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# Britain to Restrict Workers From Bulgaria and Romania

By SARAH LYALL

LONDON, Oct. 24 — Britain plans to severely restrict the ability of people from Bulgaria and Romania to work here after those two countries join the European Union in January, the government said Tuesday.

The new policy represents an enormous change for Britain, which has been one of Europe's main champions of expansion and openness in the European job market. In 2004, Britain, Ireland and Sweden were the only three European countries that granted unfettered access to their job markets to immigrants from the eight Eastern European countries, as well as Cyprus and Malta, that joined the European Union that year.

Ireland made a similar announcement on Tuesday, saying that it, too, would offer only limited jobs to Bulgarians and Romanians.

After the new members were admitted to the European Union in 2004, Britain was shocked by the number of people from Eastern European countries, particularly Poland, who poured across the borders, looking for jobs.

The government had predicted that no more than 13,000 arrivals would come each year, but in the past two years, about 500,000 Eastern Europeans have registered as workers here, the government said. Migration experts say that tens of thousands more found off-the-books jobs, or remained unemployed.

Employers and the government say the new arrivals have benefited the British economy, mostly by filling the need for lower-skilled workers. But immigrants are viewed with suspicion by many Britons, and the populist newspapers dwell on stories about how the new arrivals have strained resources at hospitals and schools.

"This is essentially a political decision, because there's massive public hostility to immigration in the U.K.," said Nick Pearce, director of the Institute for Public Policy Research, a left-leaning think tank. "If it came down to diplomatic considerations, the result would have been different."

Mr. Pearce said during an interview that it was unlikely that immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria, which have far lower unemployment rates than, for example, Poland, would rush to Britain once their countries joined the European Union.

Under the new system, Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants will be allowed to work in Britain only if they meet strict criteria, the home secretary, John Reid, told Parliament. Some unskilled laborers will be able to take seasonal agricultural jobs or work in the food-processing industry under a plan that allows 19,750 such jobs to be filled by foreigners a year. Starting next year, Mr. Reid said, that program will be open only to Romanians and Bulgarians.

In addition, highly skilled workers from the two countries will be allowed to take jobs here, as will workers who obtain permits after their employers demonstrate that their jobs cannot be filled

by British citizens. Under European regulations, self-employed immigrants will be allowed to work in Britain, provided they prove that they are supporting themselves and not secretly working for someone else.

Students from Bulgaria and Romania will be able to work part time if they are enrolled in college.

"We look forward to welcoming Romanian and Bulgarian workers here, provided that they comply with our rules and obey the law," Mr. Reid said.

The British government has long argued for openness in the European job market, and has said that the economy can benefit only if workers are willing to take lower-paying jobs, as many of the Eastern European immigrants have.

Mr. Reid said studies of the new workers showed that they had had a positive impact on the economy. But, he said, the influx of people has put a strain on housing and schools in some communities where many immigrants, particularly Poles, had settled.

Sir Andrew Green, chairman of Migrationwatch, a group that argues that Britain is already overcrowded and should limit new arrivals, said in an interview that the government's announcement was "a step in the right direction." He added, "This is the first time that the government has made even a half-serious effort to reduce immigration."

But Sir Andrew said the policy was rife with loopholes and criticized the government for not doing enough to enforce regulations. Under the new plan, employees working illegally and employers who hire illegal workers will be subject to on-the-spot fines.

At the same time, Keith Vaz, a former minister for Europe under Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labor government, criticized the new policy as a step backward for European openness.

"These restrictions will be unworkable, undesirable and unnecessary, and of lasting damage to the reputation of the U.K. as a champion of the enlargement," he told the Press Association, the domestic news agency.