

## Exiting the EU - Insights on the UK Government's White Paper

August 2017

# IN SETTING OUT THE UK'S POST-BREXIT IMMIGRATION POLICY, THE GOVERNMENT IS SPEAKING FOR THE PUBLIC PREFERENCE

Ekaterina Kolpinskaya

### *Key points:*

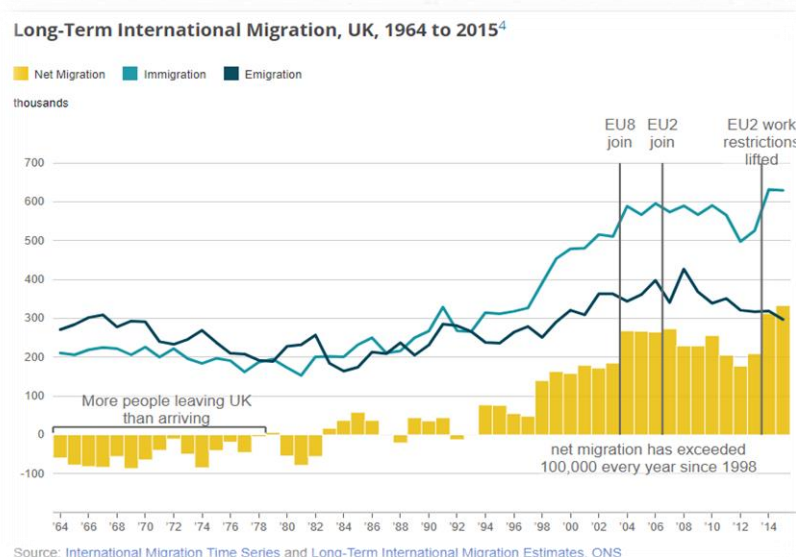
- ❑ The UK Government's White Paper explicitly states that ensuring full border and immigration control is the Government's priority for a new approach to immigration after Brexit, though the UK will continue encouraging migration of high-skilled individuals and students and migration to cover shortages in the labour market.
- ❑ This approach stems from public concerns over the net migration figures and the pressures migration puts on public services.
- ❑ The approach to migration control post-Brexit seems to be economy centred and individualistic in nature, resembling that of post-World War II Britain, which encouraged individual "guest workers" rather than a more rounded approach accounting for workers' wellbeing and family rights.

Public scepticism over the ["broken" system of immigration control](#) and [fears of uncontrolled immigration](#) in relation to the freedom of movement principle of the EU was a major driving factor behind the decision to hold the 2016 Referendum on the UK membership of the European Union. Negative assessments of immigration and its contribution to the British economy and society was also a [key predictor](#) of support for Brexit in the referendum.

Now that the process of negotiation is underway, and the release of the White Paper on the future of the UK's immigration regime [is imminent](#), it is important to outline the [Government's principles on immigration](#) that guide both EU exit negotiations and domestic immigration policy design.

The White Paper on the UK's exit from and new partnership with the European Union explicitly acknowledges the contribution of immigrants to British society and especially to British economy (in 2016, non-UK nationals [constituted](#) 11% of the UK 30.3 million labour market, including 7% EU nationals). It also commits the UK to continuing to encourage high-

skilled immigration and student exchange, whilst ensuring a tighter immigration control. The rationale behind these principles is rooted in [“...public concern about pressure on public services, like schools and our infrastructure, especially housing, as well as ...wages for people on the lowest incomes”](#).



These concerns [intensified](#) after the 2007-2008 economic crisis, coupled with record high net migration figures in the recent years (see above), thus, mirroring the 1970s when relations between immigrants and Britons [were tested](#) in a period of economic decline.

## WHERE DOES THE PUBLIC STAND?

The Government’s principles largely overlap with the areas of public consensus on immigration. Around two thirds of British population [would like to see](#) immigration reduced by introducing tighter immigration rules, stricter border controls and harsher punishments for crossing the border and/or staying in the country illegally. Furthermore, the public have [intensified](#) their demands for greater selection in immigration policy in favour of more high skilled migrants, though the level of public knowledge regarding the composition and the level of proficiency of current migrants is unclear.

Public opinion data shows a degree of appreciation regarding the contribution of high-skilled migrants into the British economy, with more Britons [considering](#) immigration to be good for economy than otherwise. This is particularly good news for immigrants from Western Europe and non-EU nationals, 57% and 52% of which, respectively, [had](#) a degree or equivalent qualification as of 2016, compared to 1 in 3 UK nationals and 1 in 4 Eastern Europeans. Their skill levels of occupations also evidence their sought after status according to the White Paper principles and public preferences for high-skilled migration, whereby 2 in 5 Western Europeans [were employed](#) in high-skill jobs in 2016, compared to 1 in 3 Britons.

The ratio of those who [consider](#) that immigrants create rather than take jobs away has also improved by 10 percentage points between 2002 and 2014, from 22% to 32%. Considering a high percentage of some groups of migrants - namely, Eastern European migrants - occupied in private sector and being self-employed [reported](#) by the Office for National

Statistics, this is not surprising. However, every third Briton still sees immigration as threatening to jobs, which might partly be stemming from the fears of being undercut by them. Potentially contributing to this fear are the willingness of migrants to work longer hours (e.g., over 50% of Eastern Europeans, for instance, [worked](#) more than 40 hours per week compared with around a third of UK nationals) and their high level of qualification, which [made](#) more than 1 in 3 non-UK nationals over-educated for their jobs compared with other workers.

With international students [generated](#) £10.8 billion of UK export earnings in 2014-15 alone, the British public [consistently believes](#) in benefits associated with student migration and [the need to exclude](#) this group from the Government's net migration target, which [accounted](#) for approximately 22% of long-term migrants as of 2016.

In addition to economic benefits, Britons value the contributions of immigrants to culture and British society more broadly. Although they are getting more sceptical on this issue with 38% of Britons agreeing that British cultural life is undermined by immigrants (which is an increase of 6 percentage points since 2002), those with a positive view still just [outweigh](#) those with a negative view by 4 percentage points.

However, despite the appreciation of the contribution of high-skilled migrants and desire to maintain student migration, in particular, many Britons - as the White Paper rightly points out - share concerns regarding the pressures that growing population puts on public services such as schools, NHS, transport. That is despite [the findings](#) that fiscal impacts of European migration, in particular, and those of recent migrants are positive. Coupled with widely shared suspicions that immigrants cost more than they bring in, these concerns add complexity to the cost benefit analysis of immigration (which is far from conclusive - see the summary of net cost estimates compiled from several studies by [the Migration Observatory and Full Fact](#)) and heats up the [debate](#).

## **WHAT MIGRANTS ARE WELCOME UNDER A NEW APPROACH (AS FAR AS WE CAN TELL)?**

Overall, the Government's approach to controlling immigration largely corresponds to attitudes and preferences of the British public for certain types of and characteristics of persons allowed to come and stay in the UK post-Brexit.

First and foremost, both public and Government preferences are for those immigrants who arrive lawfully and substantively contribute to economy, and who are preferably employed in high-skilled and/or shortage occupations. Both also encourage student migration as well. However, it is unclear whether student migrants would be encouraged to take up employment in the UK during or after their studies. Third country nationals experienced a growing number of restrictions on [their employment](#) and [post-study status](#), which is likely to apply to European nationals when Britain leaves the EU. If so, a wide pool of highly qualified and partially integrated migrants with knowledge of the British economy and society would be forced to leave the country.

Secondly, citing public concerns over pressures on public services such as schools, NHS and housing, the White Paper prioritises individual rather than family migration. The economy-centred approach to immigration sounds [rather reminiscent](#) of the approach adopted after World War II in order to fulfil unskilled labour needs of post-war Britain. However, as British history [shows](#) restrictions on immigration (such as those passed in 1962, 1968, 1969,

1971 and 1981) did not reduce the number of migrants, and instead led those immigrants who managed to get in, to settle in the country, which intensified in turn family migration. There is no reason to believe that this will not be the case in modern day Britain. As a recent Migration Observatory briefing [shows](#), Tier 1 and Tier 2 high-skilled migrants bring most dependents, per capita, as they are more likely to meet income requirements, for instance. In addition, a Home Office study [reports](#), 77% of family migrants entering the UK in 2009 had been granted settlement by the end of 2014. Such high share of settlement is rather similar to how it [was](#) in the 1970-1980s.

Overall, it is clear that the White Paper - with public support - promises a more restrictive approach to immigration policy, which in part resembles the practice of hiring “guest workers” wherever and whenever needed. However, considering the public’s and the Government’s desire to continue encouraging highly skilled and student migration, in particular, this approach does not necessarily hold a promise for reducing the actual number of immigrants to [“tens of thousands”](#). Although this is a commitment the Government still holds on to, it is unclear whether it will take precedence over the economics of migration. In other words, will this target be met at any cost - [even at the cost of damaging the economy](#), or will an economy- rather than a politics-led approach to controlling immigration prevail? In that case, the Government will have to consider making provisions for keeping the “best and the brightest” in the fold by easing limitations of post-study visas for students and ensuring the right for family life of immigrants to name a few. Furthermore, the Government might want to build on existing appreciation of migrants’ contribution to both British economy and culture to boost public support for this policy.

## CONCLUSION

- ❑ The Government’s approach to immigration is largely in agreement with public opinion and priorities, which enables an economy-centred strategy aimed at attracting individual high-skilled migrants and students whilst deterring unlawfully arriving and low-skilled migrants.
- ❑ There is, however, no provision to family life and student career progression post-study in the document, which suggest potential for contention as it happened in the 1960-1980s. This suggests potential problems with community cohesion, international labour and student recruitment.
- ❑ Making such provisions, however, will not be popular with the public, on whose attitude the entire case for tighter immigration control rests.

\*\*\*\*

*Dr Ekaterina Kolpinskaya is a Lecturer in Comparative Politics at Swansea University*

*Email: [e.kolpinskaya@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:e.kolpinskaya@swansea.ac.uk); [@DrKolpinskaya](#)*

