

Politics: The Bulgaria question –the realities

Monday, December 23, 2013 - *East of England MEP Geoffrey Van Orden explains his role and how he believes UKIP misled the public*



Geoffrey Van Orden visiting a Bulgarian orphanage where disproportionate numbers of Roma children were found

The debate in the European Parliament on December 11 was about defence policy – I lead the charge in stopping EU meddling in defence. Bizarrely, Mr Farage decided to launch a personal attack on me about Bulgaria. His colleague, Stuart Agnew (Letters EADT, December 18) took his cue from this outburst. Let me set the record straight.

As one of many duties, I was the European Parliament’s “rapporteur” (“reporter”) for Bulgaria from 1999 onwards. It was a privilege to get to know Bulgaria and to be able to shine a spotlight on many of its problems. These included the appalling situation in many “orphanages” and children’s homes; the prevalence of organised crime; and the need for effort to properly integrate the Roma into everyday Bulgarian society through better housing, welfare, education and family planning – **my aim was for happier Roma that would live contentedly in Bulgaria.**

Those that understand how the EU functions know that the decision to admit a new country to the EU requires the unanimous agreement of the governments of every EU country. Before this, these governments have to agree on the conditions for accession and any need to change the treaties.

I pointed this out in my report on Bulgaria in 2006: “It is a matter for national governments, through the transitional arrangements in the Accession Treaty and other powers, to take decisions relating to migration issues such as restrictions on the freedom of movement for workers, recognising that this issue has become a matter of concern as a result of chaotic asylum and immigration policies unrelated to EU enlargement in a number of Member States”.

Regrettably, for the 10 years that it was in a position to act, the Labour government of the time failed to make changes to the accession agreement. And it failed to reform our own immigration and welfare policies.

Among the nasty emails I received following Mr Farage's misguided, damp squib, one accused me of hypocrisy. But who are the real hypocrites? **Mr Farage leads a political group in the European Parliament called the EFD. UKIP are part of this group. On December 9, the EFD tabled a resolution which "Strongly supports the EU membership aspirations of Ukrainian society and implementation of a visa-free regime for Ukrainians travelling to the EU". Ukraine has a population of 55 million – double Bulgaria and Romania together, and even poorer. So, UKIP rejects Bulgaria but wants the Ukraine!**

There were, of course, strong reasons to admit Bulgaria to the EU without too much delay – to give that country a secure, safe haven among the democracies, out of the clutches of Russia; to encourage foreign investment; and to dampen the rise of extremist political forces. The expectation was that the Bulgarian government, with outside help, would address its shortcomings with great commitment and vigour. We were to be disappointed in this.

It was also hoped that further widening would lessen the "deepening" of the EU and lead to a more open, flexible, less integrated community of sovereign states. It would also be a spur to governments to change national and EU legislation to prevent the very abuses of the "free movement" principle that we now see. In spite of my warnings, this never happened.

Fortunately, we now have a Conservative-led government taking action. So what is being done? Firstly, we are addressing the "pull factors" for migration to the UK, limiting the ability of migrants to claim benefits. New arrivals won't be entitled to out-of-work benefits for three months; they won't be able to claim Housing Benefit; and they'll have their benefits stopped after six months unless they can prove that they have a genuine prospect of employment. Migrants who are begging or sleeping rough will be removed from the UK, and barred from re-entering for 12 months. We also intend to end the export of child benefit payments. But much more needs to be done. Conservatives want a fundamental change in our relationship with the EU. This includes changing the unqualified right of free movement.

UKIP are very good at misleading the British public. They say that the immigration problem is all down to the EU. I am perfectly willing to blame the EU for many things – that is why I have consistently fought for radical change. But bear in mind that **three times more people immigrate into Britain from outside Europe.** This, like so many of our problems, is due to the catastrophic policies of the Labour government. Between 1997 and 2010 there was a net migration of over 3,000,000 people to Britain – 2,400,000 from outside Europe. **If we left the EU tomorrow, we would still have a massive immigration problem.** Now that Conservatives are back in Government, we are in a position to do something about it – and we are. We haven't just jumped on to a populist bandwagon.

Remember, UKIP are first and foremost an anti-Conservative Party. UKIP will never be in a position to change anything except undermine Conservatives, the very people who have both the will and the power to deliver change. As we have seen in the county council elections in Norfolk, **vote UKIP, get Labour – that means more Europe, more immigration, and a ruined economy.**

Geoffrey Van Orden is Conservative MEP for the East of England. He is vice chairman of the group of European Conservatives & Reformists (ECR) in the European Parliament and Conservative defence spokesman. He was the European Parliament's "rapporteur" for Bulgaria 2000-2006. He can be contacted at geoffrey.vanorden@europarl.europa.eu