

MIGRATION AND MOBILITY IN EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA: WHAT TO EXPECT IN TIMES OF COVID-19?

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Executive Summary

Restrictions on human mobility combined with social distancing measures are the main strategies applied by the majority of governments across the world to stall the spreading of the COVID-19 disease. Consequently, these restrictions alone have fundamentally affected economies, education and transportation systems, tourism industries, agriculture and even consumption markets. However, with global mobility close to zero, internal and international migration experienced the most obvious and drastic changes. For many people in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA), which only 3 decades ago lived in one state, mobility within the region is a fundamental part of their lives. For some, migration is essential and sometimes the only way to access education, find employment, reunite or visit families spread across the region and beyond. For some, migration is the only pathway to survive.

Migration dependent economies in the majority of EECA countries have also abruptly halted since the outbreak. The impact of restrictions on mobility since the beginning of March until end of April is twofold. Whilst economies in Russia and Kazakhstan are losing an important part of their work force consisting of labour migrants, in countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan remittances that make up a high share of their respective GDP are dropping. In turn, returned migrants have increased pressure on the local labour markets that are already suffering from lockdown restrictions. Stranded migrants in the destination countries are subject to discrimination, poverty and other risks related to health, human security, and more.

May and the beginning of summer might see many countries gradually lifting internal movement restrictions. Yet it is clear that the impact on international migration and mobility will last much longer, or might for some be even permanent. This paper looks at some of the most significant consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on migration and mobility within and from the EECA region. Particularly, the paper discusses the evolvement of **labour migration**, growing patterns of **irregular migration**, the impact on migrants' **individual situation**, the potential rise of **xenophobia and discrimination**, and, finally, the expanding **inequality** between the countries in the region.

A. Current Movement and Migratory Restrictions in the EECA Region

Since the second half of March, eight of the 12 countries covered by ICMPD in the region (**Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan**) have introduced a state of emergency either nationally or locally. In addition to strict internal population movement limitations, these countries cancelled all regular flights and closed borders for international travellers with some strictly regulated exemptions.

Many introduced **internal migration and mobility (inter-city and inter-region) restrictions**, such as Ukraine, [where all entry/exit control points of Ukraine's administrative line with Crimea and Donbas are closed, with travels suspended](#). Generally, the situation of disputed territories in which access was limited before the outbreak of the pandemic (such as **Abkhazia, Donbas, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transnistria**), worsened with regard to health care, social protection, personal safety and the populations' rapidly declining economic welfare. In addition to political and social instability, the consequences of the pandemic may threaten the civil order.

In March, the **Russian Federation** announced the [special status of high alert](#) in Moscow only, before announcing it countrywide. National authorities declared [April as a non-working period](#), whilst local governments retained their right to decide according to the situation in their specific regions. Similarly, as in other countries with a state of emergency, the Russian Federation has suspended international travel and introduced certain internal mobility restrictions (in particular in Moscow).

Within the **Central Asian sub-region**, two countries – **Tajikistan and Turkmenistan** – [have not reported a single case of COVID-19](#) until the end of April. Consequently, there were no lockdown measures within the country aside from the suspension of international travel. On April 30, however, the [national authorities of Tajikistan have reported the first cases of COVID-19](#). Despite this, the internal quarantine measures were not declared in Tajikistan at the moment of finalisation of this paper in the beginning of May.

Belarus has registered cases of COVID-19, but only soft measures are introduced to prevent the spread of the virus internally. Moreover, the [national air carrier Belavia continues regular flights](#) to many European capitals, including to the EECA capitals as well as to Istanbul and Tel Aviv.

The above listed restrictions have an immediate impact on migration and migrants. The most frequent and significant challenges are:

- Hundreds of thousands of labour migrants from EECA countries have **lost their jobs** within the EECA region or beyond. According to estimations and only in Moscow, up to [three million labour migrants are at risk of losing their job](#), or have already lost it in the first half of April. In [Moldova](#) and [Ukraine](#), return of labour migrants from the European Union significantly increased in March. All countries of the region observe similar patterns;

- As a direct consequence of the economic lockdown, **decline in remittances** will severely affect many countries in the region, particularly those whose economies are heavily dependent on migrant workers' remittances: Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine. From February to April, in Georgia, remittances already [decreased in March by 9%](#) comparing with the same period in 2019, thus already illustrating the decline. [World Bank predicts](#) decline in remittances in Eastern Europe and Central Asia by 27.5% in 2020;
- Despite the fact that return of migrants has drastically increased and governments have actively supported their return, **many migrants are still stranded** in destination countries. There could be a number of reasons for this. More specifically, some countries closed their borders completely in the early days of the lockdown (as for example, [Azerbaijan](#)), and urged their citizens abroad to address their respective embassies. Some migrants, however, cannot easily move to another city to visit the Embassy due to imposed internal mobility restrictions, lack of financial resources or the fear of being unable to return back home. Others still have little trust in governmental institutions and some even prefer to stay abroad whilst waiting for the normalisation of the situation. Stranded migrants are often one of the most vulnerable groups among the population, as they lack financial resources to survive abroad and cannot expect any support from families and relatives. They may also be subject to discrimination and intolerance in the receiving societies;
- **Disrupted seasonal migration** schemes affect both sending and receiving countries. In Russia for example, [the government actively invites the local population to replace seasonal migrants'](#) jobs in the agricultural sector where field works started earlier this year due to warmer weather conditions. In addition, a significant number of migrants from [Ukraine](#) is temporary and seasonal. The current closure of the border will heavily affect the economy even in the short-term perspective. About 20-22% of [Moldovan](#) migrants in the European Union were engaged in seasonal work, for whom this employment possibility is no longer available now or in the nearest future.

Labour migrants losing jobs, decline in remittances, migrants stranded in destination countries, many of them in vulnerable situations, disrupted seasonal migration schemes as well as deterioration of security and humanitarian aid in the disputed territories within the region are consequences of the COVID 19 outbreak in EECA.

B. Overview of National and Regional Response to Mitigate COVID-19 Impact on Migration

Tajikistan issued a comprehensive action plan on mitigating the impact of COVID-19 specifically on labour migration. Even though Tajikistan has only few reported cases of the virus, the pandemic will affect its extreme dependency of remittances. In 2018, [remittances constituted 29% of Tajikistan's GDP](#) with the highest share coming from the Russian Federation. The action plan addresses the most affected areas and proposes mitigation strategies with regard to situation of both labour migrants abroad (e.g. negotiations on extension of labour permissions in the Russian Federation) and returned migrants (e.g. facilitation of reintegration of returnees).

In **Russia**, the [validity of work permits \(patents\) for all legally residing and employed labour migrants is extended for 3 months](#), exempting migrants from paying the work permit fee during this period.

The government of **Georgia** issued specific regulations, which [temporarily suspend the examination of asylum claims](#), including personal interviews. The issuing of residence permits was temporarily suspended, however, the [procedure currently continues online](#).

As already mentioned, all **governments actively supported repatriation** of citizens back home, in particular from the most affected countries. Repatriation included stranded long-term migrants and tourists.

Regional platforms within the region established additional specialised bodies, such as committees and commissions, which focus mainly on the health, financial and social-economic aspects of the pandemic. This refers to [Eurasian Economic Union](#) (EAEU), the [Belarusian-Russian Union State](#), the [Commonwealth of Independent States](#) (CIS), the [Collective Security Treaty Organisation](#) (CSTO) and the [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation](#) (SCO), as well as general multilateral relations. Generally, responses from regional organisations and multilateral cooperation platforms range from political declarations of support and [calls for solidarity and unity](#) to [expressions of condolences](#) to most affected member states. States also [monitor the situation](#) in respective member states, provide [humanitarian aid](#) (COVID-19 tests, protective measures, medical staff and equipment) and [deploy medical units and specialists](#). There are also examples of [analysing lessons learned in EU](#). Regarding specific migration related measures, EECA states cooperate in repatriation of their own and partner states' citizens stranded in other countries, as well as in [policy planning for emergency and epidemiology](#).

C. Predicted Long-term Impact and Possible Mitigation

The COVID-19 pandemic has already affected migration and mobility in the EECA region in many different ways. The pandemic will likely bring fundamental and long-term changes into migration governance structures and migratory flows within and from the region.

1. Labour Migration

Borders between the EECA countries, including the EAEU members, remain closed for non-residents, which also means that labour migrants cannot travel to work abroad. This affects almost all the countries in the region already and will only continue to do so on different levels.

Firstly, unemployment in **sending countries** will continue to grow, increasing tensions on the internal labour market and hindering the countries' social, health, educational and other systems. Furthermore, sending countries will lose the income from international remittances, which will further slowdown development, consumption, investment in human capital as well as healthcare, small businesses, and weaken national currencies. Considering the current restrictions on labour migration, it is most likely that countries which will be most affected by the crisis are Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, and Moldova.

Secondly, **destination countries** within EECA, mainly Russia and Kazakhstan as well as EU Member States, will lack labour force. This mainly refers to low-skilled workers (construction, agriculture, among other sectors), as well as domestic labour force. The absence of agricultural workers in the long term may lead to regional and global food supply disruptions. In addition, shortages of medical personnel may weaken health protection systems. It is not yet clear how many of the jobs previously held by migrants will be taken over by the local labour force in the destination countries.

Finally, when it comes to **personal and family relations**, the crisis will affect family reunion and reunification of those stranded or those who have chosen to stay abroad. Subsequently, this will affect household incomes mostly in sending countries. In addition, the crisis will negatively affect children left behind, limiting their access to education, personal health care conditions, and mental health.

The mitigation strategies to cope with the expected mid- and long-term impact on labour migration may include:

- Supporting cooperation between the respective governments on **identification of labour force** and **organisation of labour migration** for fields with the highest demand. Such cooperation could be considered shortly following the lifting of restrictions. However, as long as mobility restrictions are in place, labour migration might take place in a more targeted way, responding mainly to the sectoral needs of the receiving countries. Therefore, it might be more challenging for individual migrants to legally find employment abroad;

Demand for labour migration, particularly in specific sectors, is high. It is safe to assume that labour migration channels may re-open soon. However, migration procedures may change fundamentally, in the long-term, or permanently.

- **Broaden outreach to potential migrants** in sending countries by providing information on recruitment opportunities, improving pre-departure training, etc. in sending countries;

- Ensure that labour migrants are covered by **health and social insurance** schemes in receiving countries;

- Increase cooperation with consular authorities in receiving countries as well as diaspora communities to prepare better **organised response and provision of assistance** to migrants in crisis, as well as further build [consular crisis management](#) capacities;

- Develop **schemes for student mobility** based on professional orientation and analysis of skill shortages in the sending countries in order ensure that young professionals could expect employment after their return back home.

2. Irregular Migration

In the post-crisis situation, it is expected that inequalities between the countries will increase globally, including among the countries in the EECA region. Even before the pandemic, in 2018 [the GDP per capita](#) within the region ranged from 11,288 USD in Russia and 9,812 USD in

Kazakhstan to 826 USD in Tajikistan and 1,281 USD in Kyrgyzstan. Taking into account all negative consequences of the pandemic to labour migration benefits, this gap will further widen. Therefore, many people will still wish to migrate to the neighbouring EECA countries or further to EU Member States for employment opportunities, as the only pathway to escape economic hardship.

As described above, labour migration might become targeted to the sectoral needs of the receiving countries, which also means that migration procedures will be stricter and controlled. Altogether, this may trigger a rise in irregular migration, including in illegal border crossing, activating smugglers and trafficker networks, irregular stay and work in the destination countries. It can also be expected that stranded migrants in destination countries, hoping to continue working abroad, will stay in the shadow and contribute to further irregular migration patterns.

It is arguable that [combatting irregular migration is achievable only by stricter border control and strengthening migration procedures](#) without providing legal migration channels. A comprehensive approach is needed, especially in times of a pandemic, since there is a stronger need to protect health and safety of both migrants and local populations. One of the ways to slow down irregular migration is to address the root causes of this phenomenon, but this measure brings desirable results in the long-term. However, weakened economies in some of the sending countries in the EECA region are overwhelmed by immediate needs in a post-crisis situation which must to be addressed right now. Based on lessons learned so far, mitigation strategies in this regard may include:

- Broaden **regularisation practices** in the countries of destination in order to reveal real numbers and situation of irregular migrants, workers and overstayers, as well as regularise their status whenever possible;
- **Recognition of domestic work as a form of legal labour migration**, granting migrants working in the domestic sector health and social protection rights, right to family reunification, etc.;
- Review of the so-called **“low-skilled” labour migrants procedures** recognising their fundamental contribution to the national economies. This would also potentially lead to broadening legal migration and mobility opportunities;
- Introduction of a more **human approach to the family reunification and reunion** for legally staying migrants.

*Stricter labour migration rules might trigger **irregular migration** and increase economic, social and political inequalities among EECA countries*

3. Discrimination and Xenophobia

The current situation in the EECA countries reveals that the approach towards migrants both foreign citizens and their own returnees leaving countries most affected by COVID-19 pandemic varies. Even though language used by the media while reporting on migrants is rather

[neutral](#), or in some cases [sympathetic](#), experts report about worrisome tendencies of [aggressive and threatening messages in social media](#). The negative tone of social media is particularly noticeable in [Russia](#) with regard to labour migrants from Central Asia, as well as in both [Ukraine](#) and [Moldova](#) concerning returning citizens who are seen as a threat to national health and economy. Facing the crisis, posing a threat to health and well-being of the local population, rise of **xenophobia** may quickly escalate into violent conflicts.

In addition, experts warn about potential **discrimination and exploitation** of migrants who chose to stay in their destination countries, or did not manage to return back home. There are reports of [indefinite detention of migrants in Russia](#), including separation of children from their parents. Generally, human rights activists have broadly discussed [vulnerability](#) of stranded migrants, particularly in Russia. This echoes media reports on migrants from ECA countries in difficult situations in EU Member States, such as [Poland](#), [Italy](#), [Spain](#).

Without proper responses from governments and civil society, xenophobia and migrants' discrimination may turn into a long-term pattern negatively affecting migration perception in the region.

The potential response to the rise of xenophobia and discrimination is multi-faceted. Major measures in this regard include:

- The establishment and maintenance of **education on migration for the media**, led by independent associations of journalists in coordination with universities and other educational institutions teaching journalism;
- The implementation of state **controlled measures against hate speech and xenophobia** in media, including social media;
- Improving **conditions of integration of migrants** in the destination countries, as well as **reintegration of returning migrants**, ensuring that they have access to health care, education and other services, including transferability of social rights;
- Disseminating information about public order and its changes (particularly during crisis situation), available services and addresses where assistance can be provided in the **languages of main migrants' groups** and ensure that information reaches migrants;
- Engaging with **diaspora organisations** of main migrants' groups and other migrant communities to coordinate integration and inclusion measures, disseminate information, improve outreach and ensure anti-discriminative approach;
- Diaspora communities should also actively engage with the governments and civil society of the destination country to be an **active actor** in all potential crisis response measures.

*A well-planned comprehensive response to the rise of **xenophobia and discrimination** will help avoid any escalations to civil unrest and violent conflict between the local population and migrants, including returning nationals*

Closing remarks

According to the [latest available data](#) at the beginning of May 2020, more than 4 million people were infected by the COVID 19 virus worldwide, with almost 1.4 million recovered. Tragically, more than 280, 000 reported to have died due to the disease. The governments of the majority of EECA countries have extended the restrictions to mid or even end-May. However, several countries are currently considering or have already lifted the restrictions, which at the moment only concerns the internal population movement whereas some governments have retained their position of a rather soft (Belarus) or close to none (Turkmenistan) measures.

This paper will be periodically reviewed and updated based on continuous monitoring of the developments as well as a potential impact on migration within and from the region.

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