



POLICY BRIEF

The 10th Anniversary of the Prague Process

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BACKGROUND

The Prague Process is a mature state-led inter-governmental dialogue on migration. It gathers state authorities dealing with migration in a divergent Eurasian continent covering all European Union Member States, the Schengen Area states, Western Balkan countries, Eastern Partnership states, Central Asian republics, Russia and Turkey. This is an area stretching from Lisbon in the West to Vladivostok in the East and from Murmansk in the North to Valetta in the South. The 50 participating states of the Prague Process, with an overall population of almost one billion people, are overly diverse in terms of their size, geography, history, economy, exposure to migration and resulting policies. In 2009, they nevertheless agreed on establishing a joint migration policy dialogue based on its voluntary, informal and non-binding character, equal footing, mutual trust and genuine partnerships.

To date, three Ministerial Conferences (Prague 2009; Poznan 2011; Bratislava 2016) have set the overall direction of the Process. The annual Senior Officials' Meetings represent its decisive body. The Prague Process has been implemented through several consecutive projects, involving all interested participating states on a voluntary basis. The main donor is the European Commission, while participating states have contributed with financial support and in-kind contributions. ICMPD has served as the Secretariat of the Prague Process since its very beginning.

The third Ministerial Conference held in Bratislava in 2016 granted the Prague Process a political mandate for the period 2017-2021 and confirmed the continued validity of the 6 thematic areas and 22 concrete priorities set out in the Action Plan for 2012-2016. It also called for establishing a Migration Observatory and Training Academy, building on the outputs of previous years. Along with the overall dialogue function, the operationalisation of these two platforms constitutes the main objective of the ongoing '*Prague Process: Dialogue, Analyses and Training in Action*' initiative. The results achieved to date are available at www.pragueprocess.eu.



The challenges related to migration at the time of launching the Prague Process largely remain valid until today.

THE ORIGINS OF THE PRAGUE PROCESS

Since the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007, the EU has shared external borders with the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Western Balkans (WB) and Turkey. The new EU Member States were facing the challenge of effectively preventing irregular migration to the territory of the Union, which stipulated the need for enhanced cooperation with the neighbouring countries and their neighbours.

As of 2007, the EU's Global Approach to Migration - initially directed towards the South - was 'expanded' to the (South-) Eastern neighbourhood of the EU. Aiming towards EU accession, the Western Balkan countries were at different stages of approximating their migration systems to the EU *acquis*. Their cooperation with EU Member States in this area was already relatively strong. Meanwhile, the adoption of the document 'The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership' in 2007 also brought the Central Asia region closer to the EU. At the same time, the CIS countries were equally working on joint approaches to migration and towards regional integration. The year 2009 saw the establishment of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which has since aimed at deepening and strengthening the relations between the EU, its Member States and the six Eastern neighbours.

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KEY DEVELOPMENTS OVER THE PAST TEN YEARS

In 2009, the world experienced a global economic crisis, the impact of which remains noticeable until today. The economic downturn significantly reduced the capacity and readiness of states to absorb foreign labour force.

As of late 2010, a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions across North Africa and the Middle East initiated the so-called 'Arab Spring'. By 2012, the uprising against the Syrian president had turned into a full-scale civil war, further incited by the appearance of ISIS. These events led to major population movements across the immediate neighbourhood of the Prague Process. At the end of 2014, the total number of forcibly displaced people worldwide amounted to almost 60 million, the highest level since World War II. In terms of the number of internally displaced persons, Ukraine ranks first in Europe and is among the top ten countries in the world.

The rising numbers of people arriving to the EU resulted in the so-called 'migration' or 'refugee' crisis and exposed major weaknesses in the migration policy setup at the national and EU level. With the colossal pressure put on the receiving EU states, Turkey has been among the countries most affected by the immense numbers of people fleeing the war in neighbouring Syria and Iraq. As a timely development, Turkey established the Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM) in April 2014. In March 2016, the European Council and Turkey reached an agreement aimed at stopping the flow of irregular migration via Turkey to Europe. Turkey has since played a key role in considerably reducing the migration to Europe. The Western Balkan states also played an important role during the migration crisis, closely cooperating with the EU on the issues of security and migration.

The immigration experienced in 2015 and 2016 also had a major impact on the national elections held since, placing migration at the top of the political agenda and public discourse. The terrorist attacks and severe criminal acts committed across Europe and beyond resulted in a strong emphasis on the **nexus between migration and security**. In this vein, developments that seemed unlikely became real with the surprising results of the Brexit referendum, several separatist movements across Europe, the crisis in Ukraine, and the overall perception of migration as a phenomenon directly affecting the lives of citizens in sending and hosting societies.

At the same time, the measures supporting the regularisation of people's movements in the Prague Process region facilitated their **increased mobility**. Following the visa liberalisation dialogues with the EU, nationals of North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia have enjoyed the visa free travel to the EU since 2009. In 2010, the visa-free travel to the EU became effective for Bosnia & Herzegovina and Albania. In 2014, it became a reality for Moldova, while visa-free travel was granted to Georgia and Ukraine in 2017. The abolishment and simplification of the visa regimes turned into a common trend also outside the EU borders. In 2018, Belarus made an important step forward by allowing 74 countries, among which are over 30 Prague Process states, to enter and stay within its territory visa-free for up to 30 days. Considerable simplification of the visa regime also occurred in Uzbekistan, which introduced the e-visa system and lifted the visa requirements for up to 30 days for travellers of over 50 countries over the past two years. Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and most recently Kazakhstan equally introduced an e-visa system.

The opening of labour migration channels and schemes between the Eastern European and Western Balkan states and the EU, as well as between Russia and the other members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), has provided new possibilities for pursuing legal employment abroad, thereby turning **labour migration into a veritable megatrend**. Just recently, the Polish-Ukrainian Economic Chamber reported of 2 million Ukrainians working in Poland. The number of Belarus labour migrants in the EU has also been steadily growing, though the exact figures remain difficult to assess. The number of labour migrants from the Western Balkan states in the EU is impressive, amounting to over 30 percent of the total population of these countries. As for the EAEU, in 2017, Russia recorded over 1.4 million labour migrants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan alone. It is worth noting, that the creation of the EAEU served the formalization and regularization of the already existing movement of people. Today this sub-regional cooperation platform constitutes an integrated single market of 183 million people. While such developments benefit both sending countries, in terms of remittances, and hosting countries by reducing existing labour shortages, it undoubtedly creates new challenges, e.g. by turning temporary migration into permanent, which in combination with the observable demographic problems may lead to depopulation.

Demography is becoming a cornerstone of the migration policy of many countries in the Prague Process region. Hence, for instance, Finland and Russia have recently signalled the decline and ageing of their population, and despite continuing to rely on the natural replenishment, highlight the importance of migration in addressing the demographic challenges faced. Driven by the opposite trend in demography, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are exploring the possibilities of organised recruitment schemes and diversification of labour migration flows, while incorporating migration into their broader development planning. One possible new destination for citizens of the Central Asian Republics is China that has also been pursuing its own interests in the region by initiating as the so-called "One Belt One Road" initiative in 2013. According to most global forecasts, the vectors of economic and technological development and social modernization have shifted towards Asia, where substantial new migration processes are expected to take place. China will increasingly turn from a country of emigration and transit to one of immigration considering its aging population. The rise of China and its immense Foreign Direct Investment will influence international policies, including on migration, across Asia and Europe, further increasing the ongoing competition for highly skilled migrants.

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In spite of the substantial progress made in terms of migration management over the past decade, the Prague Process states nowadays are facing new complex challenges. How far can the capacities of individual states be stretched in terms of absorbing migrants? How can we ensure the human rights of migrants while protecting our own citizens and borders? How can we assess the dynamic developments within and outside our borders?

OUTLOOK INTO THE FUTURE

In December 2018, the Senior Officials reconfirmed that the decision of 2009 to establish the Prague Process proved right. As migration remains a challenging and dynamic topic full of unexpected developments, states need to be prepared and flexible in terms of their policy solutions at all times. The sharing of relevant experience among the 50 states is deemed as highly beneficial, especially considering the numerous commonalities in the thematic areas of the Prague Process. The participating countries are of course at different stages of developing their migration management systems as well as in terms of their engagement with the EU. These commonalities and differences make the exchanges within the Prague Process both useful and challenging at times. Participating states are encouraged to take full advantage of the joint work, actively provide their inputs and share their national experience.

The Prague Process is and shall remain a regional platform observing, reacting to and complementing developments on all levels. In this sense, it aims to address a number of aspects simultaneously, ranging from crisis resilience, long-term vision, to a deepening of multi- and bilateral cooperation, strengthened institutions and renewed trust from a highly critical public. The path from crisis management to a forward-looking, sustainable migration governance will continue to be complex and demanding. This process is in its early stages, requiring all partners and members to do their best to keep it safe from the risk of derailment.

The current mandate set by the Bratislava Ministerial Declaration and by the reconfirmed Action Plan lasts until 2021. The Prague Process will continue to facilitate the inter-governmental dialogue and exchange. The Migration Observatory shall serve as a regional think-tank generating analytical publications and collecting relevant information in order to support its participating states in assessing and addressing the challenges and priorities ahead. It will also continue to accumulate and produce expertise under the Training Academy to ensure high-quality capacity building for civil servants, migration specialist, practitioners and policy makers.

The inter-governmental dialogue constitutes a solid base with great potential that is in the hands of its participating states. The priorities and challenges of 2009 will most probably remain valid in 2029 as well. In spite of the constantly changing realities, the trends and threats largely remain identical. Some policy issues are subject to continuous improvement and progress, as they need to respond to the innovative approaches of human traffickers, smugglers or even terrorists. Governments cannot afford to lag behind but need to react to meet the needs and expectations of their constituents. Cooperation and coordination are key and the building of trust a long-term effort, an investment that pays off. Today, the European focus is directed towards the migration originating from African countries, the Middle East or the Silk Routes region. Tomorrow this may change, and the governments need to be prepared to react. Maintaining existing functioning platforms of cooperation will prove an advantage when trends and directions change.

Related Publications

All publications are available on the Prague Process website www.pragueprocess.eu

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