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Xenophobic Britain: Voices from Romania and Bulgaria by Annie Makoff and Sid Ali

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Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants have become demonised by the media in the lead up to the lifting of working restrictions for Eastern Europeans. Stories about ‘benefit scrounging’ immigrants or ‘Romanian criminals’ abound.

In a joint photographic project, Xenophobic Britain: Voices from Romania and Bulgaria, journalist **Annie Makoff** and photographer **Sid Ali** go behind the headlines to uncover the real stories behind the media propaganda.

“How Romanian criminals terrorise our streets”, “Flights and buses full as Romanians and Bulgarians head for the UK”, “Number of Romanian and Bulgarian migrant workers reaches record high”.

These are just some of the hundreds of headlines which circulated the British press before and after working restrictions for Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants were lifted in January.

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The tabloids were clear: the latest wave of Eastern European immigrants – or ‘gypsies’ – were not welcome. Crime would increase, jobs would be stolen, Britain would be swamped by billions of invading migrants and the welfare state would be exploited.



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And in the run-up to June’s European elections, UKIP leader Nigel Farage added further fuel to the fire by describing Romanians as ‘criminals’ during a radio interview. Ironic then, that these so-called criminals have been the target of xenophobic hate crime.

The Met’s own hate crime figures released earlier this year revealed that the number of London-recorded assaults on Romanians has **increased fourfold since January 2013.**

But this anti-Eastern European feeling isn’t new. The Polish community of Britain were once vilified and resented too although according to recent crime figures, they too are experiencing a **resurgence in hate attacks.**

So what do the immigrants themselves think?

From construction workers to waiters to dentists, the people who took part in *Xenophobic Britain: Voices from Romania and Bulgaria* came to the UK for a better life. For them, it's about telling it like it is. These are some of their stories.

Serge (Click for Photo)

I came to the UK to develop my passion for music. Romanians and Bulgarians were close to non-existent as far as the British public were concerned. 'The Cheeky Girls' were probably all anyone knew about Romania.

Back then, the "Polish wave" inundated everyone's consciousness. A stream of panic, hate and fear flowed almost constantly from the papers. The subjects were everything from Polish workers taking British jobs or having intercourse with dust hoovers. I always thought that the regular folk on the street would not waste their time with such low-minded attacks.



Hardly any paper mentions anything good about the Eastern Europeans who come over here to work, many of whom take on the worst jobs to begin with, who bite their lips swallowing bitter racist remarks.

Today it is the turn of Romanians and Bulgarians. Hardly any paper mentions anything good about the Eastern Europeans who come over here to work, many of whom take on the worst jobs to begin with, who bite their lips swallowing bitter racist remarks. They continue to work regardless. All because he or she wants to give their kids a better future, a better education, a better life.

But there is another side, too. London has taught me more than I could have ever learned by remaining in Romania. It represents the very model of a 21st century city: diverse and forward-looking. A city that is constantly moving, evolving and innovating, a city that is alive in the truest sense of the word.

It is here that I came to overcome limitations of race, language, colour or religion. It is here that I have begun understanding and appreciate the open-mindedness and respect that is due to every people, regardless of where they were born.

Vera (Click for Photo)

There were a lot of things I couldn't do in Romania. There is so much corruption. I would never

have had the life I wanted if I stayed there, which is why I came to London to start a better life for myself.

I never once thought about asking for benefits, so it's frustrating when people think you come over to take state money. I read some of what's written in the media and obviously it makes me quite upset and a bit offended.



I never once thought about asking for benefits, so it's frustrating when people think you come over to take state money. I read some of what's written in the media and obviously it makes me quite upset and a bit offended.

What the media said about the 'invasion' just wasn't even true. They insisted that all the country would move to the UK. I know lots of Romanians who moved to England years ago, but I don't know one Romanian who has come over since the restrictions were lifted in January.

In general though, British people are quite nice, but sometimes when they realise I'm Romanian, they make a face. And I've noticed a slight change in people's attitudes towards me since the media's hate campaign. It's hard to explain. I can't say they are more aggressive, but whereas before it didn't matter that much that I'm Romanian, now it suddenly matters.

I've seen things written on walls, too. I have a friend working in construction and he showed me where someone had written, "Romanians go home, you are scumbags."

People shouldn't be so influenced by the media. So much of it is lies. No one should be put in the corner because of where they are from - it really isn't fair.

Dessy (Click for Photo)

I was stressed coming over initially. Everyone was talking about Bulgarians and Romanians coming to the UK to take jobs and live off benefits. A friend who has been in the UK for two years said there was something in the papers about Romanians and Bulgarians every day.

But I think that a lot of the discrimination you see in the newspapers and on TV are against people who are not willing to integrate.



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Something an English friend said once stuck with me. He said it's not that people are scared that we will come here and take jobs, it's that London is overcrowded. So the media have to find something against us. They can't just say 'there isn't enough space', so they say we are no good, we can't come here, they don't want another Polish invasion.

But I really appreciate what London can offer me. I have a job in a furniture company doing similar to what I was doing in Bulgaria, although it's better paid here.

It's a very different culture in Bulgaria. You live with your parents until you get married. If you don't want to get married, you are different. And you can't take time off work for holidays. I tried to once and I got fired. The only time you can take time off work is if you're pregnant or if you are ill.

So I'm a hardworking person. I didn't come here to live on benefits, I came here because I can have a salary which allows me to live rather than survive. And just like any normal person, I want a good salary and normal working days and holidays.

Tommy (Click for Photo)

I am a dentist and President of the Europeans Party. I came to the UK in 2010 to develop my career. There are actually above 100,000 Romanians in the UK and about 50,000 in London. From those there are about 2.5 per cent who are dentists or doctors, which is the highest percentage in any community of immigrants. Yet the newspapers focus on gypsies and gangs.

So it's clear that hate crime and bad feeling towards Eastern Europeans has been increasing, especially around January. Hate attacks often coincide with what the media say. The two go hand-in-hand with the media rhetoric against immigration. We are demonised.



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In fact, the Met recently released figures about incidents of racial hate crime which have doubled in the last year. Why did they double? The number of immigrants haven't doubled. So if the numbers haven't doubled, why has hate crime increased? It's because of the media rhetoric which has disproportionately increased.

But it's always easier for the newspapers to blame immigrants when things are going wrong, like rising house prices. They say, 'we cannot afford to buy a house, it is the immigrants fault', but actually the immigrants coming over from Eastern Europe mainly work in construction, especially the Polish. They are building houses. But they are the people who are blamed, the ones who are actually providing a solution.

And what is often forgotten is that 40 per cent of NHS staff are immigrants. You are blaming again the ones who are providing a solution.

Andrey (Click for Photo)

Whilst the UK media were talking about Bulgarians being bad people, the Bulgarian media were trying to dissuade Bulgarians from moving. They said the UK people were highly anxious towards Bulgarians and they talked about how hard it was in the UK.

It has been hard. I was a qualified electrician in Bulgaria, but when I've gone to interviews or asked people for help and advice, as soon as they've heard me talking like a foreigner, their behaviour becomes anxious or they try to end the conversation.



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And at some construction sites I've worked at, the managers have looked at us like slaves. Sometimes the attitude towards general operators like myself can be sometimes offensive. Most of my colleagues in the same position as me are either Bulgarians, Romanians or Nigerians and at times we've felt mocked.

A lot of English people on the sites, even if they are very friendly, I feel are hypocritical. It's not like they really want to be a friend of mine, it is like they are pretending.

But it's not that people hate us - the people are being manipulated by the media to hate us, to be anxious towards us, to be reserved. It is the media who are to blame for this. The media and the politicians.

In countries like Bulgaria, foreign policy is dictated from outside, whether it's from Russia, the US, or Europe. Anything they do is just for economic or political interest, never about the people. That is why we come over, because we want a better life.

Final thoughts

Of the 16 people who came forward with their stories, not one of them had come to Britain with the intention of living off benefits. For the most part, they settled for low-skilled work despite university qualifications and worked long hours for relatively little pay. But their experiences aren't unique, although the tabloid press may paint a very different picture. So maybe it's time the British public begin questioning what they read in the tabloids instead of taking every story at face value.

Words: Annie Makoff. Photography: Sid Ali.

www.xenophobicbritain.co.uk

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