

# DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT

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**EASTERN  
EUROPE &  
CENTRAL  
ASIA**

**REGIONAL  
SERIES**

*The European Union Global Diaspora Facility (EUDiF) is the first European Union-funded project to take a global approach to diaspora engagement. Implemented by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), the project seeks to build an informed, inclusive and impactful diaspora-development ecosystem through research, dialogue, and capacity development. EUDiF runs from June 2019 to December 2022.*

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# BACKGROUND

In 2020, EUDiF worked with a team of regional experts to conduct a global mapping of diaspora engagement across six regions. The aim of the global mapping is address the fragmentation of evidence on diaspora engagement policies, institutions and practices by collating the information in an open-access knowledge hub.

The global mapping has generated 107 individual country factsheets, which are available via an [interactive map](#) on the EUDiF website, where findings can also be compared between individual countries.

Through the research exercise, EUDiF has sought to identify the interests and challenges faced by countries of heritage when it comes to diaspora engagement. This publication is one in a six-part series reviewing the research results by partner region.

EUDiF regions:

- Africa
- Asia
- Eastern Europe & Central Asia**
- Latin America & the Caribbean
- Middle East
- Pacific

## EASTERN EUROPE & CENTRAL ASIA

If you are interested in the specifics of the country selection methodology, email us at [eu-diaspora@icmpd.org](mailto:eu-diaspora@icmpd.org).

This document is a regional analysis of diaspora engagement in Asia. It draws on knowledge gathered during the mapping of 10 countries to study relevant policy and institutional frameworks, trends, good practices and recommendations at regional level. The resulting document offers a consolidated source of information to:

- ▶ Promote the contribution of diaspora to development;
- ▶ Guide action at regional level;
- ▶ Identify opportunities for peer exchange.



# 1. POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

## AT REGIONAL LEVEL

All 10 EECA countries mapped have a common past: they are all countries that gained their independence after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. This has direct implications for their diaspora and migration policies. Indeed, most of Eastern Europe and Central Asia have “new” diasporas that were born after the fall of the Iron Curtain and communism in the 1990s.

**After the creation of the newly independent States, all 10 Governments took great interest in cementing newly-established identities, as well as defining the notion of diaspora.**

Before independence, the term diaspora had rarely been used and diaspora matters had not attracted much attention. However, **since the late 1990s**, the post-Soviet governments have understood the political and economic potential of labour migrants living abroad. Consequently, there has been growing emphasis in the policy-making sphere on building relations with diasporas and compatriots.

There is no regional or sub-regional framework on diaspora engagement in EECA. However, the **Eastern Partnership (EaP)** is a joint policy initiative guiding the relationship between the EU, EU Member States, and six Eastern neighbours: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, as well as with Belarus (not mapped by EUDiF). In the framework of the EaP, discussions on diaspora revolve around the regulation of labour migration – including the rights of labour migrants abroad, prevention of brain drain and return of labour migrants.

Moreover, bilateral cooperation covering mobility, migration and asylum issues between the EU and five Eastern partner countries – namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova – are framed by **Mobility Partnerships**<sup>1</sup>. Mobility Partnerships are based on the four pil-

1 **EU Migration & Home Affairs Glossary:** Mobility partnerships “provide the overall framework for managing various forms of legal movement between the EU and non-EU countries. Such partnerships are agreed with those non-EU countries committed to fighting illegal immigration and that have effective mechanisms for readmission”.

lars of the Global Approach for Migration and Mobility (GAMM), one of which is related to migration and development. A few projects proposed through Mobility Partnerships in the region have directly targeted diaspora engagement, including, for example, the project “**Enhancing the Government of Moldova’s Capacity in Diaspora Engagement**” in Moldova, and the project “**Strengthening the development potential of the EU Mobility Partnership in Georgia through targeted circular migration and Diaspora mobilization**” in Georgia.

Moreover, visa-free travel regimes have been agreed between the EU and Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. Visa-free regimes have enhanced interactions and connections between Eastern Partnership countries and the EU, including with diaspora communities in the EU. They enhance business opportunities, trade, and cultural exchanges, and enable citizens to get to know the EU better. Visa-free regimes also aim to make the countries of origin more attractive to their diasporas. Currently, Armenia and Azerbaijan do not benefit from a visa-free regime, but they have concluded visa facilitation and readmission agreements, usually the first step towards a visa-free regime.

## AT NATIONAL LEVEL

**After the dissolution of the USSR, diaspora engagement was quickly institutionalised.**

Today, five out of the 10 countries mapped have an institution dedicated to diaspora engagement: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

In addition to the development of various institutions, steps have been taken to recognise diaspora as citizens in most EECA countries. Six countries mapped<sup>2</sup> permit dual citizenship – usually considered as a necessary step to optimise diaspora engagement. Furthermore, the abil-

2 Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan do not recognise dual citizenship.

ity to vote from the diaspora is widely established across the region. Only Armenia does not permit citizens living abroad to vote.

In six<sup>3</sup> countries, diaspora issues are addressed in various legislative acts (typically in the legislation on the entry/exit of persons) and in bilateral agreements that regulate various aspects of the movement of people and employment of co-nationals abroad. Of the ten countries mapped, only Azerbaijan, Moldova and Tajikistan have a diaspora engagement policy. **Turkmenistan** is the only country not to address diaspora issues in its legal and policy framework.

Establishing institutional structures dedicated to diaspora engagement and developing policies and mechanisms to the benefit of diaspora are clear demonstrations of government commitment to connect with diaspora and attract their capital for development.

**Azerbaijan** was the first country in the region to adopt a diaspora engagement policy: the 2002 **Law on the State Policy towards Azerbaijanis Living Abroad**. Compared to most countries worldwide, this was very early. The policy consists of protecting the basic rights and freedoms of Azerbaijanis living abroad; strengthening ties between Azerbaijanis living abroad, state bodies, and non-governmental organisations; providing Azerbaijanis living abroad with information on the domestic and foreign policy of Azerbaijan; engaging Azerbaijanis living abroad in protecting and strengthening the country's independence and sovereignty, and its economic, social and cultural development.

**Moldova's National Diaspora Strategy 2015-2025** was adopted after the government consulted the main stakeholders, including diaspora communities, civil society, academia and international partners. Subsequently, an Action Plan to support its implementation was developed. The Action Plan includes four objectives: to draft and develop the strategic and operational framework for the area of "diaspora, migration and development"<sup>4</sup>; to ensure diaspora rights and to build trust; to mobilise, harness, and recognise diaspora human capital; and to

engage diaspora directly and indirectly in the sustainable economic development of Moldova.

In the same year, 2015, **Tajikistan** also adopted its **State Concept of Attracting Compatriots Living Abroad as Partners for the Development and its Action Plan for 2015-2020**. These documents foresee: events for youth and children; competitions and events for the stimulation of diaspora organisations; help for Tajik diasporans who wish to create cultural and educational centres; recruiting highly qualified specialists from the diaspora to implement investment projects; and technical support and access to educational material for diaspora organisations.

In **Armenia**, the Government has been working on a diaspora engagement policy since 2002 but because of internal politics, it has not yet materialised. **Art 19 of the Constitution** of Armenia entitled "Ties with the Armenian Diaspora" states that Armenia shall, together with the Armenian Diaspora, implement a policy targeted at the development of comprehensive ties and preservation of the Armenian identity and promote repatriation. Armenia has a long diaspora history and a large diaspora, reaching almost 7 million, according to the **Armenian Government**. This explains why diaspora issues are a high priority to keep strong ties with the diaspora and to support it, however diaspora affairs in Armenia is politicized. Armenia is no exception in this; the institutionalisation of diaspora engagement in the newly independent states is often politicized and diaspora issues are often high on the domestic agenda in this region.

In **Kyrgyzstan**, the Government attempts to institutionalise the relationship with its diaspora by developing policies and programmes aiming to strengthen financial and social contributions and facilitating the repatriation of migrants working abroad. The Government has also worked on improving and strengthening the potential to return of Kyrgyz returnees.

3 Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

4 "Diaspora, migration and development" (DMD) in an innovative approach via which Moldova promotes the mainstreaming of migration across all sectors through a network of DMD focal points in all central public authorities.

## 2. REGIONAL PIONEERS

EUDiF's Regional pioneers are countries that have shown significant interest and progress in the field of diaspora engagement over time. Countries are usually identified as regional pioneers because:

- The national institutional framework and enabling environment has been developed explicitly recognising the key role of migrants and/or the diaspora in the development of the country of origin, and highlighting the importance of optimising diaspora development contributions.
- And/or, the country has implemented notable diaspora-relevant initiatives in a given development sector.

There is no ranking of pioneers. More detail on each of the regional pioneers is available in the country fact-sheet.

**Armenia** has a very rich history of diaspora engagement. The Armenian diaspora has traditionally been quite active in engaging with the country and there are plenty of Armenian diaspora organisations around the world, many of which now have their own branches in Yerevan or other Armenian cities. Armenia has a common understanding that the diaspora has huge potential and brings social and financial capital to its homeland. In June 2019, the Ministry of Diaspora of Armenia was abolished but the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs replaced it. Although reduced in staff and status, the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs is more visible and effective. Both the High Commissioner and his Chief of Staff are American-Armenians and are working actively towards enhancing Armenia-diaspora cooperation.

**Azerbaijan** was the first country in the region to conclude a diaspora engagement policy. It also has a dedicated institution, the State Committee on Work with the Diaspora, in charge of establishing and maintaining contacts with the Azerbaijani diaspora and supporting Azerbaijanis around the world in their efforts for national unity. The Congress of World Azerbaijanis is a discussion platform of diaspora leaders striving to protect the rights and freedoms of compatriots, to promote diaspora advocacy and lobbying, and to develop a strategy for diaspora youth. A major motivation for the Government's support of diaspora engagement is the diaspora-led **Pro-Azerbaijan lobby's work** to increase the weight and voice of Azerbaijan's interests in the world and in European politics.

**Moldova:** Besides reintegration of migrant workers and capitalising on remittances, Moldova has strengthened and expanded a transversal approach to diaspora related policies, including the mainstreaming of migration into development across all main institutions called "Diaspora, migration and development" (DMD). This concept originates from Moldova and is promoted globally. The DMD focal points are responsible for promoting and implementing the state policy in the field of DMD within the central public authorities. The migration mainstreaming mechanism was also extended to the local level. In practice, many initiatives exist which seek to utilise diaspora social and economic potential (i.e. Diaspora Annual Congress, Diaspora Days, Diaspora Engagement Hub, Program for efficient investment of remittances PARE 1+1 etc.). These run in conjunction with programmes promoting national identity, traditions and cultural heritage. Moreover, political engagement of the Moldovan diaspora has grown over years and in 2019, the Government created and elected individual representatives for 14 electoral constituencies for the diaspora for the national parliamentary election.

# 3. TERMINOLOGY

One of the main challenges in the region when studying diaspora engagement lies with the complexity of the terminology used: Diaspora, Compatriots, Oralman, Kandas, Kairalman, etc. The terminology is deeply anchored historically and linguistically.

The regional diaspora as a whole is comprised of all these different categories. Moldova is the only country to operate using only the term diaspora.

The most commonly used terms are compatriots, [Azerbaijanis/Tajiks etc] living abroad, ethnic [Ukrainians etc] abroad. The term compatriot is used in all countries covered by the mapping except Turkmenistan, Moldova and Ukraine; it is understood to mean citizens who currently (i.e. temporarily) live abroad, as well as former citizens (under the USSR) who have now become citizens of another State. In parallel to 'compatriot', the term 'diaspora' is used to designate people who have never been legally-recognised citizens but consider themselves citizens in terms of ethnic, linguistic, cultural or historical ties.

Nevertheless, there are national variations. In Ukraine for example, the term 'Ukrainians abroad' includes citizens or former citizens living abroad and 'Ukrainian ethnic origin' relates to non-citizens that consider Ukraine as their homeland. In Kazakhstan, the country's legislation operates with different terms: diaspora, (former) compatriot, ethnic Kazakh, Oralman (replacing by the term *Qandash*, 'blood relative' since 30 April 2020). Kyrgyz lawmakers use the terms: diaspora, compatriots and ethnic Kyrgyz (*Kairylmans*). Despite the widespread use of the word diaspora in official documents, this term is not clarified in the legal framework (it is used for non-citizens) and the term compatriot is also widely used for citizens living abroad. Kyrgyz lawmakers have created the status '*Kairylman*' (literally meaning 'returnee' in Kyrgyz), which determines temporary legal status until receipt of Kyrgyz citizenship. The terms 'diaspora' and 'diaspora members' are not defined by Armenia's national law either. However, the Armenian term '*ազգայնաբնակ հայեր*' is used by lawmakers. This term has different translations in English in legal acts, such as: Armenians by national origin, Armenians by nationality, ethnic Armenians, Armenian origin, Armenian ethnicity.



## 4. KEY TRENDS AND PRACTICES

The EUDiF global mapping on diaspora engagement showed that some trends are global (e.g. increasing remittances, attracting investment, creating links with the diaspora through events and network building networks). Nevertheless, each region also has its own specific trends and distinct practices.

In EECA, efforts largely revolve around return, reintegration and repatriation as well as youth, culture and identity.

### RETURN, REINTEGRATION AND REPATRIATION PROGRAMMES

Among the 10 countries mapped, six (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Ukraine) have established a special repatriation<sup>5</sup> programme with initiatives targeting co-ethnics<sup>6</sup> living in other countries.

Current programmes differ by target groups, measures as well as provisions for immigration and citizenship policies and reflect a varied level of state engagement. Additionally, all countries in the EECA region have established special return and reintegration programmes.

The repatriation programmes in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan aim to increase the number of ethnic population in both nation states. The Programme Kairylman (literally: Returnee) was adopted in November 2007 in the Kyrgyz Republic. It is dedicated to foreign nationals and stateless persons who are ethnic Kyrgyz, their descendants and those interested in moving to the historical homeland. Kazakh lawmakers shaped the national repatriation strategy in 1997. The Law on Population Migration defines the legal status of an ethnic Kazakh or Qandash (previously Oralman, literally: person who came back). Kazakhstan sought to build a nation state truly of and for the ethnicity (Kazakhs), in order to overcome issues of Russification of its population. The repatriation programme remains one of the main pillars of the migration strategy of modern Kazakhstan.

5 Repatriation programmes aim at attracting citizens and non-citizens with ethnic, cultural and/or historical ties to resettle voluntarily in the country of their citizenship or origin for the purpose of permanent residence.

6 Co-ethnics are people that are from the same ethnicity, whether or not they share the same nationality.

In Moldova, reintegration is a high government priority. In 2010, Moldova launched its pilot project **Pare 1+1 - National Programme on Attracting Remittances into the Economy**. The programme was designed to attract remittances into the economy through the mobilisation of migrants' savings, stimulating Small and Medium Enterprises development, and supporting job creation, especially at the local level. Every Leu invested from remittances is matched with a Leu from PARE. The programme already supported and co-financed about 1623 business initiatives. In 2018, Moldova has launched a **(re)integration guide** which aims to develop programmes and services for returned Moldovan citizens, including information and assistance on how to find a suitable job; how to build knowledge and skills; and how to start and manage a business in Moldova. A special focus was put on highly skilled diaspora return (including scientific diaspora) and special target groups - women and youth.

In 2017, Ukraine developed an **Action Plan on Ensuring the Reintegration into Society of Labour Migrants and Members of their Families**. This Action Plan facilitates the employment of migrant workers and their family members upon their return to Ukraine, taking into account their educational level, professional experience, qualifications and labour market needs. It foresees strengthening the social and legal protection of Ukrainians working abroad by stepping up international cooperation and concluding agreements on issues related to the protection of migrant rights.

Similarly, in 2019 Azerbaijan has launched a project called **Reintegration Support to Azerbaijani Returnees (RE-START)**. This project, which is co-funded by several EU Member States (Germany, the Netherlands and Poland) and implemented by ICMFD, aims at supporting the implementation of the readmission agreement in the area of reintegration through strengthening the capacities of authorities and civil society in Azerbaijan to actively facilitate sustainable return from the EU Member States and reintegration of Azerbaijani nationals.

Promoting repatriation is a priority in Armenia. The **2019-2023 Action Programme** foresees the creation and adoption of the **Law on Repatriation by the Government**. The law aims to regulate the legal framework of the repatriation process in order to preserve comprehensive ties with the Armenian diaspora, promote repatriation, consoli-

date Armenians in the Homeland, and improve the demographic situation in Armenia. Moreover, in 2020, Armenia launched a **repatriation support programme** tackling the country's demographic challenges by encouraging the repatriation and return of compatriots living in the diaspora. The programme consists of the following components: Providing information and logistical support; Language courses; Housing assistance and mortgage lending rates through the introduction of appropriate legal, financial and organisational programmes administered by the State; as well as small and medium business grants (1 + 1) to enable repatriates to invest their financial resources in Armenia and implement their business ideas.

## YOUTH, CULTURE AND IDENTITY

**The question of identity is prevalent in the EECA region, as illustrated by the multitude of projects related to culture and language. In practice, many initiatives seek to utilise diaspora social and economic potential in conjunction with programmes promoting national identity, traditions and cultural heritage.**

A large number of projects aim to keep the national culture alive abroad. One key element of many such projects is related to the mother tongue. All countries mapped cited preservation of the native language and culture as a part of their diaspora-related policies. Preservation of the native language and culture remain a component of diaspora engagement that benefits from significant financial support in the region. For example, **Step to Ukraine** is an educational portal supporting teaching Ukrainian with modern interactive materials and methodologies. The **State Program for the Development and Functioning of Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011 - 2020** provides a framework of "political, diplomatic, methodological and organisational support for the study of the native language by diaspora." In addition, within the framework of this programme, the Kazakh diaspora is regarded not only as a recipient, but also as a tool to popularise the Kazakh language. Kazakhstan is implementing several other projects related to language, culture and identity, such as the **Qazaq House**, a cultural project consisting of two branches: "Abay" Cultural Centre and "Atameken" Business House. The Qazaq House organises several events, including training courses and competitions in Kazakh language and Kazakh literature, culture and history. The **Kazakhstan**

**Culture Days** also include different cultural events: exhibitions of Kazakhstani artists, presentations of books in Kazakh languages and/or Kazakhstan's authors, music, dance and theatre performances. The **Humanitarian Association of World Turkmens** is another example of such initiatives as it aims at popularising the history, culture, traditions and customs of the Turkmen nation.

Several programmes are directed at diaspora youth. For example, Georgia has a **Young Ambassadors Programme** designed to encourage Georgian youth living abroad to represent Georgia in their respective countries of residence through cultural and educational events. Armenia has a programme called **Young Leaders Training Programme** aiming at promoting community leadership, community organisation and cohesion. In 2019, 24 young community workers from six countries participated in the project. Moldova also organises **diaspora children camps and youth camps**. These activities aim to strengthen the emotional and cultural identity and connection of second generation diaspora to Moldova. Azerbaijan also organises **Diaspora Youth Summer Camps** for young people aged between 18 and 29 who are able to communicate in Azerbaijani language and are interested in the history and culture of Azerbaijan.

Some youth initiatives specifically target the preservation of national identity, such as the **Step Home programme** in Armenia. The aim of the programme is to make it possible for Armenian youth living abroad to recognise their homeland and its linguistic and cultural values, and thus contribute to the preservation of the Armenian identity in the diaspora. Preservation of national identity among diaspora youth is also of special interest to Uzbekistan, as shown through the establishment in 2017 of the **World Association of Youth of Uzbekistan (WAYU)**. The WAYU aims to encourage a spirit of patriotism and pride, through the organisation of meetings, celebrations, festivals and literary evenings with celebrities.

Other projects target young professionals with the aim to tap into their skills and business ideas. For example, the **Neruzh programme** for young entrepreneurs of Armenian descent who wish to bring their start-up ideas and projects to Armenia. **Migration studies weekends** in Baku brought together young professionals working in a migration-related field and aimed to raise awareness on opportunities related to migration and development in Azerbaijan.



## 5. RECURRENT CHALLENGES

The following recurrent challenges were identified through the EUDiF mapping on diaspora engagement across several of the 10 countries mapped in EECA. These are challenges faced by governments in their attempt to engage their diaspora. In many cases, the same challenges are faced by diaspora organisations and individuals as they impede their involvement in the development of their country of origin due to a weak enabling environment. There is no specific ranking of the challenges listed below and most can also be observed in other regions.

**Lack of or inadequate policy framework:** Most governments in the region still have low institutional capacity to mobilise the diaspora. In many countries, there is a lack of a legal framework for a long-term strategy towards the diaspora. Moreover, social capital - in terms of professional knowledge, skills and expertise - is still undervalued. Additionally, relations between the government and diaspora organisations are relatively unstructured. Consequently, government-led diaspora engagement remains below its potential.

**Limited knowledge on the diaspora:** EECA States often have limited knowledge or understanding of the potential of the diaspora. Data, information, and statistics on the

diaspora are not always publicly available and tend to be scattered and often contradictory. This limited knowledge negatively affects the ability to build adequate diaspora engagement policies and programmes and to communicate efficiently with the diaspora.

**Polarisation of the diaspora:** The diversity and fragmentation of diaspora organisations limit collaboration between organisations and with the countries of origin at national level.

**Issues of trust:** In many EECA countries, the level of mutual trust is low. Due to the tumultuous history in the region, establishing trust between migrants and the Government is a challenge. Moreover, political instability undermines diaspora engagement in terms of programme implementation and belief in their long-term realisation. In order to build trust towards the country of origin, there is a need to fight corruption and setting up mechanisms of mutual accountability. Diaspora members are also often considered with resentment or fear.

**Politicisation of policies:** There is a risk of diaspora engagement policies and programmes being politicised, by governments and/or diaspora. This challenge is closely linked to the issues of trust.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to strengthen diaspora engagement in EECA include the following:

To countries of origin and diaspora organisations:

- **Enhance dialogue to streamline approaches:** Networking spaces for exchange between diaspora organisations and government institutions should be created (when none already exists), strengthened and supported. Enhancing dialogue would provide the government with more information on its diaspora. Additionally, polarised diaspora can learn more about other diaspora organisations. This could potentially lead to new collaborations between diaspora organisations and improve effectiveness in the communication with the country of origin. Outreach efforts on both sides can also help build trust.
- **Build trust:** Several countries in EECA need to build trust with their diaspora. This can be achieved through increased collaboration, exchanges and communication, as well as by increasing transparency and fighting against corruption. Building trust requires long-term commitment and authenticity.

To donors and implementing agencies:

- **Provide capacity development to countries of origin as well as to diaspora organisations:** Capacity development provided to EECA countries should be tailored to local realities and follow gradual steps. Peer learning activities between diaspora organisations and countries of origin are also effective ways to develop further their capacities and such initiatives should be supported further. They also contribute to trust building.
- **Support data collection initiatives:** States need to know their diaspora in order to be able to propose adequate opportunities for engagement. Similarly, diaspora organisations need to have a better knowledge of the mosaic of diaspora organisations in order to pool resources; share good practices and lessons learned as well as increase synergies and complementarity.
- **Act as an intermediary:** Facilitating initial contact, dialogue and trust building between countries of origin and diaspora organisations can help catalyse diaspora engagement. The intermediary should remain neutral and support transparent and inclusive participation. This could take the form of events inviting all the main stakeholders to discuss in a safe space, organised by an intermediary.