

COLD WILL KEEP BULGARIANS OUT

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Bulgarians will not arrive in Britain in big numbers to seek work because the weather will put them off, the country's Prime Minister said yesterday.

Sergei Stanishev said that the large Bulgarian communities in sunny southern Europe were evidence that his people would not be following an estimated 600,000 other Eastern Europeans to Britain. Winter temperatures in his own country, however, often fall below -20C.

In an interview with The Times, Mr Stanishev said that the booming Bulgarian economy would create jobs to bring unemployment down from 9 per cent. He was speaking during a charm offensive before the European Commission gives its verdict this month on the ambitions of Bulgaria and Romania to join the European Union on January 1. The two nations are expected to be admitted with warnings of severe penalties if their reform processes slip.

"I am afraid I will disappoint the British media. We don't have so many qualified plumbers," he said. "The Polish have always had close links to the British. A huge Polish community settled in Britain after the Second World War, so many people had relatives there. It was easier. So don't expect waves of Bulgarians."

Bulgaria's economy is growing at 5.6 per cent per year and attracted €1.4 billion in investment last year, causing wages to rise by 13 per cent, he said.

Mr Stanishev, 40, who speaks fluent English after a year at the London School of Economics, also reeled off a long list of anti-corruption moves such as the dismissal of four regional prosecutors. "Let's be objective - if it is something that really threatens my country, then why would there be so many foreign investments? There are thousands of British people buying properties and settling in Bulgaria. When I was campaigning in the elections I visited a remote village in the northeast and to my surprise two British families had retired and settled there."

Mr Stanishev also made his case for an open-door policy by giving warning that, otherwise, Britain would find that the immigrants its economy does need would enter illegally. "If you limit the possibilities from Bulgaria and Romania you will have illegal immigrants from Africa and Asia. I don't know in this unsafe security world if this is a better option."

He added: "Most of the Bulgarians in Europe are moving to southern European countries and that is the reason I don't expect many Bulgarians to settle in Britain."