While an EU member, Britain should behave like one

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The big debate in the United Kingdom on whether the country should leave the European Union has been going on with growing earnestness over the last months. It is a reflection of the budding euroscepticism in British society amidst the deepest economic recession for years, and it is only normal that major political parties, including Prime Minister David Cameron's co-ruling Conservatives, are trying to respond to it. In a landmark speech in January, Cameron urged a re-formulation of London's relations with Brussels with some repatriation of powers and promised a nationwide referendum by end-2017 on whether the UK should stay in the bloc given this new deal is reached.

But while it might be legitimate in view of Europe's financial and economic woes, British EU scepticism, and lately even negativism, has a dark side which does not befit a flagship EU member with a centuries-old democratic tradition. Part of the EU debate has unwittingly transformed into a public scare of impending mass waves of Eastern European immigration into Britain from the EU's newest members, Bulgaria and Romania. The openly blackening campaign, mostly led on the pages of tabloid newspapers, warns that hordes of unwelcome benefit-seeking workers are to arrive in the UK once an EU restriction on the free movement of labor for Bulgarians and Romanians expires at end-2013.

What is most worrying is that the government itself, more specifically the Tory part of it, is bowing to this discriminating discourse and even discussing ways to limit the rights of EU citizens on the territory of the UK. First, back in October 2012, Interior Minister Theresa May hinted at introducing visas for EU nationals to prevent immigration, supposedly from Bulgaria and Romania. Then in January this year, information (bordering on ridiculousness) was leaked that ministers were considering a negative, self-flagellation campaign by the UK government to present the country in a bad light so as to deter potential arrivals from the two Balkan EU member states. And in February the European Commission blasted as unlawful plans of British authorities to require EU citizens of some nationalities to carry a "European residence document" on UK territory, clearly directed to thwart Bulgarian and Romanian settlement after January 1st 2014. And it is not only in the realm of plans: the British government has already been discriminating against Bulgarian and Romanian students. Right now, because of formal procedures, they are in a more difficult position to exercise their right to work a given number of hours per week than some non-EU nationals.

The question comes then, is Britain acting as a true EU member state? Despite rising European negativism and the unclear outcome of a referendum in 2017, the UK is a legally bound member of the European community of nations and should behave like one, at least until it is part of the whole thing. Britain has always been one of the staunchest supporters of a united Europe, beginning with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the 1989-90 revolutions in Eastern Europe. It is one of the engines of EU enlargement now: while euroscepticism first gained ground in continental Western Europe after the 2004-07 enlargement, official London never succumbed to it, and has been active supporter of the Western Balkans' inclusion into the European family ever since the democratic perspective of this region improved.

Britain has a much more essential role in the European Union than the current domestic situation allows its politicians to talk about. As commonly accepted, it is an important promoter of the free market and trade with the world and a good balancer for the more bureaucratic and rules-ridden continental powers; it is one of the obvious leaders, together with France, in the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy and a potential leader in the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the future, when the EU will, hopefully, become a more assertive actor in world politics; and it is a bridge between the sometimes not concurring world views of Brussels and Washington.

But what the UK can and should be, regardless if it one day decides to leave the EU, is a democratic example for still immature democracies on the EU's periphery such as Bulgaria and Romania, and even more so for the future members states from the Western Balkans. And this would be impossible by allowing discrimination against some citizens in order to please others.