

Class pervades the way migrants are viewed in Britain

March 28 2017, by Sanja Vico



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In a poll of 25 countries by [Ipsos MORI](#) published in March 2017, 33% of those interviewed in Britain said immigration was their biggest worry. Although more British people overall were worried about healthcare, only Germans were more worried about immigration.

While discussions about immigration in Britain used to [be focused](#) on issues of race, much of the current debate hinges on social [class](#). The "problem" – particularly of migration of European citizens to the UK – is often portrayed as being the migration of the less well-off. And Eastern European migrants [are often discriminated](#) against on the basis of their class because they take low-paid jobs in the UK.

Social class has been reduced to one single aspect: the wealth of these migrants. It is assumed that people who are well-off will also have high levels of cultural and [social capital](#), such as a university degree and good social networks. And vice versa. But this overgeneralises, assuming all migrants from Eastern Europe constitute one single group and that they will all possess the same characteristics and job prospects.

Serbian Londoners

My own ongoing research focusing on Serbian Londoners illustrates how [public debates](#) about the social class of immigrants to Britain have been oversimplified. There is no precise or accurate number of Serbs in London, but [some estimates](#) put the number at 70,000. Their different histories and personal backgrounds make this group of Serbian Londoners remarkably diverse. They have come to London for a variety of reasons: economic opportunity, a change of lifestyle seeking adventure, or to escape the political situation back home.

One 47-year-old man, who works in marketing, told me that he came to London in 2001. On the one hand, his motive to leave was a better way of life. But his decision to leave came after a decade of living under the regime of Slobodan Milošević, categorised by corruption, nationalist quarrels, environmental ruin and an impoverished cultural scene. For most Serbs it was impossible to leave the country before Milosevic's fall, because borders were closed due to international sanctions.

There is often inconsistency between the different types of capital of migrants – such as their social, economic or cultural capital. This means that some people may be well-off, but they do not have a university degree and their contacts are mainly limited to people of the same ethnic origin. So they have high economic capital, but low cultural and social capitals. The opposite is also true, and other [studies of migration](#) have documented how some migrants are overqualified for the jobs they undertake in Britain.

In my research, I've spoken to people without a [university degree](#) who have managed to start their own business and gain greater economic capital in the UK than they had when they were in Serbia. Yet at the same time, while they are now financially middle class, they have not necessarily gained greater cultural and social capital than they had before migrating. This means their circle of close friends are still limited to a group of people they had known before, and their cultural and social tastes have not have dramatically changed.

Not a homogeneous group

Most of the participants in my research are UK citizens and were eligible to vote in the EU referendum. Some were born in the UK, but the majority have become UK citizens since arriving in London. Given that Serbia is not in the EU, most of the first generation of these migrants had not enjoyed the privileged status of EU citizens until they became UK nationals. But it is still relatively difficult for their relatives to come and visit them because of the very tough UK visa regime.

It was apparent that their views on Brexit were linked more to their system of values, rather than their wealth. Even some relatively well-off Serbs in London with university degrees are not necessarily welcoming of different cultures. One 40-year-old man who runs his own business told me that he voted for Brexit, because, among other things, he did not

like influences of other cultures on the British tradition. But another woman, an engineer and designer who was born in the UK of Serbian origin, voted for remain. She told me:

"I am afraid that the UK has set an example that other countries might follow. The EU is actually the only salvation for Serbia, if the EU falls apart, Serbia might go backwards a hundred years."

All of this shows that debates on immigration to Britain which treat all Eastern Europeans as being from the lower social class tend to be overly generalised and oversimplified. There is no one single category of Eastern European migrants. People may move into a higher social class once they migrate, or they may be overqualified for jobs they take in a host country: their [social class](#) is not set in stone. Debates in Britain that attempt to label all Eastern European migrants into the same category ignore the complexity and richness of the migrant experience.

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