

Citizens of Bulgaria and Romania receive full rights on the EU labour market

Tomasz Dąbrowski

The restrictions imposed on the access citizens of Bulgaria and Romania have to the labour markets in nine European Union member states – Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Holland, Luxembourg, Malta, Spain and the United Kingdom – expired on 31 December 2013. Now that the transition period is over, they no longer have to apply for work permits, and have gained unrestricted access to the labour market across the entire European Union. The countries which joined the EU in 2004 (with the exception of Malta and Hungary) as well as Sweden and Finland were the first to lift restrictions on access to their labour markets for Bulgarian and Romanian citizens (in 2007). These were followed by Denmark, Greece, Hungary and Portugal in 2009 and Ireland and Italy in 2012.

Commentary

- There are no reliable estimates of the expected increase in the number of migrants from Bulgaria and Romania once they have gained full rights on the EU labour market. The reason is shortcomings in existing data on temporary and circular labourers, who form an important section of expatriate workers from these countries. Nevertheless, no large wave of migration should be expected. One indication of this is the fact that the greatest emigrations of expatriate workers took place after 2001, when the visa-free regime with the EU was established, and after 2007, when the two countries joined the EU. The main directions for migrants from these two countries have been Italy and Spain (whose languages are related to Romanian). These countries lifted all the restrictions in access to their labour markets relatively late. Despite all this, some potential for further migration still exists due to the significant differences in the living standards. Furthermore, Romanians and Bulgarians are among the EU nations who most frequently migrate in search of work. According to the European Commission's estimates, a total of approximately 3 million Romanians and Bulgarians have emigrated to other EU member states, and the vast majority of them, around 2.5 million, were citizens of Romania.
- The end of the transition period for Bulgarians and Romanians fitted in with a broader debate on migration, which gradually becomes an essential element of the campaigns preceding elections to the European Parliament (May 2014). Fears linked to migration, which had been fomented until recently mainly by populist parties, have become an issue discussed by the mainstream political forces in some of the countries. This in particular

concerns the United Kingdom and Germany, where both the media and a number of politicians have been expressing concern over the expected wave of Bulgarians and Romanians, suggesting that migrants will exploit their welfare systems. Meanwhile, research results have proven that the scale of the burden for the welfare system is incommensurately small when compared to the gains made by the economies of these countries due to the free movement of workers in the EU.

- Migration is a serious challenge for Bulgaria and Romania in both domestic and foreign policy. It contributes to a drain on the qualified labour force (for example, IT specialists and medical personnel) and young, active and resourceful people. Bulgaria and Romania are still outside the Schengen Area, although the two countries met all the technical criteria required for accession already at the beginning of 2011. One unofficial reason for their membership being blocked is, along with insufficient progress in combating corruption, the lack of a successful policy for the inclusion of the Roma minority.