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ICMPD
Migration Outlook
Eastern Europe and Central Asia 2022

Six migration issues to look out for in 2022

Origins, key events and priorities

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Six migration issues to look out for in 2022

1. The geopolitical situation in the wider region

Throughout 2021, several major developments affected the migration situation in the EECA region. The rapid change of the ruling regime in Afghanistan affected not only Iran and Pakistan but also the northern neighbours: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The complex relations between Russia, Ukraine and the West represent another migration relevant factor, the consequences of which will require further attention.

This report is being finalised at the time of diplomatic talks between Russia, the USA and NATO, with a threat of escalation that would affect Ukraine and its neighbourhood. The Russian military units have accumulated in areas near the eastern borders of Ukraine, and in the separatist Donbas region, and is preparing for military drills with Belarusian forces at the northern border of Ukraine, with intensified presence in both the Black and Baltic Seas, as well as (allegedly) in the Transnistria region in Moldova. In this atmosphere of worsened relations between the West and Russia, which poses the biggest threat of an armed conflict since World War Two, Russia and China have agreed on a strategic partnership: "…friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation…"[i]. The situation is to be closely monitored, and the direction it takes will impact not only on migration flows but also on the overall European, Eurasian or even Global architecture in 2022 and beyond. The potential for major migratory movements towards other destinations including the EU will persist in 2022, along with a broader impact on European security equilibrium. Development or review of contingency plans for mass arrival of migrants, including mainly those in seek of protection, should thus be considered not only by bordering states.

2. The rise in irregular migration to the EU and response to instrumentalisation of migration

Almost 200,000 illegal crossings were recorded at the external borders of the EU in 2021. This corresponds to an increase of 57% in comparison to 2020 and of 38% in comparison to 2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. With roughly 8,000 illegal border crossings detected in 2021, the external Eastern EU land border witnessed a rapid increase of 1,069% compared to 2020[ii], the highest increase since October–December 2015 when the Arctic migration route[iii] from Russia to Norway and Finland emerged, generated by an influx of 6,000 asylum seekers from Syria and Afghanistan. It could be useful to analyse whether these two separate situations demonstrate any similarities.

In any case, preparedness for an assertive and collective response can contribute to addressing the phenomenon of instrumentalised migration, which has been demonstrated by the deliberate creation of a migration crisis at the EU's external border, instigated and controlled by Belarusian authorities. The EU's swift, unified and robust response in cooperation with non-European partners halted this scheme. The situation will, however, remain volatile in 2022 as thousands of migrants are left in a state of limbo, with immediate threat to their lives and well-being. Re-direction of those still present in Belarus to the Ukrainian border might destabilise Ukraine in these sensitive times. Driven by growing instability in major countries of origin and aggravated by the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, this increase of irregular migration is likely to continue in 2022.

3. The migration effects of the Taliban takeover

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the rapidly growing humanitarian crisis in the country are likely to lead to additional displacement and outbound flows of refugees and migrants. According to initial assessments, another 500,000 Afghan refugees are expected to flee the country. Other countries in the region have closed their borders, limited access to passport and visa holders and cut support for newly arriving Afghans, while at the same time providing humanitarian assistance and establishing pragmatic relations with the Taliban. The northern neighbours of Afghanistan, in close cooperation with regional entities such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, consider refugees from Afghanistan as a potentially destabilising factor and security threat. It was thus decided that Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan would not host refugees from Afghanistan and would strengthen, in cooperation with the aforementioned organisations, the protection of their southern borders. It remains to be seen to what extent the Central Asia region will be successful in preventing the migratory flows from Afghanistan, considering the region's own political, economic, ethnic, religious and security challenges. In case of migrant arrivals from Afghanistan to the Central Asia region, international support for the receiving countries would be of crucial importance.

4. Labour mobility as a key priority for migration governance in the EECA region

The European Union has entered a period of demographic ageing. By 2050, the share of the EU working age population will shrink by 37 million. Already, many vacancies cannot be filled with domestic applicants, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made it all the more evident how much the European economies depend on essential workers.

As well as the EU, EECA countries, with the exception of Central Asia and Azerbaijan, face demographic ageing, and despite being a source of labour migration for the EU and other destinations, they increasingly realise the need for a stable labour force in their own labour markets. Proactive implementation of programmes designed for compatriots and attraction of labour force from abroad both seem crucial for local economies. EECA countries and regional integration entities such as the Eurasian Economic Union have made strong efforts to establish functioning and simplified governance of labour migration, and this is reflected in national, bilateral and multilateral migration strategies. Considering their political, economic and social circumstances, the receiving states within the region, in particular the Central Asian source countries – Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – have been exploring opportunities for diversification of their external labour migration. The EU is among the attractive destinations for Central Asian countries looking for legal frameworks and channels for accessing the EU labour markets, in particular in EU MS with historical and cultural ties and Russian language proximity. With functioning return systems in place, the EU may, in the competitive environment, benefit from establishing informed and functioning circular or temporary work schemes for the Central Asian labour force in the spirit of the Talent Partnership.

5. Growing impact of climate change on migration and mobility in the region

Countries in the region are among the most affected by climate change. The Central Asian region might see up to 2.4 million climate migrants by 2050. The increase of natural hazards, limited water resources and the negative impact on the agricultural sector and infrastructure may result in intensification of internal movements, potential forced displacement due to ongoing in-country and cross-border conflicts, social unrest and overall deterioration of the economic situation. Tension observed between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan or in the Ferghana Valley, which due to its location between three countries has a dense population, high unemployment and ethnic diversity, may define other areas of concern for 2022.

Another potential stimulant for internal migration, mostly to urban areas in West or South Russia, or for outbound flows from Russia, could be the thawing permafrost in the Arctic and Siberia, which threatens the existing infrastructure. By 2050, half of the critical expensive-to-fix industrial infrastructure will be at high risk of being damaged. Russian territory is 65% permafrost, home to 60% of settlements in the affected region and 90% of its population[iv]. While climate change represents a challenge and a threat to humans and infrastructure, programmes have been set up with the aim of turning this challenge into an opportunity for development, for instance by populating remote areas; examples include the “Arctic Hectare program” (extended as of February 2022 to all Russian nationals) and the Far East and Arctic Development initiative[v] which is open to foreign investments. If successful, these development projects might lead to new employment opportunities from within and outside the region, increasing the pressure in the race for attracting foreign labour force.

6. The continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migration

The pandemic has exerted increased economic pressures on large parts of the overall population in low-income countries but also on the migrant and refugee populations residing within their territories. The resilience of migrant remittances might cushion some of these pressures but surely not all of them. Uneven economic recovery is likely to fuel irregular migration in 2022.

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[i] Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development, 4 February 2022; http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770

[ii] EU external borders in 2021: Arrivals above pre-pandemic levels, 2022-01-11; https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/eu-external-borders-in-2021-arrivals-above-pre-pandemic-levels-CxVMNN

[iii] Frontex Migratory Routes, Eastern Borders route: https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-routes/eastern-borders-route/

[iv] Thawing Perfmaforst is undermining Arctic infrastructure; 20 January 2020; https://polarjournal.ch/en/2022/01/20/thawing-permafrost-is-undermining-arctic-infrastructure/

[v] Map of the Russian Arctic shows investment opportunities; https://arcticeconomiccouncil.com/news/map-of-the-russian-arctic-shows-investment-opportunities/

Introduction

ICMPD's Migration Outlook on the situation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) presents a **brief analysis of migration and policy trends in the region** and provides an outlook on developments and key issues to watch out for in 2022. The paper covers developments in the twelve EECA countries according to ICMPD's geographic division: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

This Outlook highlights the most important and relevant trends in EECA without intending to cover all migration-related developments. The main goal of this publication is, therefore, to provide expert perspectives on how migration might evolve across the region in 2022, based on ICMPD's regional office experience. In this regard, while migration trends in the region are largely impacted by geopolitical developments and challenges, and often triggered by geopolitical tensions and conflicts in the region and its surrounding areas, this paper focuses only on migration-related outlook for 2022.

In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to affect migration and mobility across the EECA region. Developments in Afghanistan with anticipated migration flows to Central Asian countries, the migration crisis at the EU-Belarus border, geopolitical tensions in areas of frozen and smouldering conflict (i.e. Nagorno-Karabakh, Donbas) and a border dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan constitute acute and potential drivers of migration within the region and internationally. The year 2022 started with a sudden flare-up of protests in Kazakhstan amid growing fuel prices, along with a new cycle of the political crisis between Russia and Ukraine, or more broadly the Russian Federation and Western Europe, USA and NATO. While the impact of these events on the region's current migration flows and/or cross-border movements has been limited so far, their actual implications and potential outcomes are yet to be seen.

The worldwide stock of migrants of EECA origin amounted to over **30 million in 2020**, which represented an increase of 2.4 million compared to 2010. Close to 54% of EECA migrants are women, and this ratio has remained stable for the past 30 years. The region is also home to over 23 million migrants who mostly originate from within the region. In absolute terms, Russia is both the main origin and destination country with an immigrant stock of 10.8 million and an emigrant stock close to 12 million persons. Labour migration remains the most significant form of migration within the region, with regional flows forming rather tenable labour migration corridors from Central Asia towards Russia and from the Eastern Partnership countries and Belarus to the EU, in particular Poland, which hosts up to 85% of all migrants from Eastern Europe in the EU territory.

Focus countries and subregions within EECA

Like other parts of the world, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has affected migration trends in the EECA region. In addition, geopolitical developments and violent conflicts in and around the region have had an impact on migration directions, flows and scope. This will continue to be the case in 2022.

Belarus

In 2021, migration trends related to Belarus were primarily quoted in the context of irregular transit from the Middle East through the territory of Belarus towards Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, and further still, to other EU MS, including Germany. The majority of migrants came from Iraq, but also from Afghanistan, Syria and other countries. In total, more than 43,000 apprehensions at the border were reported in Poland, and 4,200 in Lithuania; Germany recorded over 11,000 migrants using the route through Belarus to enter the country in 2021[vi].

The development of the so-called Belarus route emerged in summer 2021, not long after the new sanctions were imposed on Belarus by the EU in May. According to different sources, migrants were allowed to enter Belarus with a single-entry visa. Most of them arrived on flights operated by the state-owned Belavia air company, some of them newly introduced. From Minsk, migrants were apparently guided to the Polish or Lithuanian borders which they attempted to cross illegally[vii]. Based on this observation, experts and observers concluded that these movements were deliberately orchestrated by Belarus in response to the aforementioned sanctions. Experts referred to the resulting humanitarian emergency at the borders between Belarus and its neighbouring EU MS as a case of state-sponsored instrumentalisation of migration – using and facilitating irregular migration flows as a tool for political purposes in response to political and economic sanctions, in order to destabilise the EU or its member states. Recognising this, EU MS and competent EU institutions issued additional political and economic sanctions against Belarus, aiming to halt this practice and send a clear signal to prevent similar situations arising in the future. Moreover, proactive diplomatic action and substantial migration and border management assistance for affected EU MS have been part of the EU's policy response[viii].

Leaving aside the geopolitical consequences of the conflict as well as potential outcomes for EU's migration and asylum policy, this situation will most likely continue to have an impact on migration flows in the region. Thousands of migrants, including families and children, are trapped in limbo in Belarus between the opposing sides without any real perspective of a dignified return home or without durable solutions for ensuring their safety and well-being[ix]. Some observers foresee potential rerouting of migrants from Belarus towards Ukraine[x], which will further aggravate the situation in this Eastern European country. Currently, labour migration from Belarus towards the EU is growing[1]. However, it might be affected by further sanctions, suspension of the visa facilitation agreement and business activities, transportation limitations, internal regulations in Belarus, etc. This may direct the labour migration from Belarus towards Russia, which together with Belarus forms a Union State, or further to the Eurasian Economic Union with equal residence and employment conditions for citizens of its member states.

Russia and Ukraine

Western European and US observers report that there is a concentration of Russian troops and significant military equipment along the Russian-Ukrainian border, in south-west Russia. This, together with frequent military drills and increased Russian presence in Crimea, the Baltic Sea and Transnistria,

[1] See section 3 on Migration trends in the region.

has raised concerns over a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine, following Moscow's criticism of Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO. Thus far, diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict have not brought any significant results. Instead, the Russian Federation has deployed additional troops to Belarus, prompting several Western countries to send additional military equipment to Ukraine. Eastern and Northern EU MS have been strengthening their military preparedness, while the British and US Embassies in Kyiv, as well as the Russian one, have ordered their staff and families to leave the country, as well as advised citizens to return home[xi]. Official Moscow denies any speculations about a potential military invasion of Ukraine, justifying military movements within its own territory as a response to a potential expansion of NATO[xii]. Western and independent Russian observers and policy experts, however, have described various scenarios for a potential escalation, ranging from a hybrid invasion in the form of cyberattacks, demonstrations of force and spread of disinformation, to a full invasion, this latter being the least likely outcome[xiii].

Any further escalation of the conflict might result in the forced displacement of Ukrainians who would first and foremost seek asylum in neighbouring countries[xiv], including EU MS, taking into account the EU-Ukraine visa-free regime. Back in 2014, hundreds of thousands of people had to flee the Donbas area. While the majority remained within Ukraine, some sought asylum or moved abroad for family reunion or labour migration[xv]. Unless current tensions are resolved diplomatically, such internal displacement and refugee flows may also be expected in 2022. Therefore, neighbours of Ukraine should consider reviewing their emergency plans for mass refugee arrivals, along with their preparedness for processing claims for international protection as well as housing-related logistics.

Central Asia

Migration within, to and from Central Asia was affected by various factors in 2021, and will most likely be a matter of concern in 2022. Factors that continue to impact on migration trends in this sub-region are related to: proximity to Afghanistan and other conflict-affected territories; significant labour migration due to economic hardship; unemployment in the face of a growing working-age population; and climate change.

The rapid withdrawal of NATO and US troops from **Afghanistan** had a direct impact on neighbouring Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as well as the Central Asian region as a whole. In July 2021, Tajikistan announced that it had the capacity to host up to 100,000 more Afghan refugees; however, only two months later, the authorities declared that this would not be feasible. Even so, before flights from Afghanistan to Tajikistan were suspended in August 2021, the country already registered 7,500 refugees. According to the State Committee for National Security, the figures reached 15,000 in the next two months, with 500-600 people attempting to cross the border on a daily basis[xvi]. Turkmenistan refused to accept refugees. Uzbekistan closed the border with Afghanistan and only temporarily provided transit facilities for refugees flying to third countries. There are indications that around 2,000 Afghans have entered Uzbekistan since the Taliban took over, yet their status upon expiration of legal stay is unclear. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (together with Tajikistan), echoed the alliance's joint position and refused to host refugees from Afghanistan. While Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan were ready to accept ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyzs, these figures were limited to several hundreds[xvii]. In 2022, Afghanistan's neighbours and the EU are still likely to see increased arrivals of migrants, including asylum seekers from Afghanistan, as people will continue to leave the country due to security, humanitarian and economic reasons. Given the current resistance of Central Asian countries to accepting migrants from Afghanistan, irregular migration flows might increase. Even an insignificant increase of forced migrants arriving in Central Asia, especially Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, might lead to tensions with the local population due to the region's difficult economic situation and widespread poverty.

At least four countries[2] in the region – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – are actively involved in repatriation programmes for their nationals from Afghanistan, but also from Iraq and Syria. According to the UN Security Council, nationals from Central Asia constitute one of the biggest foreign fighter groups in Afghanistan, mainly affiliated with the Taliban, but also supporting Al-Qaida[xviii]. Central Asians were also among those who fought as ISIS members in Iraq and Syria: some of them are currently placed in detention, while others have joined other combats. Since 2019, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have returned an estimated 1,300 nationals from Syria and Iraq, including women and children, with some countries only returning minors[xix]. All listed countries implement rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, which are seen as a good practice[xx]; however, all countries have experienced challenges in this area[xxi]. Repatriation programmes have slowed down to some extent due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but these will continue in the future. In addition to organised repatriation, cases of "secret return[3]" have been identified, with the exact motives of returnees and possible missions being a matter of concern for the authorities. Experts suggest that most secret returnees head for Kyrgyzstan, but also target other countries in the EECA region, taking advantage of the visa-free regime and their knowledge of the Russian language[xxii]. Kazakhstan was quick to announce that foreign fighters from Central Asia and Afghanistan might have been responsible for unrest at the beginning of 2022[xxiii], which resulted in a swift CSTO deployment of peacekeeping forces in Kazakhstan.

Labour (out) migration and migrants' remittances constitute a large share of the economies of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Remittances for 2021 were projected to be 2.3, 2.5 and 7.6 billion USD respectively, benefitting predominantly from the rebound in the Russian economy and the rise in oil prices. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were the top two countries in the EECA region in terms of share of remittance in GDP which constituted 30.1% and 27.8% respectively, with Uzbekistan reaching 11.8%[xxiv]. Russia remains and will continue to remain a major destination for migrants from Central Asia, with labour migration flows reaching pre-pandemic levels, due to a number of measures taken by Russia to facilitate labour migration, but also due to extreme economic hardship and the important role of remittances in countries of origin. Although some steps have been taken towards diversification of labour migration flows from Central Asia (to Turkey, South Korea, UAE and the EU)[xxv], it is safe to

[2] There are no official data on Turkmenistan.
[3] Secret returns, according to experts, include those who return home unauthorised, to potentially pursue militant activities, for example by promoting radical ideologies and recruiting new fighters.

say that labour migration from Central Asia to Russia will continue, and will probably increase in 2022 due to security and economic concerns. Labour migration has been simplified for member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (Armenia, Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) with free movement and equal access to the EAEU labour market.

Despite the efforts of governments and international actors in Central Asia to contribute to global climate action, **climate change** is likely to further increase temperatures and alter the mountain glacier and snow reserves. This has already resulted in limited water resources experienced by both mountain and downstream communities, and these challenges will persist in the future, aggravated by an increased risk of natural hazards. Climate change seriously affects the agricultural sector: the lack of water resources combined with drier weather conditions increases risks in the area of food security[xxvi]. The Central Asian region might see up to 2.4 million climate migrants by 2050. The Fergana Valley, a densely populated intermountain territory shared by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, may be particularly affected. It is often described as a hub of agriculture, industry, ethnic and cultural diversity. Notwithstanding the fact that nearly a quarter of the overall population of Central Asia already resides here, climate change may stimulate further population growth. In addition, the area around Tashkent, lower-elevation areas of southern Tajikistan (including Dushanbe) and denser settlements in northern Kazakhstan are projected to become climate in-migration hotspots. On the other hand, climate out-migration is expected to mostly affect regions along the southern border of Kazakhstan, areas surrounding the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and the area around Bishkek, eastern Turkmenistan and southern Uzbekistan along the Amu Darya River[xxvii]. As environmental changes are likely to stimulate internal and intra-regional migration, international labour migration from over-populated regions and climate in-migration hotspots will probably increase as well, due to pressure on labour markets and socio-ethnic conflicts. Opportunities for improving the situation mainly relate to continued efforts in coordinated climate actions, but also to strengthening cross-border cooperation among the Central Asian states. The business forum ‘Integration of borders – the key to development’ in April 2021[xxviii], which gathered representatives from the three neighbouring regions of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, was a good example of such cooperation.

Migration trends in the region

This section will sketch some key regional migration trends observed in 2020–2021. All forecasts remain uncertain due to the protracted nature of the pandemic and uneven response and recovery, as well as the fragile geopolitical environment.

Structural drivers of migration: economic recovery, vaccination rates and demographic outcomes

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in **a steep recession of most economies in the EECA region**. However, effects on per capita income growth, poverty and inequality have been disproportionate[xxix]. For instance, the decline in real GDP in 2020 exceeded 8.6% in the Kyrgyz Republic, 7.4% in Armenia and 6% in Moldova and Georgia. The only two EECA countries with positive GDP growth were Uzbekistan (1.6%) and Tajikistan (4.5%)[xxx]. In the first half of 2021, all EECA countries saw their economies grow, albeit unevenly. This growth was attributed to a recovery in domestic demand, rising oil prices, expanding gas production and increased remittances and mobility, among other factors.

However, this recovery also brought on rapidly accelerating inflation that pushed up the prices of essential goods such as food, transport and utilities. This in turn increased food insecurity in countries such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan that depend on food imports from neighbouring Kazakhstan as well as Russia[xxxi]. Moreover, the spread of more contagious COVID-19 variants appeared to decelerate recovery in the second half of 2021. Overall, the slowdown of the fundamental growth drivers – investment, improvements in education and health, and working-age population growth – that started before the pandemic is likely to persist for a prolonged period across the entire region. According to the latest World Bank estimations, the EECA economy is expected to grow by only 3.4 % in 2022[xxxii].

Progress with the region's **vaccine rollout** has been uneven due to unequal vaccine access and vaccination hesitancy[xxxiii]. By January 2022, only one EECA country,[xxxiv] Turkmenistan, had reached a 50% level of full vaccination[4]. These limited vaccination rates may increase the immobility of those who remain unvaccinated and further drive mortality rates, exacerbating the lasting demographic decline in parts of the EECA region.

Except for the dip in life expectancy[xxxv] across the region, apart from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the observed **demographic** trends are not novel. While the five Central Asian states and Azerbaijan feature predominantly young and growing populations, all other EECA countries are facing a steady demographic decline and losing their labour force. The demographic shift experienced in Russia is particularly illustrative: the country lost close to one million people[xxxvi] over a span of just one year (October 2020–November 2021), many of whom were in the 45–48 years age group[xxxvii]. Russia was hit by a 'triple whammy': the COVID-induced excess mortality, lower birth rates and reduced immigration meant that nothing compensated for the natural population decline. Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine face quite similar albeit less dramatic demographic changes. In such circumstances, migration becomes an important instrument for both countries with shrinking and ageing populations and those featuring a considerable labour force without employment prospects on national labour markets.

Labour migration

Given the described socio-economic and demographic drivers, labour migration – within and outside the region – represents a viable option for EECA populations. Over the past few years, regional flows have formed rather tenable labour migration corridors from Central Asia towards Russia and from the Eastern Partnership countries (including Belarus, which suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership [EaP] in summer 2021) to the EU, especially Poland. Russia used to be the prime destination for EaP labour migrants but less so in recent years. Meanwhile, the importance of Turkey as a destination for migrant workers from South Caucasus and Central Asia, notably Turkmenistan, has been growing.[xxxviii] This especially concerns migrants from Turkmenistan, who account for a small share

[4] The rates of full vaccination against COVID-19 in the EECA region on 10 January 2022 were as follows: Azerbaijan – 46 %, Kazakhstan – 45 %, Russia – 46 %, Belarus – 38 %, Ukraine – 32%, Tajikistan – 30 %, Georgia – 29 %, Armenia – 24 %, Kyrgyzstan – 15 %, Uzbekistan – 17 % (updated 20.10.2021), Turkmenistan – 52 % (updated 27.09.2021), Moldova – 13 % (updated 29.08.2021).

of labour migrants in the EU and Russia alike but have been among the top recipients and holders of residence permits in Turkey over the past three years. Over 87,000 Turkmen nationals had residence permits in Turkey in 2020[xxxix], and this number grew to over 121,000 in 2021[xl]. This trend seems to be continuing in 2022.

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic affected the volume of migrant flows and migrants' employment outcomes throughout the region. The implications of this have been manifold, ranging from increased migrant vulnerabilities and returns to barriers to remigration for seasonal employment and more profound labour force shortages. For instance, close to half a million labour migrants returned to Uzbekistan in 2020, finding themselves with no fixed income. In Tajikistan, border closures led to increased unemployment and poverty: in the short time between March and April 2020, about 350,000 Tajik nationals could not leave for work. The closure of borders has also seriously affected the domestic labour market in Kyrgyzstan, which saw its poverty rate increase by 11 % in 2020, resulting in about 700,000 people out of the 6.5 million population falling below the poverty line[xli]. At the same time, the considerable reduction in travel and general uncertainty motivated many labour migrants to remain in destination countries, often in vulnerable situations, and to continue remitting money home.

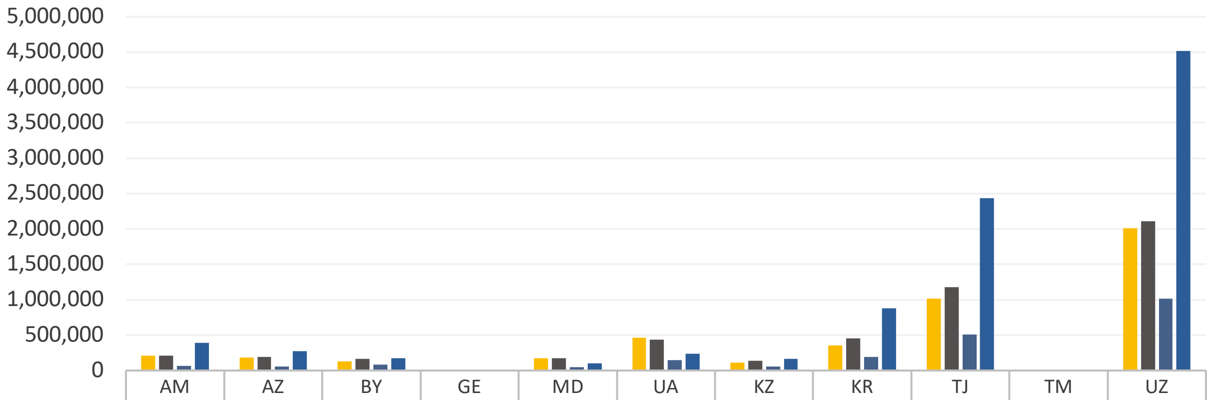
Labour migration to Russia

Although Russia usually registers up to 5 million labour migrants annually, in 2020 the country recorded only 2.4 million migrant workers, 92% of whom originated from the EECA region, primarily Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.[xlii] Widespread mobility restrictions led to a 50% drop in arrivals after April 2020. Official data also show an average 20% increase in departures in 2020 compared to 2019[5]. Nevertheless, the stock of migrant workers in Russia declined less drastically by approximately 20%, amounting to 3.67 million on 1 October 2020 (4.39 million on 1 October 2019).[xliii] As of 2021, and particularly as of the second quarter, the flow to Russia started to recover. The resumption of air traffic to and from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in April 2021 was part of the reason.[xliv] In 2021, Russia recorded over 4.5 million Uzbek labour migrants, over 2 million labour migrants from Tajikistan and 884,000 nationals of Kyrgyzstan – up to five times as many compared to 2020[6].

[5] The data showing the outflow surplus could have been affected by the existing automatic de-reregistration of migrants whose registration at a place of stay had expired. Such persons are considered as having left Russia. Given that Russian borders had been closed, the outflow might have been less than the data suggest.

[6] In 2021, Russia extended the period of legal stay for migrants until January 2022, simultaneously reflecting an 85% drop in outflows from the country as of July 2021. This may explain the record high numbers of Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz labour migrants.

Figure 1. Registration at a place of stay for work reasons in Russia



	AM	AZ	BY	GE	MD	UA	KZ	KR	TJ	TM	UZ
2018	207,945	186,167	124,633	3,012	177,468	460,622	111,464	351,959	1,018,497	2,779	2,007,407
2019	210,460	194,929	163,410	3,412	174,150	435,528	136,208	453,702	1,179,423	4,813	2,107,302
2020	69,024	60,818	85,590	1,747	49,378	148,063	60,461	190,312	507,255	3,906	1,011,028
2021	389,809	275,280	174,500	2,774	104,582	240,590	163,938	884,133	2,439,198	7,880	4,519,618

2018 2019 2020 2021

Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation

Overall, labour migration from Central Asia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus to Russia has by now returned to pre-pandemic levels, or even exceeded them. However, labour migration from Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine is significantly below the pre-pandemic level. As a result, the stock of labour migrants on 1 October 2021 was 3.55 million, 20% less than in 2019. Taking into account the slight decrease in migration from Moldova and Ukraine even before the pandemic, as well as current tensions between Russia and Ukraine, this trend is likely to have a lasting effect. For Russia, which faced observable labour shortages aggravated by the pandemic[xlv], migrants from Central Asia will play an increasingly important role. Yet, with 1 million fewer labour migrants in stock, Russia might see the need to facilitate larger flows from Central Asia and/or to explore other potential source countries[xlvi]. On 8 October 2021 an amnesty was announced for 300,000 nationals of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan who had been subject to entry bans, and this can be seen as a step forward in this direction. Moreover, Russia and Uzbekistan are piloting a programme to recruit and send 10,000 construction workers from Uzbekistan to Russia, with the aim of issuing work permits (patents) before they depart Uzbekistan[7]. This approach may become a regular practice unless or until Uzbekistan joins the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)[xlvii,8].

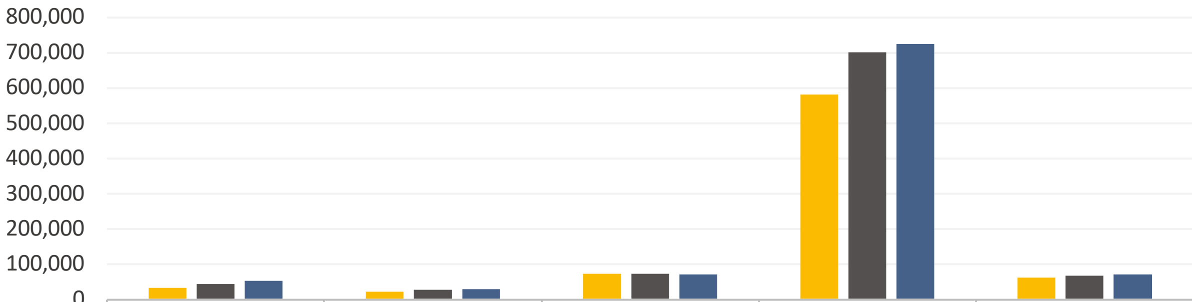
[7] In 2017, the two countries also signed an agreement on the organised recruitment of migrant workers. Although the overall share of workers mobilised through such schemes remains low, the flow to Russia amounted to 84,500 in the first nine months of 2021, one of the highest figures on record.

[8] The EAEU unites Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia. EAEU nationals can freely move and work within the Union. Uzbekistan became an observer member of the EAEU in December 2020. Moldova joined the EAEU as an observer in 2018. See here for further information.

Labour migration from the EECA region to the EU

Regional labour migration to the EU stems primarily from Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Russia. Notwithstanding the COVID-19 pandemic, the stock of labour migrants from these countries in the EU has grown in recent years, except for Moldova. The number of all valid residence permits issued for remunerated activities to nationals of Belarus increased considerably from approximately 34,000 in 2018 to over 53,000 in 2020. The same indicator increased by 34% for Georgia, by 24% for Ukraine and by 14% for Russia. There was also positive growth among residence holders for work from all five Central Asian countries, exceeding 67% for nationals of Turkmenistan and 42% for nationals of Kazakhstan. However, in absolute terms, citizens of Central Asia, Armenia and Azerbaijan hold just 3% (22,000–26,000) of all work permits issued within the EU to EECA nationals in the past three years. However, the number of first residence permits issued for work reasons decreased in 2020 compared with 2019. Against declining flows, the resilience of the stock of labour migrants implies that many migrant workers opted to stay in the EU in 2020. As official EUROSTAT statistics for 2021 are not yet available, it is difficult to anticipate future dynamics.

Figure 2. All valid residence permits issued for remunerated activities in the EU to citizens of selected EECA countries between 2018 and 2020



	Belarus	Georgia	Moldova	Ukraine	Russia
2018	34,350	21,988	74,238	582,659	63,584
2019	44,545	28,138	73,119	702,177	67,457
2020	53,351	29,545	71,266	724,505	72,600

2018 2019 2020

Source: Eurostat

Among EECA nationals, Ukrainians held by far the largest number (74%) of valid residence permits for employment purposes in 2020, with most issued by Poland for a period of up to 11 months. The Ukrainian labour force makes a sizeable contribution to the Polish economy with the number of Ukrainian labour migrants growing year on year. Even in 2020, against declining flows, Ukrainians received 73% of the 406,496 work permits issued in Poland[xlviii]. 49% of these permits were issued for a period of temporary employment of up to five months, 44% for employment up to 11 months and only 7% for a period of longer than 12 months[xlix]. The share of labour migrants from Belarus and Georgia in Poland has also dynamically grown, significantly increasing between 2018 and 2019 (from 19,324 to 27,207 for Belarus; from 2,775 to 7,588 for Georgia), and further increasing in 2020 (27,942 were issued to BY citizens; 8.559 to GE citizens)[l]. According to several data sources[li], labour migration to Poland from Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine picked up again in 2021, exceeding the volumes observed in 2019 and 2020.[9] With Poland continuously simplifying access to its labour market, labour migration from the region to Poland can only be expected to continue.[10]

Within the EU, Poland and Italy represent the top two destinations for EECA labour migrants. Between 2018 and 2020, Italy issued the majority of all valid residence permits for work to nationals of Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Russia, valid for 12 months or longer. In absolute terms, Ukrainian migrant workers represent the most populous group in Italy. Other attractive EU destinations for EECA migrants include Germany, Lithuania and the Czech Republic.

Table 1. All valid residence permits issued for remunerated activities in the EU and top destinations

Country	2020	Highest ranking EU destination	Second highest ranking EU destination
Armenia	5,514	1,260	781
Azerbaijan	4,817	1,469	1,139
Belarus	53,351	22,078	19,649
Georgia	29,454	9,751	8,034
Moldova	71,266	59,688	4,052
Ukraine	724,505	380,633	141,535
Russia	72,600	12,738	11,026
Kazakhstan	5,445	1,023	801
Kyrgyzstan	2,719	782	433
Tajikistan	1,040	368	207
Turkmenistan	411	108	88
Uzbekistan	5,932	1,367	829
Total			**977,054**

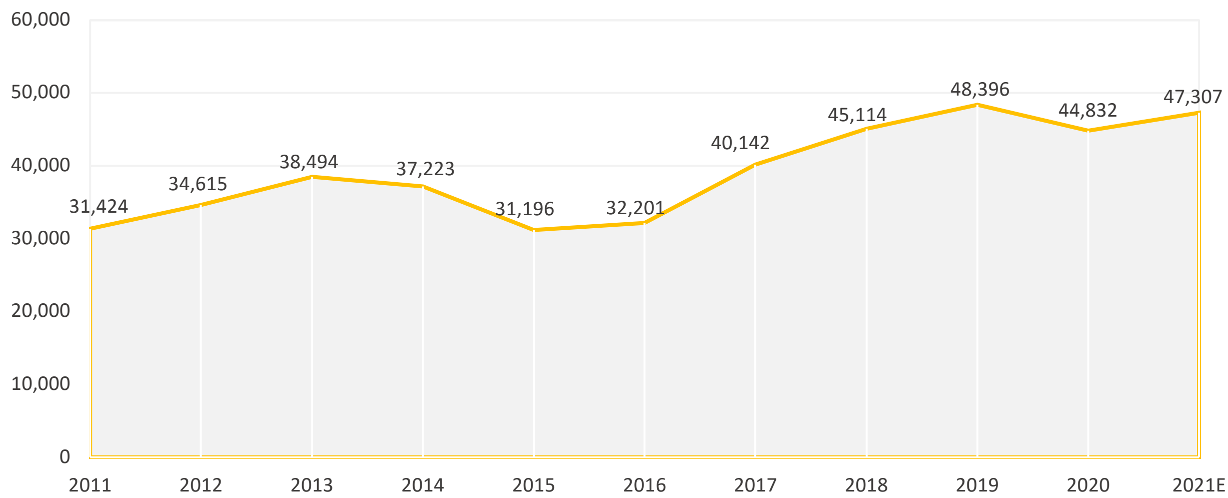
Source: Eurostat

[9] 10,000 residence permits, of which 96% were for work, were issued to GE nationals in 2021. From January until October 2021, 300.000 residence permits were issued to Ukrainians and over 37.000 to Belarusians.
[10] In September 2020, Poland launched a governmental programme 'Poland Business Harbour' allowing Belarusian ICT specialists to obtain a Polish visa on simplified terms. In mid-2021, this programme was extended to citizens of Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine. In recent years, Poland has been continuously simplifying access to its labour market for temporary employment of non-EU nationals, with the latest draft law on this matter published in November 2021.

Remittances

Remittance flows largely reflect labour migration patterns within and from the region. Against earlier predictions, remittances to EECA countries contracted by only 7% in 2020, showing ample resilience. Transfers to Azerbaijan even gained 10% in inflows in 2020 as compared to the previous year. Remittances to Kyrgyzstan, which account for nearly 30% of its GDP, were equally strong and gained 0.5%. Uzbekistan lost 18% in inflows; remittances to Armenia decreased by 13%, to Georgia by 6.5% and to Tajikistan by 5.8%. The drop was most noticeable in Belarus and Kazakhstan, 28% and 26% respectively; however, in both countries the share of remittances in GDP was insignificant (1.7% in Belarus and 0.2% in Kazakhstan). For estimates of remittances as a percentage of DGP in all EECA countries, see Figure 4 below[lii].

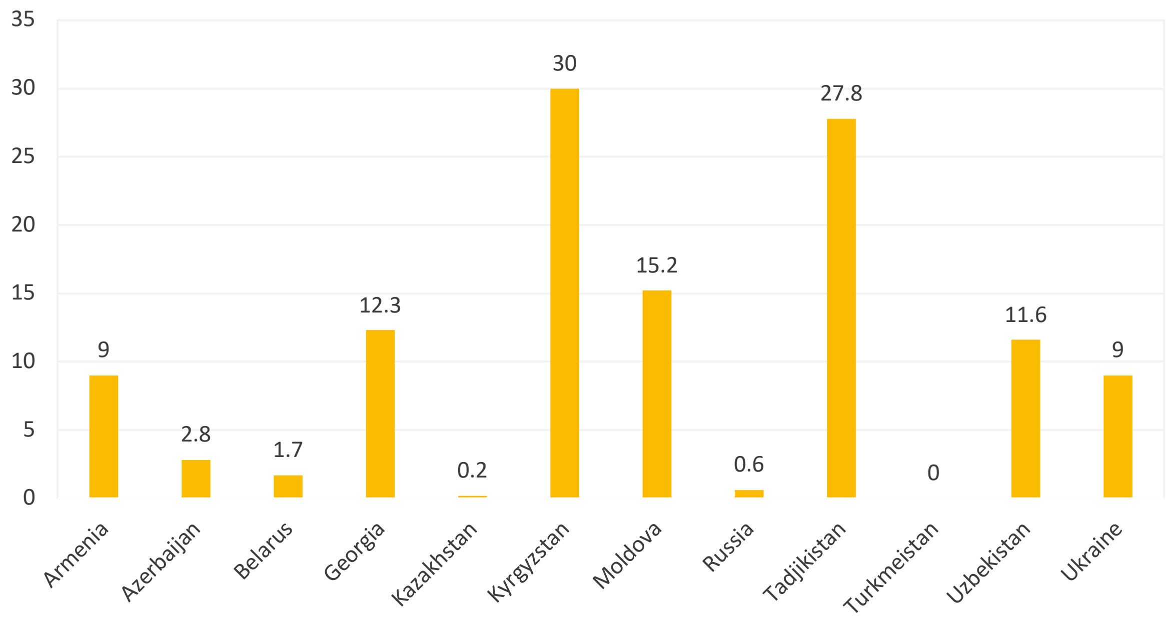
Figure 3. Remittances to the EECA region (USD million), 2011–2020 and estimations for 2021



Source: World Bank

In 2021, personal money transfers in Europe and Central Asia were estimated to have gained 5.3% to reach 47 USD billion[liii]. For the EECA region, economic rebounds in Russia and Poland and rising oil prices were key in this respect. The World Bank forecasted that, except for Armenia, all countries of the region would receive more remittances in 2021 than in 2020. Ukraine, recipient of most remittances in the region in absolute terms, saw inflows of some 16.3 USD billion in 2021 (7% increase from 2020 and 3% from 2019). This was driven by a sharp rise in flows from Poland, the source of over 30% of remittances to Ukraine in recent years. In comparison to 2019, personal transfers to Azerbaijan are estimated to grow by 17% in 2021. Russia, Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan closely approached the 2019 volume. Meanwhile, remittance flows to Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan did not return to pre-pandemic levels in 2021. Nevertheless, outward remittances from Russia to Uzbekistan between January and September 2021 exceeded the amount of transfers made in the same period in 2019.

Figure 4. Remittances to the EECA region as a percentage of GDP, 2021 estimates



Source: World Bank

Permanent and long-term migration

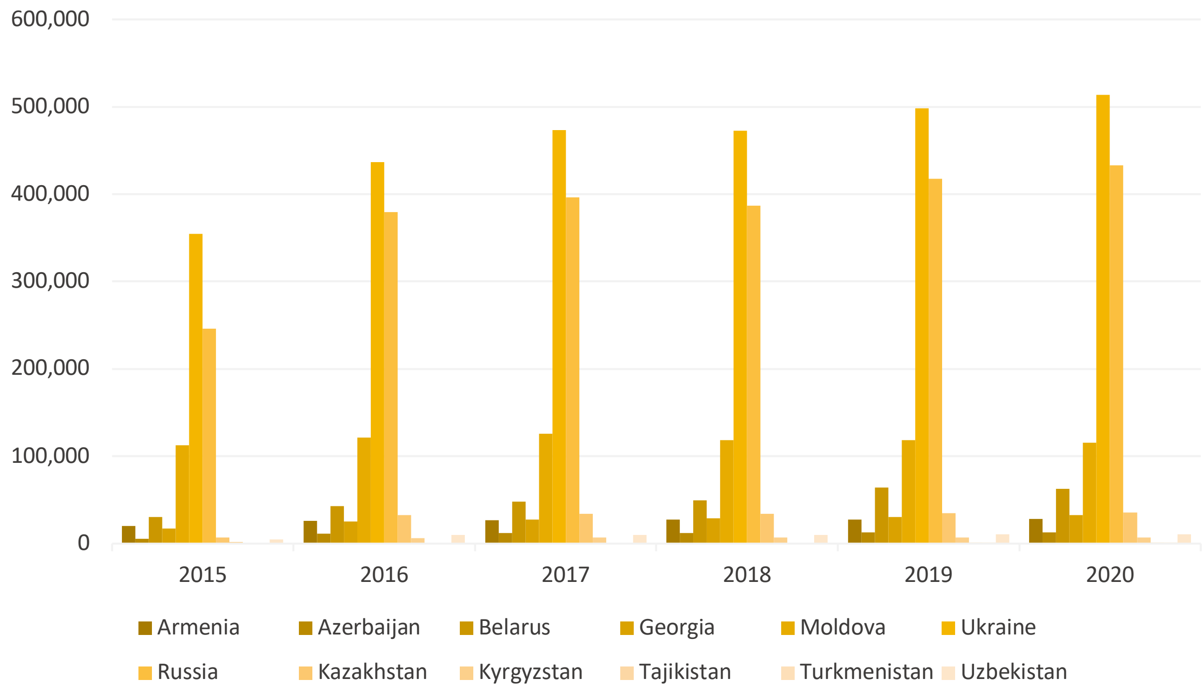
With regard to permanent migration in the region, recent data on the acquisition of Russian citizenship is particularly striking. With the number of new Russian citizens from the EECA region nearly doubling in 2019, a new record was hit in 2021 with as many as 715,000 EECA nationals obtaining Russian passports. Of the total number, 52% were Ukrainian nationals (64% in 2020) and 15% nationals of Tajikistan. In relative terms, the most notable observation is the increase in Belarus nationals (from 5,000 in 2019 to nearly 25,000 in 2021)[liv]. The recently amended citizenship law of the Russian Federation[lv] that simplified the pathway to naturalisation for nationals of ex-Soviet republics is perhaps the prime reason for such considerable growth. Other possible factors include COVID-19-induced immobility, the long-term intention to naturalise among some of the EECA migrants present in Russia[lvi] and the lack of restrictions on dual citizenship[11]. In the coming year, given additional simplifications of Russia's citizenship law proposed at the end of 2021[lvii], the number of foreigners to receive Russian citizenship may remain just as high.

EU data on long-term residence show steadily increasing levels of emigration from the EECA region originating predominantly from Russia and Ukraine. Data on citizenship, meanwhile, reflect 2016 as

[11] Notably, Uzbek nationals, who account for the majority of all labour migrants in Russia and rank second in the number of permanent residence permit holders, remain restricted by the need to renounce Uzbek citizenship following an official signature of the president of Uzbekistan.

the peak year in terms of new EU citizens of EECA origin[12]. The protracted political environment and economic push factors in both countries may further drive emigration to the EU and other important destinations for long-term migrants such as the US and the UK.

Figure 5. Long-term residence of EECA citizens in the EU, 2015–2020



Source: Eurostat

Irregular migration and return

In terms of irregular migration, it is important to highlight three trends. The first relates to the status of EECA as the region of transit for non-EECA irregular migrants *en route* to the EU through Belarus (see section on Focus countries and sub-regions above).

The second trend derives from widespread informal and irregular migrant employment. As a rule, most EECA migrants come to the main destinations on a visa or visa-free basis. Thereafter, many of them breach the law by working in the informal economy. The problem is not new. Year on year, the number of migrants indicating 'work' as their purpose for crossing the border with Russia exceeds the number of migrants who then obtain a work permit (patent). For example, in 2019 over 3,000,000 Uzbek and Tajik nationals came to Russia for employment purposes but only 1.8 million migrants obtained work permits (in 2021 the same ratio stood at some 7,000,000 migrants against 2,222,000 work permits). Existing evidence from the region suggests that the informal sector has grown since the onset of the pandemic. Approximately 40% of surveyed Tajik migrants had an informal job in the period March–May 2020, and another 40% were willing to accept one[lviii]. With the liberal migration regime

[12] Eurostat data on citizenship covers the period until (and including) 2019.

implemented by the Russian authorities in 2020–2021 coming to an end[13], and the price of the patent increasing as of 2022, many more migrants could go informal and become vulnerable to exploitation. Moreover, the rising opportunities of platform and digital economies without corresponding legal frameworks may represent another driver of informal employment both in Russia and in the EU in the coming years[lix]. Labour platform economies often function outside of labour and taxation regulatory frameworks in many countries. On the one hand, this makes establishment of such platforms less complicated and provides more labour opportunities. On the other hand, issues related to occupational safety and health, social security and pensions, working time and remuneration remain unregulated.

Finally, 2020 saw a sharp increase in the number of Ukrainian and Moldovan citizens being illegally present in the EU (20% and 50% respectively) as compared to 2019. Moreover, Ukrainian citizens accounted for the highest number of all non-EU nationals found to be illegally present and the highest number of those refused entry into the EU in 2020. Citizens of Moldova, Belarus, Russia and Georgia also ranked among the top 20 nationalities refused entry in 2020[lx]. This corresponds to the high and growing volume of labour migration in the EU originating from these five EECA countries, and it would be reasonable to assume that this trend will continue in 2022.

Rates of return to the EECA region from Europe are consistently high. Even in 2020, the figure was close to or above 50% for most nationalities, including Ukrainians, Georgians, Russians and Moldovans who received most orders to leave. Returns to Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan remained at pre-pandemic levels; meanwhile, the return rate to Uzbekistan exceeded the 2019 estimate. Assuming that the region remains respectful of readmission agreements, actual return rates in 2021 may exceed 2020 figures, albeit at different scales across the region.

Forced displacement and international protection

There is no definite trend when it comes to the number of refugees and asylum seekers originating **from the EECA region**, and relative peaks and falls have been observed in recent years. The only exception is the steady growth of asylum seekers from Belarus. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)[lxi], the number of asylum applications lodged by Belarus nationals worldwide showed an average yearly increase of 20% between 2016 and 2021, with the main countries of destination in 2021 including Poland, the USA and Germany. The heightened political context in Belarus led to a twofold increase in applications in Europe in 2021 compared to 2020[lxii][14]. Extrapolating UNHCR figures, the number of asylum applications submitted by Belarusians may exceed 7,000 in 2022 if the same political drivers persist.

According to UNHCR data, 134,461 refugees were registered **in the EECA region** in 2020. Out of this number more than 107,000 refugees were hosted by Armenia. Such a sharp increase (from 17,980

[13] In view of COVID-19, Russia has introduced a number of ways for migrants to legalise their stay in the country without consequences up until 31 December 2021. These rules were lifted in January 2022. Further information is given here: https://мвд.рф/news/item/27709695

[14] At the time of writing, Eurostat data for 2021 did not include the month of December.

people in 2019) can be explained by the arrival of almost 90,000 people as a result of the newly escalating conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Numbers of recognised refugees are decreasing in Russia, ranging from 235,732 persons in 2014 (98% coming from Ukraine) to 20,260 in 2020, which might be explained by the naturalisation process[lxiii].

The number of asylum seekers in the region decreased in 2020 (5,814), compared with 2019 (7,309); however, in 2021 the number exceeded the pre-pandemic level: 8,537 persons sought international protection in the region. The majority of asylum seekers in 2021 were registered in Ukraine (2,621), followed by Tajikistan (2,519, all of them from Afghanistan) and Russia (1,091)[lxiv].

Internal displacement also remains a reality for many EECA countries. Since 2014, conflict-driven displacement has proved to be a challenge for Ukraine which today hosts over 735,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and over 1.5 million people of concern to UNHCR on its territory[lxv]. Internal displacement in Georgia dates back to the events of 1991–1993 and 2008, and still affects the lives of over 300,000 IDPs. A flare-up in Nagorno-Karabakh between September and November 2020 resulted in 84,000 new displacements in Azerbaijan, increasing the number of IDPs from 651,000 to 735,000. The reoccurring border dispute, aggravated by water distribution system challenges, between the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan led to 770 new displacements in the period 2019–2020 and another 50,000 in 2021.[lxvi][15]

Displacement resulting from extreme weather, the slow onset effects of climate change and water scarcity is a matter of growing concern in the EECA region. In 2020, disasters triggered 234,000 new displacements in Europe and Central Asia. Flooding is a reoccurring issue in EECA countries. In 2020, floods led to over 100,000 new displacements in Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan[lxvii]. Overall, Central Asia is regarded as highly vulnerable to climate change with the region expected to become warmer, which may amplify the risks of desertification and soil salinisation, among others. However, the rapid onset of climate impacts, such as natural disasters, floods, rising rivers, mudflows and landslides are more likely to drive short-term displacement.[lxviii] All forecasts in terms of disaster-driven and conflict-driven migration in the region remain problematic (see the section on focus countries and sub-regions above).

Migration policy developments

This section focuses on migration policy developments that are most relevant to the migration situation and migration debate in the region, without analysing all legislative changes in the area of migration and border management. To this end, the overview below is clustered by subregions: Belarus and the Russian Federation, Eastern Partnership countries, Central Asia and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

[15] The latest flare-up in 2021 resulted in the evacuation of some 50,000 persons to the Kyrgyz Republic and some 14,000 to Tajikistan. More details can be found here: https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/violent-clashes-at-the-troublesome-kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-border/

Most countries in the EECA region already have strategic documents on migration or are in the process of developing their migration policies, addressing demographic and economic developments as a priority of migration policy, and gradually introducing a whole-of-government approach. It is also important to note that while these strategic documents mainly envisage mid- to long-term changes, some effects will already be seen in 2022, mainly in terms of a more targeted and transparent governance of labour migration in the wider region.

Union State of Belarus and the Russian Federation

Belarus suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership initiative in June 2021[lxix]. The draft State Migration Policy Concept, which was elaborated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 2019 was still not approved in 2021; however, in November 2021, the Union State (of Belarus and the Russian Federation) signed the joint Concept on Migration Policy[lxx]. The Concept provides certain control and preventive measures with regard to irregular migration from third states and underlines one of the fundamental principles of the Union State: free movement and employment of the citizens of Belarus and the Russian Federation within the territory of both states, without the need for additional permission and documentation. The join Concept on Migration Policy demonstrates accelerated and strengthened integration of the Union State, first established in 1997.

Migration policy in the **Russian Federation** is being directed by the State Migration Policy Concept for 2019–-2025[lxxi], which was adopted in 2018. The Concept recognises the demographic decline as well as labour force shortage in Russia, and yet, according to the Concept, “natural reproduction” shall remain the main source of replenishing the population. Migration is seen as a supplementary measure; moreover, voluntary resettlement to Russia with a view to fully (re-)integrating is a favourable option, which does not, however, exclude temporary labour migration. The Concept has been implemented by the action plan, which is currently valid until the end of 2022. The latest amendments to the plan placed stronger emphasis on labour migration[lxxii]. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian Federation has sought to address challenges faced by labour migrants due to movement restrictions and the decline in economic activity (extension of work permits, regularisation measures, expulsion moratorium, etc.[lxxiii]; however, several regulations, approved in 2021, have strengthened the migration rules again. For instance, supportive measures for labour migrants ceased to exist at the beginning of 2022; medical examinations and fingerprint registration are now obligatory for all migrants (except for citizens of Belarus), and patent (labour permission) payment has increased.[lxxiv] Finally, the Ministry of the Interior is working on a new migration law, which should replace current migration legislation in the country (laws “On migration registration of foreign citizens and stateless persons”, “On the procedure for leaving Russia and entering Russia” and “On the legal status of foreign citizens in Russia”); this new law shall come into force in 2024[lxxv].

Eastern Partnership countries

Three countries of the **Eastern Partnership (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine)** enjoy a visa-free regime with the EU, having signed Association Agreements, which significantly inform their national migration policies. The fourth report on the visa suspension mechanism was issued by the European Commission in 2021. The report analyses the continued fulfilment of visa liberalisation benchmarks in the countries concerned, and provides recommendations for further improvements in migration, asylum and readmission management, among other areas[lxxvi]. Georgia and Moldova obtained observer status in the European Migrant Network (EMN) in March 2021, making them the first countries to join from outside the European Economic Area. Participation in EMN activities will support the exchange of good practices in migration management and improve mutual understanding of migration from the perspectives of EU MS and EaP countries[lxxvii].

In **Georgia**, the latest Migration Strategy for 2021–2030 was approved at the end of 2020, implemented by the annual action plans[lxxviii]. The overarching goal of the Strategy is to support and facilitate the mainstreaming of migration into development processes, taking into account national needs and interests, as well as challenges and opportunities on local, regional and global levels.

The National Strategy on Migration and Asylum of the Republic of **Moldova** was implemented in 2011 and remained in effect until 2020[lxxix]. In 2021, work on the development of a new strategy continued, based on the evaluation of the implementation results of the previous one. In addition, in 2021, Moldova strengthened the rules of control over the activities of private employment agencies which organise recruitment of Moldovan citizens for work abroad[lxxx].

In **Ukraine**, migration management follows the State Migration Policy Strategy, which was approved in 2017 and is valid until 2025[lxxxi]. However, the government’s desire to protect the rights of Ukrainian labour migrants abroad, on the one hand, and to facilitate their return, on the other hand, as well as the factual return of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic, call for revision of state migration policy[lxxxii]. Taking this into account, a number of legislative changes were initiated in 2021 seeking to improve labour migration management, and some of them have already been submitted to Parliament. The proposed changes include: the introduction of non-repayable grants to returning migrants who wish to start up a business back at home; dual citizenship; and improved regulation of employment abroad[lxxxiii].

Armenia’s Migration Strategy directed the migration policy of the country from 2017 to 2021[lxxxiv]. A new migration strategy will be developed. However, according to the country’s Policy Reform Strategy for 2020–2022, the Ministry of the Interior, which was established in 2021, will be responsible for migration and citizenship issues, implemented by the Migration Services (previously subordinate to the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure)[lxxxv].

In **Azerbaijan**, a draft State Migration Policy document has been developed with the participation of relevant national and international stakeholders and is expected to be approved in 2022[lxxxvi]. In March 2021, Azerbaijan and ICMPD signed a Seat Agreement, recognising the full legal status of ICMPD in the country[lxxxvii].

Central Asia

In **Kazakhstan**, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection is tasked with developing a new Migration Policy Concept for 2022–2026. The Concept will replace the previous strategic document which was valid from 2017 to 2021. The new Concept shall provide favourable conditions for internal mobility from south to north; it will also create mechanisms for the protection of labour and social rights of Kazakh citizens working abroad and offer further support for *kandas*es resettling in Kazakhstan[lxxxviii]. Kandases are ethnic Kazakhs or their family members; this term replaced the name *oralmans* in 2020, in accordance with a new law that was passed to improve the procedure on granting residence permits and citizenship to kandases, as well as employment and social protection procedures[lxxxix].

In 2021, the government of **the Kyrgyz Republic** approved the Concept of Migration Policy for 2021–2030. The Strategy sets out a long-term vision for migration management. The document, among other issues, discusses the protection of the rights of labour migrants, and emphasizes the importance of facilitated return and sustainable reintegration assistance for returning migrants, especially women and children[xc].

Tajikistan (via the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment of Population) has developed a draft National Migration Strategy that will be valid until 2030; however, this strategic document has not yet been approved. The draft provides a comprehensive analysis of migration processes in Tajikistan, and focuses on streamlining these to increase migration contribution to the development of the country[xci]. According to the draft, the main priorities of Tajikistan in the area of migration policy are to improve the management of labour migration from and to Tajikistan, as well as climate and internal migration, and to ensure continued implementation of international obligations in the area of international protection.

Discussions on the development of a migration strategy in **Turkmenistan** were initiated in 2021[xcii]. In addition, Turkmenistan continues efforts to integrate the principles established in the Global Compact for Migration into national development strategies[xciii].

The so-called organised recruitment of labour migrants has been actively promoted by **Uzbekistan**, which concluded bilateral agreements on this matter with South Korea in 2006, with the Russian Federation in 2016 and with Japan in 2019. The year 2021 saw negotiations with Poland, UAE and Saudi Arabia[xciv]. Generally, issues of labour migration in Uzbekistan are part of the overall state employment strategy which demonstrates the importance of the economic contribution of labour migrants and the government's recognition of this[xcv].

Eurasian Economic Union

The **Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU**) unites five EECA countries: **Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and the Russian Federation**. Moldova and Uzbekistan obtained observer status in this organisation in 2018 and 2020 respectively. Freedom of movement, including for work purposes, is one of the fundamental principles of the Union, established by the EAEU Treaty, which came into force in 2015[xcvi]. In addition to the Treaty, a number of bilateral agreements and protocols in the area of labour migration and readmission have been signed between member states. Finally, the Eurasian Economic Commission (the permanent regulatory body of the EAEU) issues recommendations on the implementation of specific provisions of the Treaty, including labour migration and mobility. Thus, in 2021, two recommendations were issued to facilitate the signature, ratification and implementation of bilateral agreements in the area of migration and readmission, specifying the implementation of labour migration freedom during the pandemic[xcvii].

Conclusions for 2022

In 2021, migration trends in EECA countries confirmed once again that **economic reasons are the most significant drivers of mobility** in the region. Moreover, labour migration and migrant workers' remittances in many countries of the region are extremely important for their respective economies. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the world's third and fourth top countries according to the World Bank list of global remittances as a share of GDP (30% and 27.8% respectively). Remittances are also important for Moldova (15.2%), Georgia (12.3%) and Uzbekistan (11%). Ukraine is one of the top ten countries that received the highest remittances in 2021 in absolute numbers (16 billion USD). Labour migration from almost all EECA countries returned to or even exceeded pre-pandemic levels. All of this leads to the conclusion that this trend will continue to be observed in 2022 and in the years to come. Furthermore, there has been an interesting development with regard to Moldovan migrants which needs to be further observed and analysed in 2022. For several decades now, Moldovan migrants have strongly supported their country's economy and individual households; however, this is the only country in the region where levels of migration between 2020 and 2021 did not achieve the pre-pandemic level, neither to Russia nor to EU MS. Also, estimations of remittances for 2021 do not show any increase compared with 2020. It will be interesting to see how the mobility of Moldovans develops in 2022 to understand whether this trend corresponds to the more sustainable return of Moldovan migrants, the opportunity to travel with various passports thanks to multiple citizenship (including EU and Russian ones), or naturalisation and long-term migration trends. Another possibility is that migration will return to pre-pandemic levels later.

With regard to destination countries for EECA labour migrants, the **changing direction of labour migration for Eastern European migrants (mainly from Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) towards the European Union rather than Russia** is a trend that continues. Migration from Belarus to the EU is growing as well. However, it is difficult to estimate the extent to which migration flows from Belarus to the Russian Federation are affected by this trend, as Belarusian citizens can take advantage of special conditions for migration in Russia due to labour mobility freedom according to the Russian-Belarusian Union State regulations. Russia might decide to further activate migration from the Central Asian countries, most of all from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in order to compensate for a lack of labour force from Eastern European countries. On the other hand, there is a **growing trend in Central Asian countries towards diversification of destinations for labour migrants**. It is reasonable to presume that this trend regarding labour migration destinations will continue in 2022.

An increase in informal and irregular employment of labour migrants was observed in the region in 2021, mainly in the Russian Federation. This may continue in 2022, taking into account the importance of labour migration and migrants' money transfers to Central Asian countries, on the one hand, and the strengthening of migration legislation in Russia, aggravated by COVID-19 related regulations, on the other. This could also increase the vulnerability of labour migrants to exploitation and discrimination.

The year 2021 also saw a growing trend among EECA countries in the **strategic regulation of migration policies**, many of which are directed at improvement of labour migration management from and to countries of the region. All member countries have migration policy documents or are working on the development or review of existing ones. In addition, there is a strong trend of mainstreaming migration into different development policies, including those relating to economic, demographic and human capital development, or policies related to employment and the protection of social, health and human rights.

Geopolitical developments, climate change and violent conflicts have a strong impact on internal and external mobility trends in the region. The year 2021 and the beginning of 2022 have seen several events which are driving migration or might be potential drivers of migration in the near future. In this regard, the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, which ishaving a profound impact on neighbouring countries of Central Asia, may well affect migration trends in 2022. Tensions in Central Asia on issues related to border delimitation, water resources and ethnic relations contribute to general instability in the region, which is already one of the most affected by climate change within the EECA region. Additionally, relations between Ukraine and Russia could potentially cause forced migration movements. All of these situations and their impact on regional migration trends need to be followed in 2022.

The vulnerability of migrants in and from the region continues to be a matter of concern and will no doubt be observed throughout 2022. Vulnerabilities are mainly caused by: a rising trend of informal employment; situations of limbo, with no hope for durable solutions (particularly in Belarus); and the protracted situation of internal displacement in Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Armenia. The number of asylum seekers from Belarus in EU MS has increased in the last few years, which might be a lasting trend. As mentioned above, additional conflict situations in the EECA region might further contribute to a rise in the number of international protection seekers from EECA countries.

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