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13 reasons why I am taking the Daily Mail to the Press Complaints Commission

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The world's most popular online newspaper had reported that many Romanians and Bulgarians were coming to the UK following the lifting on 'work restrictions' on 1 January.

The Mail claimed that seats were sold out; that one airline had to double its flights to meet demand, and one-way air tickets were selling for £3,000.

The paper announced that '29 million Romanians and Bulgarians' now had, 'the right to work in the UK'.

Their New Year's Eve edition reported that all buses from Bulgaria's capital to London were sold-out for the first week of January and that almost all flights from Romania were full-up. The paper claimed that Wizz Air, the no-frills low-cost carrier, had to raise its prices to £300 a ticket because of the demand.

I posted [three blog articles](#) claiming that buses and planes were not full; last-minute tickets were still available at reasonable prices; Wizz Air hadn't doubled its flights, and demand for bus and plane tickets was about the same as this time last year. In fact, the main bus company in Bulgaria said that ticket sales were down.

I also sent a comprehensive [letter of complaint](#) to Paul Dacre, the Daily Mail's Editor claiming that their story was inaccurate and misleading, and that the paper should publish a prompt correction and apology. I have now launched a formal complaint to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC).

Here are the facts of my case:

The Daily Mail's story, headlined ['Sold out! Flights and buses full as Romanians and Bulgarians head for the UK'](#) claimed that plane and bus loads of Romanians and Bulgarians were not only coming to the UK for jobs, but were intent on finding ways to claim on the UK's benefits system.

Firms had been set up to advise them how to do it, or how to avoid paying government fines, reported The Mail. In addition, Romanians and Bulgarians were posting on website forums asking how to get a Council House, child tax credits or maternity benefits in the UK.

By contrast, last week The Daily Mail published a story headlined, ['Just 24 Romanians have entered Britain since migration laws were relaxed, according to the country's UK ambassador'](#)

There were so many loose ends with the Daily Mail's story that I decided to enlist the help of my colleague, [Alina Matis](#), award winning journalist and Foreign Affairs Editor of one of Romania's leading newspapers, [Gândul](#). Alina recently won a prize in the ['European Reporter'](#) contest for her article about [immigration](#).

We decided to do a full deconstruction of all 890 words of the Daily Mail's feature that claimed buses and planes from Bulgaria and Romania to the UK were full. This in summary is what we analysed and discovered about the Daily Mail's claims:

Claim 1: One airline has even doubled the number of flights to meet demand

The claim is [flatly rejected](#) by Wizz Air, the airline named by the Mail as doubling its flights from Romania to the UK 'to meet demand'. Wizz Air flights from Romania and Bulgaria to the UK were only increasing by 30%, stated the airline, and that was for summer 2014. The Mail's claim that tickets from Romania to London from 1st January were being sold for £300 was also misleading. Wizz Air flights from Bucharest to London were available on New Year's Eve for travel the next day at only €190 each (£158).

Claim 2: Some one-way tickets are selling for up to £3,000 each

The £3,000 ticket was offered by Alitalia for a non-direct route from Bucharest to London via Rome. As I pointed out to

the Daily Mail, they'll always be oddly priced, oddly routed tickets. But why mention it when direct flights were readily available for less than £160? Who would buy a £3,000 ticket when much cheaper ones were available?

Claim 3: Buses leaving Bulgaria capital Sofia until January 9 are fully booked

On 1 January I, the day after the Mail's story was published, I was easily able to buy a bus ticket from Sofia to London departing 3 January. The bus company, Balkan Horn, stated that the bus left on 3 January with five empty seats. Their manager, Valentina Georgieva, told me, 'We actually have less bookings than this time last year.'

Claim 4: Bulgarians and Romanians were last night preparing to travel to Britain as restrictions on working here are lifted tomorrow

The Daily Mail claimed that their story didn't say if there was a link with Romanians and Bulgarians coming to the UK and the lifting of 'work restrictions' on 1 January. The Mail's legal department told me, 'It is for a reader to make a connection if he or she chooses.' But the connection seemed clear enough in the sentence above.

Claim 5: When controls imposed in 2005 are lifted tomorrow, 29 million from the two countries will gain the right to work in Britain

Apart from the fact that it simply isn't possible, let alone likely, that the entire populations of Bulgaria and Romania would all move to the UK, the Daily Mail's claim that 29 million from both countries have 'the right to work in Britain' from 1 January cannot be correct. Romania has 3.5 million children under the age of 15; many of them are babies. Is the Mail claiming they have 'the right to work in Britain'? There are also almost 1.2 million children in Bulgaria, and a combined elderly population of Bulgaria and Romania of over 4.5 million. Are they all coming to work in the UK too?

Also, the Daily Mail was incorrect to state that 'controls' were imposed on Romanians and Bulgarians in 2005. The 'transitional controls' were imposed by some EU member states – including the UK – in 2007 when Romania and Bulgaria first joined the European Union. During the transitional period, Romanians and Bulgarians could only work in the UK with a work permit, although students could work for 20 hours a week during term time and full time during holidays. From 1 January 2014, Romanians and Bulgarians are able to come to work in the UK, or to look for work, on the same basis as other European Union nationals.

Claim 6: One user of a popular website wrote: "My husband and I want to have a child in the UK. We want to know what kind of benefits we can apply for. We are interested in receiving a council house."

The Daily Mail claimed that messages on internet forums in Bulgaria and Romania asked how to claim benefits in the UK. No details of the website forums were given in The Mail story. The Mail declined to let me have the addresses of the websites they referred to, so that I could check them. Of course that doesn't mean such forums don't exist; but it does seem odd, and not best journalistic practice, for the Mail not to be open about this.

Claim 7: Aleksandra Dzhongova, who runs a legitimate employment agency in Sofia, said other firms had been set up with the specific intention of helping immigrants understand Britain's welfare system, rather than filling job vacancies.

Aleksandra Dzhongova, partner in the employment agency Anons, insisted that she had never spoken with the Daily Mail and she would never have given such a quote. My colleague, Romanian journalist Alina Matis, told me, 'The agency was stunned when I phoned them. They had no idea about the Daily Mail story.' Programme Manager and

Partner, Daniel Kalinov, commented, 'The quote is inaccurate and untrue and we will likely take this further through our lawyer.'

Mr Kalinov explained that last January the Daily Mail had interviewed him for a story published in February 2013: 'Mafia bosses who can't wait to flood Britain with beggars: While politicians dither over new wave of immigration from Eastern Europe, ruthless gangmasters are rubbing their hands with glee'. Mr Kalinov claimed that the article presented 'untrue facts' about him, so that when the Daily Mail contacted the company again last December for another interview, they refused. As Ms Dzhongova doesn't speak English, Mr Kalinov conducts all interviews with foreign media, and he said no one from the Mail had spoken with Ms Dzhongova or to him or anyone else in the company.

Claim 8: One firm offered to help its Romanian clients avoid paying fines issued by HM Revenue and Customs

I asked the Mail for the name of this firm and whether they had reported them to the authorities for possible illegal activities. The Mail declined to answer. The Mail's story also referred to another anonymous firm helping Romanians find work in Britain whose spokesman was quoted as saying, 'There are already many using these social benefits without necessarily having an urgent need for them.' But the Mail didn't name the firm and has not accepted my request to provide more details.

My colleague Alina said, 'I did a thorough search on the internet, but I could not find any such firms in Romania or Bulgaria offering advice on benefits or avoiding fines.' Of course, that doesn't mean to say that there are no firms offering such advice; but it's impossible to prove something doesn't exist, and it would be easy for the Mail to verify this part of their story. As Alina pointed out, 'Out of 141,000 Romanians and Bulgarians living in the UK, in February 2013 there were around 1,700 Romanians who applied for benefits, according to statistics from the British government. I would hardly say there is a trend or a mindset on going to the UK for benefits by the citizens of Romania or Bulgaria.'

Claim 9: The Daily Mail asked Priority Point, which gives Romanian migrants advice on settling in the UK, whether they could help a Romanian woman with two children with no legal documents to claim benefits while looking for a job as a housekeeper. A member of staff said they could, for a free (sic). The employee said: 'There is no problem. But first she will need to apply for a national insurance number and then she can apply to receive money for the kids.' When asked if the company will fill out the paper work, the employee replied: 'Yes, we will do. For the documents for claiming child benefits you'll be charged £70.'

I phoned the Managing Director of Priority Point, Cristina Haicu, and read the above piece to her from the Daily Mail article. She exclaimed, 'Oh my God!' and said she knew nothing about the story. She told me, 'Thank you for bringing the article to our attention. Please be advised that Daily Mail did not call Priority Point and Priority Point did not make the quoted statement for Daily Mail.'

Claim 10: Travel agencies in Sofia as well as the Romanian capital of Bucharest reported huge demand for tickets. At the Central Bus Station in Sofia, travel agent Svetlanka Beaucheva said: 'Everything is booked until Thursday, January 9. There are no seats left.'

Commented my Romanian journalist colleague, Alina Matis, 'Svetlanka Beaucheva has been impossible to find. She only seems to exist in the Daily Mail article. The Bulgarian who helped me told me that the Daily Mail might have misspelled the name when they tried to adapt it to English, because it doesn't sound right and he tried some variations of it, but couldn't find her anywhere.' It does seem strange that the Daily Mail didn't give the name of the travel

agency. Furthermore, it wasn't correct that as at 31 December – the date of the Daily Mail article – that all bus seats to England were booked until 9 January. I was able to book a seat on the bus from Sofia to London on 3 January; and according to the bus company, that bus had five spare seats when it left Sofia for London.

Claim 11: A manager at coach company Karats Eurolines said prices had gone up due to the high demand.

Kurats Eurolines in Bulgaria categorically stated that they never spoke to the Daily Mail, or gave that quote, and they don't even have any buses going to the UK. In a strong statement sent to my colleague, journalist Alina Matis, their manager, Bojidar Stamenov, wrote: 'What is the problem? Our company is KARAT-S AD, member of Eurolines Organisation from Bulgaria. We have NO interest for England, NO coaches for England, NO meetings with journalists.'

Claim 12: Another, at coach firm Balkan Horn, said: 'It is very busy, many people want to travel to England, especially with the change in EU rules. But everything is booked up, it's hard to get there.'

Balkan Horn deny any knowledge of ever talking with the Daily Mail, and say they would never have given such a quote as it wouldn't have been true; there were seats available on their buses to London, and no increased demand because of the change in EU rules. In fact, demand for bus journeys to England had gone down.

Last week the Mail's legal department explained that, 'The published comments from the worker at the Balkan Horn office at Sofia bus station were given on the condition that he was not named because there is a company ban on speaking to journalists.' This seems odd, as both myself and my journalist colleague, Alina Matis, had no problems talking several times with Balkan Horn, and found them to be very helpful. There was no ban by the company on speaking to journalists.

Claim 13: Ion Prioteasa, president of Dolj county in the south of Romania, claimed that the numbers travelling from there to the UK will double to 70,000 next year.

Commented my Romanian journalist colleague, Alina, 'I spoke with Ion Prioteasa, and he was shocked when I read out the quote to him. The Mail had misquoted Prioteasa from a speech he gave last October when Wizz Air launched a direct flight from the city of Craiova to Luton. Mr Prioteasa was talking about numbers of all flights from Craiova airport to all destinations, and he was not referring to the UK.'

Ion Prioteasa told Alina, 'I was referring to the doubling of the number of passengers from Craiova Airport in the next year, but we have many other destinations other than Luton. We have Bergamo, Milan, Rome, we are now trying to have flights to France and Barcelona. I had no knowledge to support a statement regarding the number of people traveling to UK in the coming year.' Mr Prioteasa confirmed that he had never spoken with the Daily Mail.

For these 13 reasons, I am today making a formal complaint to the Press Complaints Commission about the Daily Mail article, on the grounds of an alleged breach of the PCC's Editors Code of Practice, in particular Code 1, items i, ii, and iii, regarding accuracy. If you feel you want to complain, the more people who do so the better.

You can also complain directly to the Daily Mail by clicking here.

Jon Danzig is an award winning medical journalist and formerly an investigative journalist at the BBC



Uploaded by [Peter Wilding](#) January 20, 2014

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