In search of better opportunity: Transnational social workers in the United Kingdom navigating the maze of global and social mobility

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1- Introduction

Social workers are increasingly becoming global professionals, both in utilising their professional qualifications as a means to achieve international mobility, as well as in the expectations of an internationally transferable set of skills. However, there is a continued dilemma in defining such professional international identity due to contradictory processes of 'indigenisation', or the extent to which social work practice fits local contexts; 'universalism', finding commonalities across divergent contexts; and 'imperialism' where Western world-views are privileged over local and indigenous cultural perspectives (Gray, 2005). Many regard social work to be especially context-sensitive in that a good understanding of language and cultural clues is an essential element in the ability of workers to perform their work effectively. In that sense, while global professional mobility facilitates transnational social work (Hanna and Lyons 2014), social work is not yet a global 'common project' and clear differences remain at the level of training, qualifications and practice (Hussein, 2011 and 2014; Weiss-Gal and Welbourne, 2008).

Despite these disagreements, there is growing evidence that international social workers contribute significantly to the national workforce of many developed countries including Canada (Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2012); England (Hussein et al., 2011); Ireland (Walsh et al., 2010) and New Zealand (Bartley et al., 2012). While transnational social workers' (TSWs') contributions to the host countries are not to be disputed, these transnational movements are happening within a set of constraints at different stages from application, qualifications recognition, securing jobs to practicing in a new environment. Some of these difficulties may arise from how social work practice has evolved as a profession within different national and local contexts and how it connects to wider policies and national priorities. Others may relate to international agreements and processes of qualifications and experience recognition. Thus, different TSWs are faced by a multitude of challenges and hurdles, some of which are similar to professionals from other domains, such as medicine or engineering, yet others are specific to the nature of social work itself. These layered challenges are observed by and impact on

TSWs themselves, both at the individual and professional levels, as well as in relation to their new context of practice in the destination countries.

2- Aims and Methods

The current chapter aims to discuss, based on empirical research, the various challenges and opportunities when TSWs engage in British social work practice. These are identified through the perspective of different actors including TSWs themselves, their managers and colleagues. The analysis utilises data from different sources and studies. First, it explores trends in the levels and profile of non-UK qualified social workers registered in England through interrogating data held by the previous and current social work regulators in England, the General Social Care Council (GSCC) and the Health and Care Professional Council (HCPC). It then draws on rich qualitative and quantitative data obtained through interviews, focus group discussions and national surveys with different stakeholders (See Hussein et al., 2013; Hussein, 2014). Data sources include: workforce records (GSCC 2003-2012 and HCPC 2012-2015); online surveys of non-UK qualified SWs (n=101 in 2010 & n=32 in 2014); interviews (n=18) and two focus group discussions (n=7) with transnational social workers; interviews with British managers and social workers (6) and service users (35). SW practitioners' interview participants were recruited through invitations from distributed to a sample of employers, focus group discussions were held with newly recruited TSWs in two local authorities in England recruited via other participants participated in the online survey; service users were recruited through older people' forums and carers' associations.
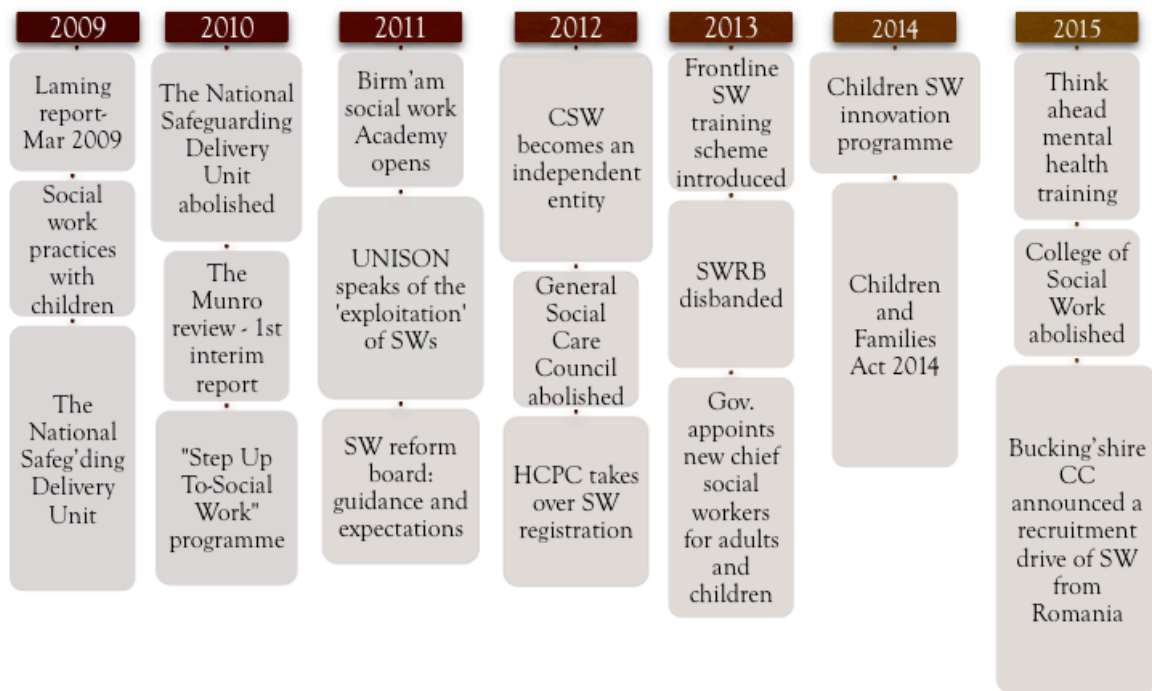
3- The British Social Work Policies and Context

Britain was one of the first countries to go through the process of industrialisation in the 19th century, when a number of social problems emerged. Mass internal migration, economic and political challenges and changes in the family structure were some of the key factors contributing to a set of 'new' social problems. Some of these social problems – manifested in extensive child labour, poor sanitation and the staggering growth of the urban poor during that period – set a 'road map' of social upheaval (Pierson, 2011). During the mid 19th century it was 'the women's movement' that initiated social work within a context of an emerging welfare state: from the start it evolved as a 'female profession' with the bourgeoisie taking the lead to address social problems and inequalities through public and political means

(Walkowitz, 1999). Social workers initially focused on poverty, increasingly concerned with the problems of children and families and by the 1930s, the new occupation had achieved professional status as a personal service profession, as a result of the growth of professional organizations, educational programs, and academic work. Following the Second World War, social work saw significant expansions particularly during post-war recovery era with increased funding to the welfare state. However, by the 1970s and later during the Thatcher era, welfare spending was significantly reduced; the same period also witnessed the increased movement into marketization and outsourcing of public services.

The past two decades has seen a dynamic process of social work education and practice that have direct implications on TSWs. While recruitment issues have remained a particular concern, especially for child protection work, a number of attempts have been made to reform social work education and practice. Some of these include the transition of social work qualifications from a two-year diploma into a three-year degree in 2003, in an attempt to increase the status and portability of social work qualifications and to attract new recruits (Orme et al., 2009). More recently, there has been a number of 'fast-track' social work training programmes, some of which target graduates from other disciplines to enter social work practice after relatively short and 'condensed' university and practice based training schemes. The latter usually have some financial support attached to them. The rationale behind such schemes are to address chronic shortages in certain social work areas, such as mental health, and to widen the pool of students: however, these have attracted some controversy. Figure 1 shows some social work reforms and policy developments from 2009 to 2015, where recruitment needs and policy reactions to public 'scandals', such as the infamous Baby P case, featured strongly.

Figure 1 Selected policy and practice developments in the English Social Work system (2009 and 2015)

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Laming report- Mar 2009	The National Safeguarding Delivery Unit abolished	Birm'am social work Academy opens	CSW becomes an independent entity	Frontline SW training scheme introduced	Children SW innovation programme	Think ahead mental health training
Social work practices with children	The Munro review - 1st interim report	UNISON speaks of the 'exploitation' of SWs	General Social Care Council abolished	SWRB disbanded	Children and Families Act 2014	College of Social Work abolished
The National Safeg'ding Delivery Unit	"Step Up To-Social Work" programme	SW reform board: guidance and expectations	HCPC takes over SW registration	Gov. appoints new chief social workers for adults and children		Bucking'shire CC announced a recruitment drive of SW from Romania

4- Drivers for Recruiting Transnational Social Workers

Social work in England has faced a number of recruitment crises over the past few decades. The reasons behind the inability of the sector to recruit enough social workers are multiple and include the intrinsic nature of social work and subsequent emotional burden (Hussein et al. 2014), the poor public image of social work and the tight pool of traditional social work students.

For employers, the level of supply of UK-qualified and experienced social workers is a key driver in resorting to recruiting TSWs especially from outside the UK (Hussein, 2013). The higher stress level observed among children's social workers and continued recruitment shortages partly explain overseas recruitment campaigns undertaken by local authorities for children and families social workers since late 1990s. For example, between 2001 and 2002, overseas social workers accounted for approximately one-quarter of all new recruits (Tandeka, 2011). Interviews with employers in the UK confirmed that the main reasons behind active recruitment of TSWs related to shortages and high caseloads. However, many employers also highlighted other positive outcomes from recruiting TSWs including their work ethics and how TSWs value their employment in the UK. In some situations, these

attributes were subconsciously assigned to some groups of migrants than others: for example, there was a tendency to profile TSWs from Eastern Europe as hard-working but at the same time as groups that can pose retention challenges because of a perception that they can easily change jobs . On the other hand, there was some preference to social workers from Australia and Canada where there are more similarities in terms of social work practice as well as a common language. Employers also highlighted other values TSWs bring, including their willingness to accept high caseloads and to work in 'challenging' situations.

> *The actual professionalism and work ethic is, quite often, a lot stronger. They are quite different to a number of the people we've recruited not from abroad, in the sense that they are very often a much more driven workforce (Human Resource Manager).*

5- UK Immigration Policies: Implications on TSWs Mobility

Similar to social work reforms, there has been a dynamic process of immigration policy reforms in the UK. The UK has relied extensively, for many decades, on immigration to fill labour shortages, first during the 1960s and 1970s from Commonwealth states, formerly part of the British Empire (Redfoot and Houser 2008). From late 1970s, the UK gradually began to closely link migration policies to economic imperatives such as redressing workforce shortages. In 2004, 10 countries joined the EU: eight of them required further development to meet full joining requirement, referred to as the A8 accession countries[i]. The UK was one of a minority of EU states that permitted free labour flows of the A8 in 2004 prior to the agreed date of 2010. In 2008, the UK introduced a 'points-based' system, based mainly on the skills of individual migrants and with specific quotas for various sectors and a shortage occupation-list reflecting national demand which is reviewed yearly. This has reduced the ability of employers to recruit migrants from outside the EU (Dobson and Salt 2009). In 2010, in his general election campaign, David Cameron promised to cut net immigration to the tens of thousands and, with no control over levels of immigration from the EU, the only alternative was to cut skilled-migration from outside of Europe through an 'immigration cap' on non-EU migrants. Following this, some local councils, as presented in Figure 1, have initiated recruitment campaigns of TSWs from Romania, which is a member of the EU, since 2015, however, the impact of these campaigns were not captured in the period covered by the data obtained from the HCPC. During this period, children's social work was removed from the UK Border Agency 'Occupation Shortage' list, but was shortly reintroduced to the list, while

social work with adults never made it to the list. This meant that employers were still able to apply for Tier 2 visas to enable the recruitment of non-EU children and family TSWs, however, with an overall cap on numbers of non-EU migrants, the process was considerably onerous. In 2016, the UK had voted to leave the EU, Brexit, however, the strategy of such exit is not yet clear but it is likely to have various implications on the ability of EU and non-EU TSW to join the UK social work sector

Figure 2 presents the number of overseas social workers registering to work in England from 2003-2015. The trend in the level of new TSW recruits reflects most of the UK immigration policy developments during this period of time. It should be noted that the analysis used two data sources that present different levels of detail and coverage. Up until 2011, all social workers with non-UK qualifications were required to request registration to work in England through the GSCC; this responsibility was transferred to HCPC after 2012. Thus, the year 2012 showed a 'loss' of data during the transfer; this figure has been imputed to smooth the curve presented in Figure 2. The other point to notice is the significant difference in the numbers of TSWs registered to work in England prior to and after 2012. This in the main is likely to reflect the changes in the UK immigration system during this period but might also reflect some variations in the data recording processes employed by the GSCC and HCPC.

Figure 2 Number of overseas-qualified social workers registered by the GSCC and HCPC to work in England from 2003 to 2015[†]

Figure 2 shows that the number of non-UK qualified TSWs increased sharply from 2003 to 2009 when the UK allowed free mobility of the A8 countries and at the same time overseas recruitment campaigns continued to recruit TSWs from countries such as Australia, Canada and the United States of America (USA). The data also reflect the introduction of the immigration cap in non-EU migrants in 2010, when the number of newly registered TSWs in England declined sharply from 1,185 in 2009 to 413 in 2011.

Data obtained from the GSCC for the period 2003-2011 allowed further interrogation of source countries of TSWs in England, while the HCPC data were provided it aggregate format with no detailed breakdown of country of qualifications. Table 1 presents trends in the number of TSWs obtaining qualifications from different source countries from 2003 to 2011. The analysis clearly shows the changing profile of TSWs during this period, with more TSWs from Europe registering to work in England over the years, however with a peak during 2008-2009 when active overseas social workers' recruitment campaigns were adopted by a number of local authorities.

Table 1 Number of overseas-qualified social workers registered to work in England by year of registration from 2003 to 2011 by country of training^

Country and region of SW qualifications	Year of registration in England									2003-2011
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	
Traditionally sending countries (non-EEA[1])†	*(28)*	*(77)*	*(587)*	*(422)*	*(526)*	*(741)*	*(725)*	*(557)*	*(224)*	*(3887)*
India	3	13	97	90	115	194	190	147	57	906
South Africa	8	28	235	112	97	127	108	72	34	821
Australia	3	1	64	62	112	162	144	119	51	718
United States	6	18	62	66	99	125	161	124	40	701
Canada	2	2	21	45	37	43	57	41	19	267
Zimbabwe	3	10	75	23	34	41	30	21	7	244
New Zealand	3	5	33	24	32	49	35	33	16	230
EEA countries (Excluding A8 & A2)	*(4)*	*(26)*	*(100)*	*(84)*	*(151)*	*(150)*	*(219)*	*(166)*	*(82)*	*(982)*
Germany	0	12	42	35	57	58	75	38	23	340
Ireland	2	3	6	8	15	6	33	29	10	112
Spain	1	2	6	13	19	21	25	11	11	109
Portugal	0	1	1	1	14	21	20	26	9	93
Netherlands	1	2	14	7	14	13	4	12	3	70

[1] EEA refers to EU member states plus Iceland, Norway and Switzerland

Country and region of SW qualifications	Year of registration in England									2003-2011
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	
Sweden	0	3	8	3	7	5	19	14	7	66
Other[a]	0	3	23	17	25	26	43	36	19	192
A8 countries	*(1)*	*(6)*	*(22)*	*(24)*	*(37)*	*(85)*	*(79)*	*(79)*	*(36)*	*(369)*
Poland	0	4	12	13	22	47	39	29	20	186
Hungary	1	0	5	4	5	13	16	12	10	66
Lithuania	0	2	1	0	5	12	5	14	2	41
Slovakia	0	0	1	3	2	4	10	7	3	30
Other[b]	0	0	3	4	3	9	9	17	1	26
A2 countries	*(2)*	*(8)*	*(37)*	*(35)*	*(68)*	*(71)*	*(72)*	*(65)*	*(36)*	*394*
Romania	2	6	33	34	61	59	65	61	34	355
Bulgaria	0	2	4	1	7	12	7	4	2	39
Africa§	*(3)*	*(7)*	*(52)*	*(39)*	*(48)*	*(69)*	*(52)*	*(41)*	*(15)*	*(326)*
Ghana	0	4	15	20	16	29	18	12	2	116
Nigeria	1	1	14	8	13	21	14	16	5	93
Uganda	2	1	6	5	5	11	9	5	3	47
Other[b]	0	1	17	6	14	8	11	8	5	70
Asia	*(1)*	*(6)*	*(21)*	*(9)*	*(20)*	*(18)*	*(12)*	*(14)*	*(10)*	*(111)*
Philippines	0	4	15	5	13	10	1	5	3	56
Other[b]	1	2	6	4	7	8	11	9	7	38
The Caribbean	2	2	8	9	10	7	6	10	3	57
Eastern & Central Europe (non-EEA)	1	12	6	1	6	8	5	6	1	45
South America	3	1	8	4	4	2	8	8	3	41
The Middle East	0	1	7	4	5	5	7	2	3	34
All Countries	**45**	**146**	**848**	**631**	**875**	**1156**	**1185**	**948**	**413**	**6246**

^ Author's own calculations using GSCC registration data records; † Sum of each group of countries is indicated between brackets (n). § Excluding South Africa and Zimbabwe; a: Less than 50 SWs over 2003-11 from each other country in that region; b: Less than 20 SWs from each other country in that region.

6- TSWs Navigating Their Way Into the British Social Work Practice

For some TSWs, having social work qualifications was an enabling factor for migration and mobility. This was particularly the case for European social workers or those recruited directly from Commonwealth countries by British local authorities. Interview participants highlighted their ability to utilise their qualifications as an important facilitator factor, particularly when they were faced with recruitment challenges in their own countries:

> *It was really just the option of being able to choose a job here. I graduated in*
> *Germany and started looking around there. At this point in time, there were very few*
> *people employed and employers really had to choose between say, 250 application*

forms for each job. I knew UK needed social workers so I came here (Female, Germany).

Negotiating entry to employment was not the main hurdle, for those arriving from outside the EU they have to secure a 'work permit' with an attachment to certain employment for a period of four years. Due to such visa requirement they experience considerable restrictions in relation to further labour mobility within the UK, although, in theory they can change employment if the new employer is also able to offer them anther work permit:

Immigration status gave me limited work opportunities, as other Local Authorities and agencies do not offer work permit (Female, the Philippines).

While obtaining access to the UK job market was one step of the process, the next most important step was to get one's qualifications recognised in the UK. For EU TSWs, this process was governed by the European Directive (Hussein, 2011), but for others these were decided on a case-by-case basis. Many social workers from the USA, Canada and other nationalities faced constraints in skills and qualifications recognition, which resulted in many cases of de-skilling and acceptance of less-qualified job roles. Moreover, the variability in the content, depth and emphasis of social work training had further implications on practice and on the way that qualifications were accounted as relevant experience for career progression purposes.

The qualifications that I received in the US are not understood, and are not recognised in the same way that they are in the US, as they do not translate easily to UK Higher Education attainments (Male, USA).

I think the [training] emphasis is just different, simply because, in Holland we don't have Social Services. It's a completely different system. It just means that the education is different, because it's tailored to the country that you are in.... So I don't really think they [GSCC] had come across the degree very often
(Female, the Netherlands).

After acquiring entry to social work practice through a process of obtaining the right of entry and work in the UK, and overcoming the various hurdles of qualifications recognition

processes, TSWs continued to face a set of challenges during their practice. These ranged from understanding social work legal and cultural systems; communicating effectively with colleagues, managers and service users; and adjusting to a new life with limited social networks. Many TSWs, even those who were recruited directly from their home countries, felt there was little done to address these needs and regarded induction as a lost opportunity.

When I joined social work practice in the UK, there should have been a 'transition course' for those of us from abroad [could be linked to the Post Qualifying (PQ) framework]. I was given a full caseload in a busy child protection team, and had never heard of the Children's Act 1989! This lack of training made my practice seem more inconsistent, and made the culture shock more severe (Female, USA).

We felt like we got a lot of support when we were in the States [at the recruitment stage] but then when we got here [the UK], that [support] sort of tapered off ... I think it's important for the employer to sort of touch base with the individuals. I mean you know, they put in all of this effort in terms of getting us here and then we got here, you know, sort of left to your own devices (Male, USA).

Social work is regarded as a culturally sensitive and 'nation-specific' profession (Kornbeck, 2004). In this research 'cultural context' was defined to include the diversity of the host nation and its norms as well as both home and host country social work practice culture. Challenges associated with the diverse cultural context were laid across a wide spectrum, ranging from understanding and relating to different groups of service users to fitting into the UK social work culture and to the wider status of social workers within society. Data analysis indicated that TSWs from both the EU and other countries have experienced challenges in relation to cultural difference in some way or another. However, there were some differences between the two groups. Proportionally more EU TSWs indicated that '*communicating with staff and service users*' was most challenging when compared to non-EEA TSWs. On the other hand, more non-EEA TSWs indicated that '*colleagues and employers don't understand my culture*'. Some participants felt that a greater level of cultural understanding would enhance both their professional and personal experience of working in the sector. From providing 'insider' knowledge of different cultures, this would enhance integration within the team and reduce potential social isolation and associated health risks. However, some were skeptical of how different cultures are actually valued by the British social work sector:

I personally feel that the UK has very little space for outside social workers. After immigration the professionals should have been attached with the relevant departments to gain experience for a reasonable period before practicing independently & to make use of his/her full potential. I had been trying my best to work voluntarily in the social care field but in veil. Maximum I could get was befriending with Asian service users (Male, Pakistan).

The analysis of the online survey with TSWs indicated that relatively more TSWs from outside Europe had 'no difficulties at all' in relation to language requirements. However, working in a non-native language imposes its own barriers to communication flows and network building. Language interpretation is affected by communication style and cultural perceptions of different terms. This may occur between TSWs and users and within teams, and sometimes between TSWs from different countries:

I have had an experience of working quite closely with an Italian social worker and I always think she's angry with me. I always feel like I've done something wrong. I've learned that it is actually her way of expressing herself. But it does sounds, quite often she sounds very angry when she isn't, I realise that. There are sometimes, you can sound more abrupt and your accent can make you sound more abrupt (Female, Sweden).

Social work practice requires understanding situation-specific language styles for effective service delivery. Flow of communications was not necessarily guaranteed if TSWs arrive from English speaking countries. Some of the latter group also acknowledged that communications were not always straightforward, particularly within the context of social work and associated 'jargon':

Even though we speak the same language – [there are] different value base and references in different countries, which may make communications difficult
(Female, New Zealand).

The stories of TSWs in the UK highlighted the serious implications of a complex journey to social work practice that can easily translate to stress spilling over to their personal lives where they, in the majority, do not enjoy a large social network in the UK.

I had never been to the UK and didn't know anyone when I moved here. It was literally trial by fire (Female, Canada, with Dutch passport).

Some staff, relatives of service users and surprisingly some professionals do not accept working with people of colour (Male, Zimbabwe).

7- Conclusion

TSWs continue to be part of a growing global professional body utilising their skills to enable cross-border mobility. This is occurring within a context of a profession that is not easily internationally transferable, albeit continued efforts by academics, educators and regulatory bodies for a comprehensive international social work identity. Drivers for skilled migrants are triggered by demand in host countries where it has proved difficult to recruit personnel with certain skills, and social work in the UK is no different. The UK social work sector continues to face considerable challenges in attracting highly skilled staff, particularly to work with children and families. A dynamic process of reforms has been occurring in the UK over the past decade in relation to social work education, policies and regulation. These played a part in facilitating or hindering mobility to some TSWs. Similar to other professionals' global mobility the host country's immigration policies and legislation are key facilitating or hindering factors. The past decade has witnessed considerable changes and developments in the UK immigration policy, restricting some and allowing other groups of migrants, including TSWs. These are still evolving with new dynamics in place, chief among them the recent decision (June 2016) of Britain to exit the European Union (Brexit) with unclear implications on TSWs from within and outside of Europe.

A cornerstone in the debate around TSWs' mobility is concerned with the transferability and development of skills and training from a national to an international context. The very nature of social work in assisting those vulnerable in society entails a culturally and 'nation-specific' sensitive practice. The complexity in constructing social work training that is transferable to national and international contexts has been addressed by several writers and scholars and these are directly reflected in the findings presented here. For TSWs, individual ability to translate their training to a new context is influenced by their original qualification content and structure, their own analytical ability as well as different supports they receive from outside agencies. Induction in the host country that addresses commonalities and knowledge

gaps is thought to be crucial in such dynamics, however, the findings from this study indicated limited usage of tailored, or even general, induction opportunities for TSWs. These, combined with linguistic and cultural challenges, place TSWs in a vulnerable situation especially if they have limited support networks inside and outside of the workplace. Empirical findings presented here highlight the need for employers to take active responsibility in this process, acknowledging their role in facilitating this process through tailored induction and building work-based support networks.

Acknowledgment and Disclaimer

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[i] The A8 countries are a group of eight of the 10 countries that joined the European Union during its 2004 enlargement. They are commonly grouped together separately from the other two states that joined in 2004, Cyprus and Malta, because of their relatively lower per capita income levels in comparison to the EU average. These are: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia.