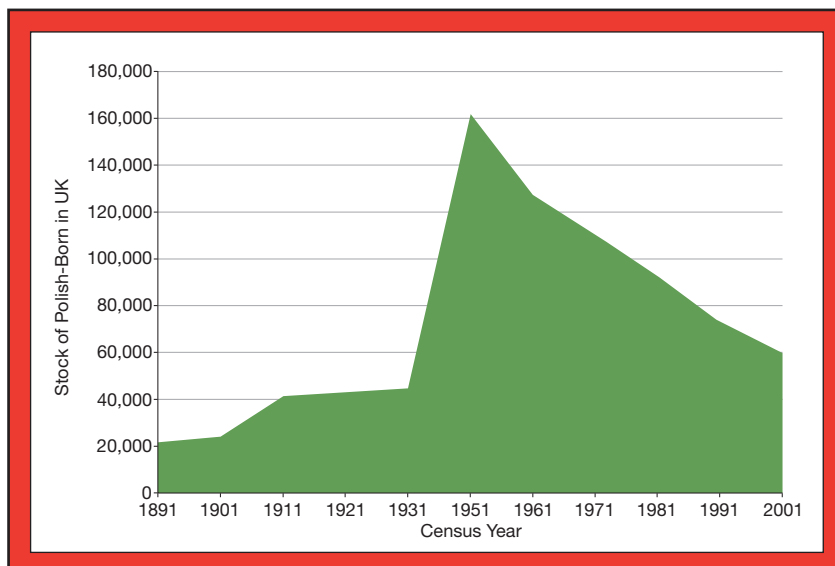


Figure 4: Change in the stock of Eastern European migrants in the UK: the example of the Polish 1891–2001.

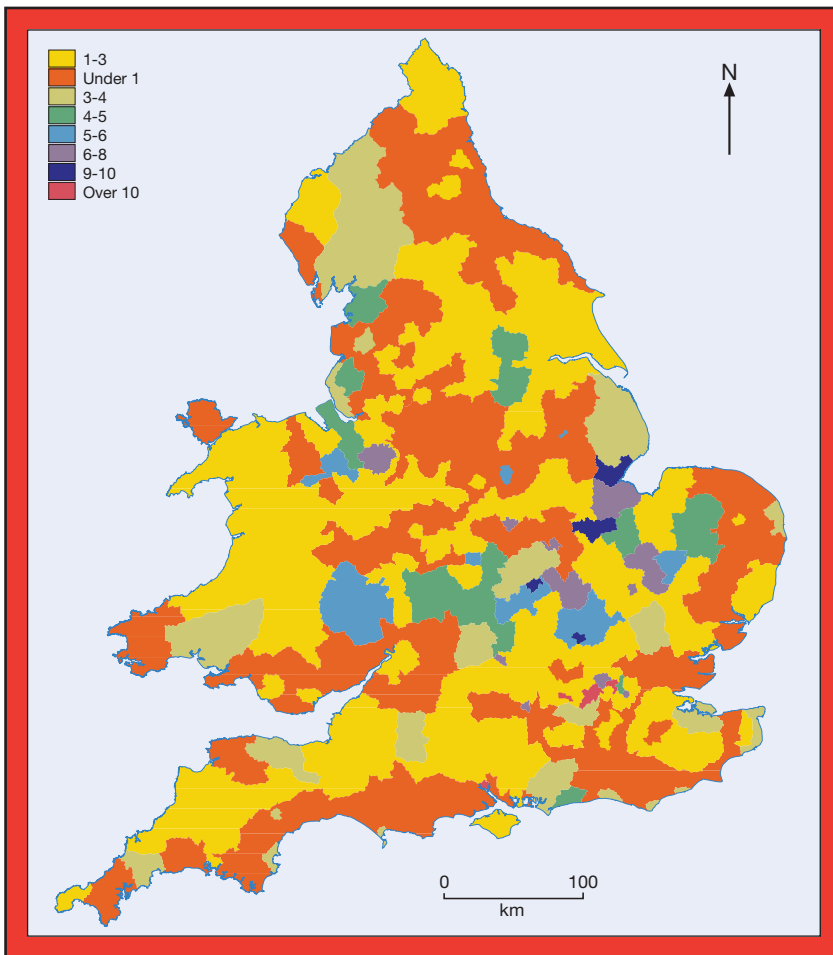


Figure 5: Polish migrants as a proportion of the working age population (2006).

minimum wage or below, this would, for a full-time worker in 2006 (before tax), mean an income of 1,269 Euros per month in the UK; in Poland the equivalent figure is 234 Euros (Eurostat, 2006: 73). This said, the gap does appear to be narrowing, as it did after Southern European countries joined the EU in the 1980s. This suggests that the rapid increase in east-to-west migration over the past five years may start to slow. Growth may also slow as countries with temporary controls on A8 migrants begin to follow Britain's lead and open up their borders.

Alongside the supply-side issues associated with economic transition in Eastern Europe, migrants' willingness to move from east to west has also been facilitated by recent cultural developments. The internet, for instance, has expanded exponentially since the 1990s, and has enabled people to communicate instantaneously and cheaply/freely irrespective of geography. E-mail, cheap telephone calls, Skype, MySpace etc. have all been significant advances in this respect, creating virtual networking environments that many migrants now rely upon. These communication channels are also used to find work and accommodation and have, overall, made the prospect of an international move less daunting than in the past. Similarly, the development of English as the global

*lingua franca* has certainly propelled the UK towards the top of many peoples' destination lists. At the same time, an array of cheap transport routes has opened up, connecting often unlikely places across Europe, which means that migrants are now able to travel with greater frequency and at a smaller cost than ever before. Figure 6 gives insight into this by listing the Easyjet flights that have opened between the UK and Poland since EU enlargement. For many would-be migrants it is as easy and cheap to fly abroad as it is to move domestically.

### The impact of Eastern European migration on UK society

The enlargement of the EU in 2004 and 2007 has had a significant impact on the UK. At a very basic level, people have started to talk about areas of Europe that were previously ignored and marginalised; the Iron Curtain came down dramatically, virtually over-night, but the genuine opening up of Eastern Europe – at a human level – is being played out over a much longer time period, quietly, and literally as we speak.

The British public are increasingly discovering Eastern Europe through the contact they now have with migrant workers. A walk through a working-class neighbourhood of Sheffield, for instance, reveals a web of Asian shopkeepers selling Polish speciality sausages and bread, with signs

Route	Year established
Newcastle to Krakow	2007
Belfast to Krakow	2007
London Gatwick to Krakow	2007
Liverpool to Krakow	2006
Bristol to Krakow	2006
London Luton to Krakow	2004
London Luton to Warsaw	2004

Figure 6: The 'Easyjet effect'.

announcing this placed awkwardly alongside colourful advertisements for cheap telephone calls to the Indian sub-continent. Down the A1 at Grantham, a newly-opened shop is selling only Eastern European food, but is throbbing with young migrants; a similar shop has also just opened up in an inner city district of Bristol. In London, Polish can be heard in the parks on a Friday and Saturday night; as workers relax with a drink (avoiding the prices of nearby bars). Up the west-coast mainline to Crewe, Polish waitresses serve Italian-American food to an affluent Cheshire set, and in the nearby supermarket distribution centre (where no doubt some of this food originates) a group of Polish men start the night shift as the surrounding suburb sleeps.

These mere glimpses of new and dispersed migrant communities are part of a rich, but relatively invisible, mosaic reflecting the now-ubiquitous presence of Eastern Europeans in the UK (see Figure 7 for other examples). Where we shop, where we eat, where we drink, and where all these products come from, connects us as citizens to our European neighbours. We effectively travel to Eastern Europe every day, and benefit greatly from this (culturally, socially, and economically). Moreover, it is not just in London where this process is intense: A8 migration is fascinating from a geographical perspective because of how dispersed it has been. Students contemplating EU expansion, therefore, can assess the human face of it – Churchill's United States of Europe 'from below' – without having to travel far at all. Hopefully this direct experience will inspire more young British citizens to move, against the grain, to explore the cities and peoples of Eastern Europe: for the east to come in from the cold, UK citizens must play a part. This article was written in this spirit: a small recognition of the contribution made by ordinary people to a form of European integration unimaginable less than two decades ago. ■



### 1. Here: Poles in Darlington

The *Northern Echo* serves Darlington and South Durham in North-East England. At the time of the 2001 census, the North-East had the smallest foreign-born population (as a percent of total population) of all the English regions: in Darlington, for example, only 3.1% of the population (around 2700 people) were born outside the British Isles (BBC, 2007). According to recent National Insurance data, however, 400 A8 workers registered to work in Darlington in 2005–2006 alone (DWP, 2007). The *Northern Echo* was more ambitious and calculated the Polish community in its catchment to number 7000. In January 2007 it launched a weekly column in Polish column 'Echo Polnocy' to serve this community ([www.thenorthernecho.co.uk/news/echopolnocy](http://www.thenorthernecho.co.uk/news/echopolnocy)). Adam Gosiewski, the journalist responsible for writing the column, explained the logic:

'People talk about the Poles in the third person – the Poles are working here, the Poles are doing this – and the Poles talk about the English in the same way. There's no ill-feeling, they just don't talk to each other, and the column will hopefully be the first, important bridge between them' (*Northern Echo*, 2007).

### 2. Here to there: The Polish on the move

Each week thousands of Eastern European lorry drivers struggle to navigate their way through the creaking British road network: some working from the UK, others based out of A8 States, delivering cheap goods to Britain and Ireland. The 7.5-mile journey between the A534 Wrexham Road at Ridley (Cheshire) and the A49/B5476 Tarporley Road in Whitchurch (Shropshire) is relatively unspectacular and, on the surface, this quiet corner of rural England has nothing to do with mass-migration. However, in early 2007, the road hosted a number of diversion signs – in Polish! The *Daily Express* felt under attack, lamenting: 'Council bosses have been branded "bonkers" after putting up road signs in Polish to stop migrant drivers getting confused' and concurring with the Conservative MP Philip Davies' view, that 'it's absolutely bonkers' (Broster, 2007). There are, however, almost 2500 Polish workers in nearby Crewe according to the Home Office (2007), and the rural A-road is a well-known cut-through, between the M6 and the Holyhead ferry terminal, for lorry drivers en route to Ireland. With 10,940 Eastern European migrant workers registering as commercial drivers in the UK since May 2004, and trans-European freight from A8 states growing rapidly, one starts to see the logic behind these signs (Hull, 2007). Similar signs have been used to guide coach drivers bringing migrant workers into London's Victoria station at the rate of an estimated 2000 people per week (according to Westminster City Council).

### 3. There: Luring the Poles back

Over 60% of the A8 migrants in the UK are Polish and the majority are under 34 (Home Office, 2007). Concerned with the impact of this 'brain drain', the city of Wroclaw in southern Poland – the country's fourth-largest city – has launched a campaign to lure workers back. This has so far involved: adverts in Polish-language papers in the UK exclaiming 'Wroc-loves you'; a website for Polish expatriates ([www.terazwroclaw.pl](http://www.terazwroclaw.pl)); adverts on Polish radio in the UK and at Polish music and cultural events; and payments to young professionals to remain in Poland. The city's mayor explained the rationale: 'I'm a big fan of a free Europe. I believe people should be allowed to make their own decisions. At the same, time it's my job to try and create an alternative, so that not everybody goes off to Britain!' (Pidd and Harding, 2006). When thinking through the impact of A8 migration, therefore, it is important to consider experiences both in the UK and in the sending countries.

### References

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- Stenning, A. et al. (2006) *Assessing the Local and Regional Impacts of International Migration*. London: Department for Communities and Local Government.

### Useful resources

- National mapping  
The *Guardian*: [www.guardian.co.uk/flash/0,,1690291,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/flash/0,,1690291,00.html)
- BBC: [news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/05/born\\_abroad/html/overview.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/05/born_abroad/html/overview.stm)
- UK regions  
Information about detailed resources on East of England; East Midlands; West Midlands; Yorkshire and Humber; North East; North West; South East; South West; Scotland; Wales; Northern Ireland can be found on the GA website: [www.geography.org.uk](http://www.geography.org.uk)

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Figure 7: The impact of Polish migration: From here to there.

### Notes

- 1 The UK, Ireland and Sweden did not place any transitional restrictions on migration from the 'A8' 2004 accession countries of Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia. These restrictions, which could last up to seven years, were imposed by the other twelve 'old' EU member states.
- 2 The Home Office predicted in 2003 'an annual net inflow from around 5000 to 13,000 individuals' into the UK post-enlargement (Dustmann et al., 2003, p. 57).
- 3 There are two main sources of data available in the UK capturing contemporary migration from Eastern Europe: migrant National Insurance registrations (from the Department for Work and Pensions) and Worker Registration Scheme applications (from the Home Office). The most reliable source of data is the census, however, but this will not be available until after 2011. The problem with National Insurance (NI) and Worker Registration Scheme data is that it only records entrant to the UK: there is no requirement for a migrant to de-register on leaving the country. At the same time, there is also evidence that many migrants fail to register, particularly those working for only a few months in the UK before returning home. A number of other sources are also available to capture migration between censuses: the Labour Force Survey (LFS); the Annual Population Survey (APS); the International Passenger Survey (IPS); the Annual School Census; police figures for translation requests; and the National Health Service Central Register (NHSCR).

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