15 YEARS ЛЕТ

PRAGUE PROCESS
ПРАЖСКИЙ ПРОЦЕСС

MIGRATION OBSERVATORY

Selected Publications 2023-24

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Disclaimer

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Prague Process Migration Observatory

The Prague Process is an intergovernmental migration dialogue involving nearly 50 countries from Europe and Central Asia. During the third Ministerial Conference in 2016, the participating states agreed to establish the Prague Process Migration Observatory to enhance information sharing among the parties and better inform policy makers and experts from migration authorities in their decisions.

Since 2018, the Migration Observatory has engaged academic researchers and state experts from the region to conduct systematic and ad hoc analyses of significant migration trends and policy developments at both regional and national levels, addressing contemporary migration challenges. The publications produced by the Observatory identify concrete lessons learned, map potential future trends, and offer relevant policy recommendations. These findings also inform senior-level discussions within the Prague Process.

The Migration Observatory provides impartial, evidence-based analysis aligned with the six thematic areas outlined in the Prague Process Action Plan:

- **Preventing illegal migration;**
- **Return, readmission and reintegration;**
- **Legal and labour migration;**
- **Integration;**
- **Migration and development;**
- **Asylum and international protection.**

All publications are available in both English and Russian at **www.pragueprocess.eu**

Acknowledgements

Dear Reader,

I am pleased to present the fourth collection of selected publications produced by the Prague Process Migration Observatory in 2023-2024. Since its inception, the Observatory has engaged academic researchers, state experts, and policymakers to address contemporary migration issues through rigorous and impartial research.

This compilation showcases in-depth analyses and research findings on migration trends, policy developments, and the various challenges and opportunities within the Prague Process region. The selected works from 2023 and 2024 reflect the Observatory's commitment to the six thematic areas outlined in the Prague Process Action Plan 2023-2027. Highlights from this collection include:

- Exploration of the drivers shaping long-term migration trends and the necessary policy responses.
- In-depth scenarios of forced migration from Ukraine, considering the impacts of the ongoing Russia's war in Ukraine.
- Analyses of emigration patterns and developments in Russia post-February 2022.
- Insights into the integration of displaced populations in Central Asia and the role of modern technologies in migration management.

The Migration Observatory remains dedicated to producing high-quality, evidence-based research to inform policy and practice. I hope this compilation serves as a valuable resource for decisionmakers, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners engaged in migration-related work.

The successful completion of this book would not have been possible without the contributions of numerous individuals. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the authors and researchers for their contribution and hard work. Special thanks to the Prague Process Secretariat team for their unwavering dedication and the editorial team for their meticulous attention to detail and commitment to quality. I also acknowledge the financial support provided by the European Union to the Prague Process and its Migration Observatory.

Finally, I thank the readers and stakeholders who engage with our work. Your interest is essential to the ongoing relevance and impact of the Migration Observatory's efforts. I invite you to explore the insights and findings presented in this volume and look forward to your feedback, inspiring ideas and continued engagement with our work.

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Phil. Radim Zak
Head of Prague Process Secretariat
ICMPD Head of Region Eastern Europe and Central Asia

15 years of the Prague Process cooperation

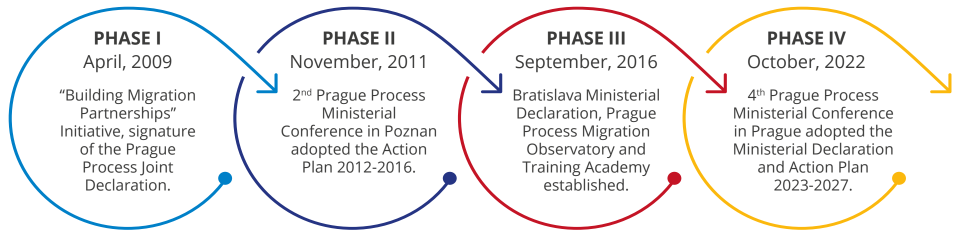
The year 2024 constitutes the Prague Process 15th anniversary and thereby an opportunity to reflect upon the origins and evolution of the Process since its establishment in 2009.

The journey commenced after nearly a year of groundwork in 2008, culminating in the official initiation of the intergovernmental dialogue on migration known as the Prague Process during the inaugural Ministerial Conference in Prague on 27-28 April 2009, organised by the Czech EU Presidency within the EU-funded Building Migration Partnerships initiative. The launch of the Prague Process coincided with the genesis of the Eastern Partnership, which took off in Prague a mere month after the Prague Process Ministerial Conference. The endorsement of the Prague Process Joint Declaration marked the beginning of the cooperation among the Prague Process countries, giving the impetus to approximation of differing migration systems and approaches within this distinct geographic context.

In November 2011, the second Ministerial Conference 'Building Migration Partnerships in Action' adopted the Action Plan 2012-2016, adding the area of asylum and international protection to the list of thematic priorities of the 50 participating states. The period following the second Ministerial Conference saw the implementation of the 4,5-year Prague Process Targeted Initiative, including its seven Pilot Projects on the four priority areas of the Action Plan and the enhancement of the Knowledge Base, at the time consisting of Migration Profiles Light and the i-Map. The 'Eastern Partnership cooperation in the fight against irregular migration' (EaP – SIPPAP) and the 'European-Russian Integration Standards' (ERIS project) were equally implemented under the Prague Process umbrella in this period.

The adoption of the Ministerial Declaration in Bratislava in September 2016 kicked off the third phase of cooperation, marked by the establishment of the Prague Process Migration Observatory and Training Academy. Expanding its institutional framework, this phase underscored the evolution and deepening of the Process's foundations. The third Prague Process Ministerial Conference 'Addressing Challenges Together' coincided with a UN meeting in New York that launched the Global Compact on Migration, highlighting a synchronicity in addressing migration issues across geographies.

The current Phase of cooperation is shaped by the Ministerial Declaration 2022 and the Prague Process Action Plan 2023-2027 adopted at the 4th Prague Process Ministerial Conference 'Migration Partnerships - Way forward in times of new challenges', hosted by the Czech EU Presidency in October 2022. This phase signifies an expanded scope of collaborative efforts and more operational cooperation through introduction of four designated Thematic Components on key priority areas of the Action Plan. Acknowledging present realities and pressing challenges that require joint solutions, the Prague Process cooperation of today emphasises information sharing, capacity building, enhanced preparedness and digitalisation as essential pillars of work.



Over the years, the Prague Process has seen significant strides in the approximation of legal systems and national practices. This alignment, coupled with the continuous exchange of knowledge and experience, stands as a testament to the Process's success. Under the chairmanship of the Czech Republic (2009-2011), Poland (2012-2016), Lithuania (2017-2020) and again the Czech Republic as of 2021, the Prague Process has served as a platform for dialogue on migration on various levels as well as a laboratory for generating new ideas, approaches and best practices aligned to priorities in a broad spectrum of areas of migration.

Read more about the inception of the Prague Process here.

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PREPAREDNESS & RESILIENCE

The Future of International Migration: What We Know About the Drivers That Shape Long-Term Migration Trends and Require Policy Responses

Martin Hofmann

November 2023

Introduction

Today, Europe experiences perhaps the greatest challenges since the end of the Second World War, in terms of the geopolitical situation and the complexities of flight and migration. Recent events have led commentators to speak of a turning point in world history and the evolvement of a fundamentally changing global geopolitical environment. The war in Ukraine and the Israel-Gaza crisis may be the most recent manifestations of this development, but are only the culmination of a trend that started more than ten years ago. Since then, the world has transitioned from a two-decades-long period of relative stability to increasing volatility and disruption. This change is characterised by a more competitive and less secure global environment,[1] systemic rivalry between the world's great powers,[2] a multipolar or "poly-nodal" international order,[3] weakened multilateralism and multilateral institutions, increasing state fragility, a growing number of violent conflicts, terrorism, hybrid threats, economic crises, weaponization of energy, food insecurity, climate change and pandemics.

These global shifts also pose new challenges for state migration management systems and international cooperation on migration issues. The simultaneous and mutually reinforcing occurrence of the aforementioned factors has already resulted in new migration realities in Europe that are shaped by increasing levels of human mobility - voluntary and forced, regular and irregular - as well as decreasing predictability of the size, directions, and patterns of international migration flows. It can be assumed that these trends will continue to intensify and that migration in its various forms will increase rather than decrease. Governments and other stakeholders are well advised to plan for such developments, while emphasizing that the future of migration can never be accurately predicted. It is not a matter of certainties but of probabilities and plausible scenarios for which migration policy actors should be prepared. This publication aims at contributing to the debate on preparedness in the area of international migration, to present a number of factors that shape the size and structure of migration flows, and to discuss how these drivers might develop in the coming years.

International migration as both a "young" and an "old" phenomenon

The increase in international migration over the last decades, the occurrence of events perceived as crises, and the associated heightened public and political attention may lead to the conclusion that present migration is fundamentally different from that of earlier periods. This impression is reinforced by the existence of targeted migration policies that treat the subject as a very specific matter, but also by a public debate that views the migration and settlement of non-citizens as a phenomenon deviating from the nation-state prerogative that dominates the current world order. A closer look reveals that recent migration history has certainly seen major novelties, as it also witnessed continuities that go back decades, if not centuries. Migration of the modern age is a new but at the same time quite an old phenomenon. It does not happen in a vacuum but is embedded in a broad range of political, economic, social and cultural contexts. For more than a half-century, migration research and analysis have identified a range of factors influencing migration as individual drivers, but also collectively within intricate sets of interconnectivity and interdependence. Research also revealed that even the best and most detailed understanding of migration patterns and dynamics does not allow for sound forecasts on what might happen in terms of human mobility in the immediate future or in a given geographic area. The many factors that are at play, and sudden and often largely unforeseen events, profoundly affect the size and direction of migration movements or trigger such movements in the first place. What can be understood, however, are the long-term developments and main drivers of migration that form the broad migration environment, in which short-term developments are embedded in. Analysing these factors may be insufficient for precise forecasting but still provides a solid basis for understanding broad and long-term trends, which helps prepare for likely scenarios.

Migration of the modern age is a young but at the same time old phenomenon. It does not happen in a vacuum but is embedded in a broad range of political, economic, social and cultural contexts.

A changing migration environment?

It is an often-repeated quote that migration is as old as mankind itself and it was always part of the human condition. Although this is certainly true, it is also true to speak of our time as "the age of migration". Never in history have so many people moved, lived, worked or studied in a country other than their country of birth or citizenship. Currently, there are 281 million international migrants, representing 3.6 percent of the world's population. The number of international migrants grew by 84 percent over the last thirty years, from 152 million to 281 million.[4] 169 million persons are considered migrant workers, bringing invaluable skills and motivation to the economies of the host countries, but also sending almost 800 billion USD of remittances back to their families and home countries every year.[5] But there is also another side of migration. Today, we speak about 117 million displaced persons, internally and across borders – a figure that surged more than fivefold in the past three decades. According to the IOM,

1 Lazarou, E. and Pichon, E., Peace and Security in 2023. Overview of EU action and outlook for the future. EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service, July 2023, p. 5.

2 Ioannides, I., What European Union in the "Age of Uncertainty"? Weathering the Geopolitical Storms in a World of Perpetual Crises, Intereconomics, ISSN 1613-964X, Springer, Heidelberg, Vol. 57, Iss. 6, 2022, pp. 363-367, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10272-022-1088-8.

3 European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS), Global Trends to 2030. Challenges and Choices for Europe, April 2019, p. 19.

4 McAuliffe, M. and Triandafyllidou, A. (eds.), 2021. World Migration Report 2022. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva, p. 3.

5 ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers – Results and Methodology – Third edition International Labour Office – Geneva: ILO, 2021, p. 11

almost 7,000 migrants have lost their lives in 2022 alone while travelling on dangerous routes or when trying to cross deserts or oceans.[6] Often, they are deceived by migrant smugglers, and many are subject to exploitation and abuse by human traffickers. Most migration is intra-regional; however, cross-regional migration largely flows from low- and middle-income countries to high-income countries. Consequently, about 65 percent of all migrants reside in high-income countries and this trend is likely to continue.

As will be discussed below, the impact of the main drivers determining international migration is very likely to increase in the coming years and decades. This process, however, will not necessarily follow continuous trends that can be precisely predicted and allow governments and other actors to gear their policies and planning to clearly foreseeable developments. Rather, migration futures will be a combination of expected trends and unforeseen events or "black swans", which are rare, unexpected and impactful, may appear as predictable or even obvious in retrospect, only that before their occurrence hardly anyone saw them coming.[7] During the last decade, the world of migration has seen a number of "black swans": the Arab spring, the civil war in Syria, the aggressions against Ukraine, or the global Covid-19 pandemic.

The so-called refugee crisis of 2015/2016 in Europe and the global pandemic demonstrated, albeit in different ways, in how far unexpected events can upend the migration environment. The refugee crisis had its roots in the Syrian government's crackdown on opposition protests that began in March 2011, which plunged the country into a catastrophic civil war by the summer of 2012 and subsequently resulted in an unprecedented level of displacement of Syrian civilians. Within a few months, the number of IDPs rose from around 500,000 to over 4 million. By 2013, it had increased twentyfold and reached more than 10 million, 6.5 million internally displaced and 3.5 million refugees who had moved to the neighbouring countries.[8] The time span preceding the arrival of refugee flows in European countries was much shorter than had been observed with earlier waves of refugees. The sheer scale and speed of these arrivals triggered a border and reception crisis unprecedented at that time. As a result, the established administrative analysis and response mechanisms proved inadequate to understand the situation in time and put appropriate responses in place.

The Covid-19 pandemic showed its impact at the other end of the spectrum. The onset of the global health emergency in March 2020 and the immediate introduction of wide-ranging mobility and migration restrictions had an instant and profound impact on international migration. Almost all countries in the world introduced travel restrictions and strict border controls. There was a 65 percent decrease in international travel and cross-border movements in the first half of 2020, not only affecting mobility but also migration. The ILO estimated that more than 160 million migrant workers were subject to mobility restrictions in the first half of 2020. Mid-2020 almost 3 million migrants were stranded outside their place of habitual residence and were unable to return due to containment measures. Closely related, the world's collective gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 3.4 percent in 2020, disproportionally affecting populations in countries of the global south and curbing the much-needed flows of migrant remittances. Virologists had long expected a worldwide pandemic, but not too many had thought of the effect of containment-related mobility restrictions and their impact on economies, commuters, travellers or migrants.[9]

The impact of the main drivers determining international migration is very likely to increase in the coming years and decades. Migration futures will be a combination of expected trends and unforeseen events.

Both events not only influenced migration flows in different, yet highly significant, ways, they also challenged the administrative resources of affected states and stretched their capacities to the limit. At the same time, the two events provide good arguments for a discussion and reassessment of what "being prepared" should mean in the context of future migration developments. Preparedness in this context means understanding long-term developments and incorporating them into strategic foresight and planning, but also recognizing that unexpected events can occur at any time and that systems must be designed flexibly to deal with such situations successfully. As far as the long-term environment is concerned, one can develop a reasonably complete picture of what migration governance and management systems should be preparing for, based on the analysis of past trends and expected future developments.

War, civil war and conflict

Notwithstanding the complex and multi-facetted nature of migration, war, civil war and violent conflict are of paramount importance in the context of sudden and large-scale cross-border movements. The Stockholm International Peace Institute (SIPRI) 2022 report pointed out that the number of state-based armed conflicts almost doubled between 2010 and 2022 from 31 to 56,[10] resulting in more than a doubling of forcibly displaced people in the world over the same period from 41 to 102 million. Mainly due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, this number increased to an estimated 117 million in 2023.

6 IOM Missing Migrants Project, Global Data Overview, January 2022 – December 2022, https://reliefweb.int/report/world/missing-migrants-project-global-data-overview-january-2022-december-2022

7 Castro Correa, C., Black Swan Theory: We know absolutely nothing & the finding of atypical events optimization-method, 2012, https://www.actuaries.org/mexico2012old/papers/CastroCorrea.pdf, p. 2.

8 International Displacement Monitoring Centre, UNHCR (data accessed June 9, 2016), https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data.

9 ICMPD Migration Outlook 2021, https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/50555/file/ICMPD0Migration0Outlook020210EN.pdf, p. 4.

10 Black, R., Busby, J., Dabelko, G.D., de Coning, C., Maalim, H., McAllister, C., Ndiloseh, M., Smith, D., Alvarado, J., Barnhoorn, A., Bell, N., Bell-Moran, D., Broek, E., Eberlein, A., Eklow, K., Faller, J., Gadnert, A., Hegazi, F., Kim, K., Krampe, F., Michel, D., Pattison, C., Ray, C., Remling, E., Salas Alfaro, E., Smith, E. and Staudenmann, J., Environment of Peace: Security in a New Era of Risk (SIPRI: Stockholm, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.55163/LCLS7037>., p.12.

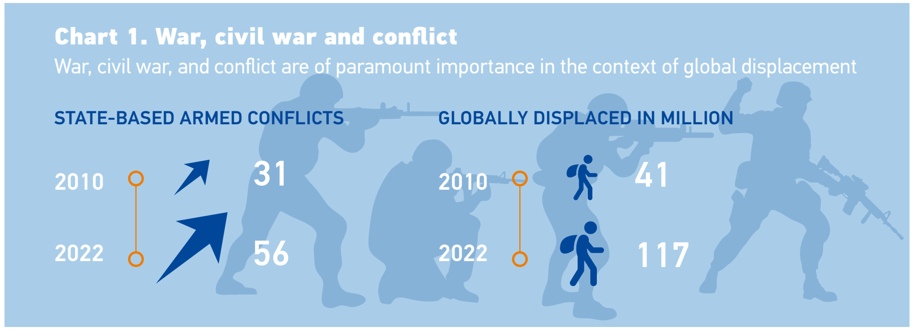


Chart 1. War, civil war and conflict
War, civil war, and conflict are of paramount importance in the context of global displacement

Source: SIPRI, Environment of Peace 2023; UNHCR Global Trends

Conflict-induced displacement can be the indirect consequence of military operations or the result of deliberate aggression targeting specific populations. Forcible displacement, up to the physical extinction of whole ethnic and minority groups, has been part of many wars and internal conflicts. The large majority of those managing to flee from hostilities stay on the territory of their home country or find protection in countries neighbouring the conflict. Only a smaller share seeks refuge further abroad.

At present, there is little reason to believe that violence-induced migration will diminish. Since 2020 alone, the outbreak of war in Tigray, a series of military coups in African countries, the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and the renewed deterioration of the security situation in Syria have caused new highs in the number of globally displaced. At the time of writing, Hamas' terrorist attack and Israel's military response have displaced over one million people, almost half the total population of Gaza and this number might increase in the coming weeks and months.[11] As long as the world does not become more peaceful, the number of displaced persons and refugees will increase rather than decrease, making the repeated occurrence of spontaneous and numerically significant refugee and migration flows an almost inevitable future development.

The impact of growing geopolitical competition

The war in Ukraine symbolises the end of the post-Cold War era and marks at the same time a turning point in the global order. Some scholars trace this development back to the economic shocks in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008/2009, which led to social unrest, fuelled existing conflicts and undermined political stability in many regions of the world. New economic and military powers arose while traditional powers entered a phase of growing geopolitical competition, which has not contributed to fostering stability in fragile states but rather resulted in lowering government standards, flaring of violence and large-scale displacement. Power struggles also affect regions geographically far removed from the conflict as such. The global supply crisis triggered by the war in Ukraine severely affected African countries, particularly those heavily dependent on wheat imports. Recent disruptions have caused deep concerns about shortages in the supply of energy, fertilizers, and grains. Overall, the available evidence points towards a link between food supply, displacement and migration. The protests leading up to the Arab Spring in 2011 and subsequent migration movements were amongst others triggered by soaring wheat prices. Food insecurity caused by an El Niño drought is seen as the main reason for an increase in irregular migration movements towards the US in 2014.[12]

The instrumentalisation of migration for non-migration-related political purposes is perhaps one of the most visible expressions of a new era in which human mobility and geopolitics are closely intertwined.[13] The phenomenon as such is not new.[14] What is a novelty, however, is the systematic integration of migration into hybrid warfare strategies; and in the event of an actual war, the equally systematic attempt to force third parties to make concessions by means of forced migration. During recent events, government authorities stimulated interest among migrants, organised travel, entry, accommodation and transport, and established standing cooperation with people smuggling networks operating in countries of origin and along migratory routes. Unlike earlier examples, instrumentalisation today is no longer limited to exerting pressure and improving negotiating positions. It has become part of the hybrid aggression toolbox and aims directly at undermining the stability and security of countries considered to be adversaries.[15]

The instrumentalisation of migration for non-migration-related political purposes is perhaps one of the most visible expressions of a new era in which human mobility and geopolitics are closely intertwined.

Demography and migration

Based on projected fertility levels, the world's population is expected to reach 9.1 billion by 2050. This development is mainly owed to globally decreasing death rates and will take place despite the fact that the annual growth rates are expected to shrink from 80 million to 48 million between 2020 and 2050. Within this period, all countries across the globe will face major changes in their demographic profiles, however,

11 UN News, Gaza: 'History is watching' warns UN relief chief, saying aid access is key priority, 16 October 2023, https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1142382

12 United Nations World Food Programme, Food Security and Emigration. Why people flee and the impact on family members left behind in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, Research Report, September 2017, file:///C:/Users/hofmannm/Downloads/FOODpercent20SECURITYpercent20ANDpercent20EMIGRATION.pdf

13 ICMPD Migration Outlook 2023, p. 22, https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/58952/file/ICMPD_Migration_Outlook_2023.pdf

14 Greenhill, K.M., Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy. 1st ed. Cornell University Press, 2010.

15 Kochis, D., Russia's Weaponization of Migrants Hasn't Gone Away, Commentary Global Politics, The Heritage Foundation, Nov 18, 2002, https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/russias-weaponization-migrants-hasnt-gone-away.

developments will vary significantly between the world's regions. In Africa, the total population is projected to grow by more than 75 percent by 2050, from 1.4 billion to 2.5 billion; in Asia by 12 percent from 4.7 billion to 5.3 billion. The total population in Europe is projected to decrease by almost 6 percent until 2050, from 744 million to 704 million.[16]

Already now, 95 percent of the world population growth is taking place in countries of the global south and this trend will continue in the future. By contrast, 41 countries of the global north, many of them in Europe, already experience population decline. Their number is projected to increase to 88 by 2050.[17] There are growing concerns over the impact of this trend on labour supply and welfare systems, always linked to the question of whether labour markets of ageing countries should be more open towards immigration. There is less awareness that demographic ageing will affect countries in the global south as well. Today, 60 percent of all persons aged 60 or above live in countries of the global south, a share expected to increase to 79 percent in 2050.[18] The share of persons aged 60 or above among the total population in these countries will increase from 8 percent to 20 percent over the same period. These projections are particularly important for the discourse on migration. The need to financially support ageing parents and other dependents is one of the main motives for migrants to find work abroad. In the absence of fully-fledged welfare and pension systems, the incomes that can be generated in high-income countries are often the only option for securing the livelihoods of elderly family members. Thus, demographic ageing both in high- and low-income countries is likely to result in growing demands for emigration- and immigration.

Demographic ageing both in high- and low-income countries is likely to result in growing demands for emigration- and immigration.

Socio-economic development

It is not poverty that causes migration but economic and social development, which brings about fundamental changes within a society. The transition from agrarian to industrial or post-industrial societies accompanied by lower infant mortality, higher life expectancy, higher levels of education, but also by a drastic decrease in the demand for manual labour in agriculture. During the transitional period, however, developing economies struggle to create sufficient perspectives for the growing number of young people. To build a better future for themselves, a part of these populations leaves their homes and moves to the economic centres in their own countries or migrates abroad.

16 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022, Online Edition.

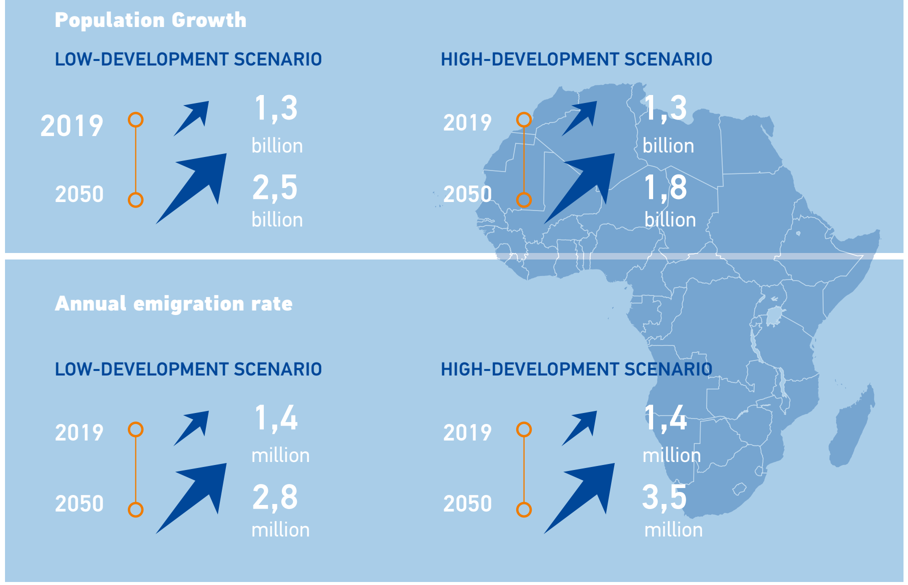
17 Bloom, D.E. and M. Zucker, L.M., Population aging is the top global demographic trend; the pandemic can teach us how to prepare for it, Finance & Development, June 2023, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/Series/Analytical-Series/aging-is-the-real-population-bomb-bloom-zucker, p. 59.

18 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017). World Population Ageing 2017 - Highlights (ST/ESA/SER.A/397), p. 4.

Throughout history, all countries went through this transition until birth rates fell, population growth stabilised, and emigration pressures started to ease. Today, the countries of the global south start to see slowing birth rates and rising GDP rates. Consequently, they are likely to turn from emigration to immigration countries at some point. This transition will, however, take many more years to complete. Recent research suggests that this process will not only depend on objective indicators like GDP per capita but also on more subjective perceptions of a country's future prospects. An overall positive outlook on the future and prospects for a better life in economic, social, political and cultural terms influence migration decisions more than merely economic indicators.[19]

Chart 2. Socio-Economic Development and Migration

High-development leads to lower population growth but temporarily to more migration. Scenarios for Africa



Source: European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Many more to come? Migration from and within Africa, 2018

19 Benček, D and Schneiderheinze, C., More Development, Less Immigration to OECD Countries – Identifying Inconsistencies Between Cross-sectional and Time-series Estimates of the Migration Hump, Kiel Working Paper Nr. 2145 December 2019, Kiel Institute for the World Economy.

Income disparities

Income disparities between the world's regions are seen as another key driver of international migration. The impressive economic growth seen in many countries of the global south over the past three decades has also meant significant increases in the average per capita income in these regions. Between 1990 and 2022, the average GDP per capita in Africa grew by 24.3 percent, and that in Asia by 106.5 percent. Notwithstanding this, the average GDP per capita in Africa is still only 38.0 percent of the global GDP. Europe's GDP per capita is twice the world average and almost five times that of Africa. Despite the economic growth in many African countries, the income gap compared to Europe widened in absolute terms over the last thirty years. In 2022, the GDP per capita in Europe stood at 44,289 Euros and was 9,139 Euros higher than in 2000. The GDP per capita in Africa was 8,254 Euros and 1,707 Euros higher than in 2000.

Labour migration is largely driven by wage differentials and the above figures imply that with regard to relative earning opportunities a move from the majority of African, but also Asian, countries to Europe is becoming more and not less attractive. In view of the aforementioned growing need to care for the elderly in countries of the global south, the stronger increases in income and purchasing power in Europe can be seen as a major structural factor in migration decisions that is likely to gain in significance, despite economic growth in countries of the global south.[20]

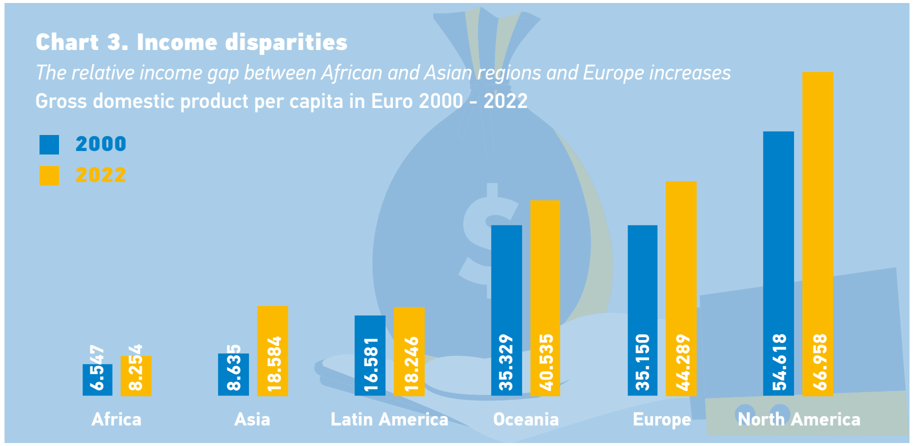


Chart 3. Income disparities
The relative income gap between African and Asian regions and Europe increases
Gross domestic product per capita in Euro 2000 - 2022

Source: World Inequality Database. Gross domestic product. Downloaded from wid.world

20 World Inequality Database. Gross domestic product. Downloaded from wid.world on 20-10-2023 at 10:30:29

Climate change and environmental migration

There is extensive discussion on whether climate change will have a major impact on international migration flows, and if so, what those impacts would be. For a long time, there were relatively few hard facts that would have allowed for a sound assessment of these effects or projections of how related trends might develop in the future. Any analysis of the phenomenon had to account for both the lack of unanimously accepted terms and definitions and the (un)availability of key data for the observation of flows. Meanwhile, there is broad consensus that climate change has indeed started to affect human mobility and will continue to do so at a growing speed and with an increasing number of populations concerned. There is less consensus on the expected size, direction, and dynamics of climate-change-induced migration.

Environmental changes are likely to force millions of people to leave their homes and migrate elsewhere over the coming decades, either within the territory of their home countries or abroad. Governments must prepare sound policy responses, within their territories and in terms of international cooperation, to make sure that adaptation to climate change can be managed without spikes in spontaneous and disorderly migration flows.

First of all, it needs to be stressed that most analysts agree that climate-related factors will represent one of many aspects of individual migration decisions: "Migration is multicausal, while climate change will affect mobility choices, so too will many other factors".[21] Observed instances of "environmental migration" hardly ever have a single cause. Environmental aspects are linked to other factors such as social and economic exclusion, poverty and inequitable distribution of resources, land issues, demographic developments, institutional constraints, inter-group tensions and conflict.[22] Secondly, the estimates of future climate-change-induced migration vary significantly. In their 2023 Omnibus Overview on "Climate Change and Migration", Huckstep and Clemens quote several predictions of climate-affected mobility, ranging between 50 million and 1.4 billion persons globally until 2050.[23] The wide bandwidth of estimates results from the use of different concepts and definitions of mobility but also on different assumptions of whether flows will be predominantly internal or also cross-border to a large extent. In any case, available indicators suggest that the extent of environmentally-induced displacement will be considerable. According to the most accurate estimate provided by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, there were 32.6 million new displacements caused

21 Huckstep, S. and Clemens, M., 2023. "Climate Change and Migration: An Omnibus Overview for Policymakers and Development Practitioners." CGD Policy Paper 292. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. https://www.cgdev.org/publication/climate-change-and-migration-omnibus-overview-policymakers-and-development, p. 10.

22 Hofmann, M., Jolivel, A., Huss, D. and Ambiaux, C., International Migration: Drivers, Factors and Megatrends. A Geopolitical Outlook, ICMPD Policy Paper, March 2020, https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/51472/file/Policypercent2520Paperpercent2520-percent2520Geopoliticalpercent2520Outlookpercent2520onpercent2520Internationalpercent2520Migration.pdf, p. 7.

23 Huckstep, S. and Clemens, M., 2023. "Climate Change and Migration.", p. 46.

by disasters – mainly flood, storm and drought - in 2022 alone.[24] Notwithstanding conceptual and quantitative uncertainties, two conclusions can be drawn. First, environmental changes are likely to force millions of people to leave their homes and migrate elsewhere over the coming decades, either within the territory of their home countries or abroad. Second, governments will have to prepare sound policy responses, within their territories and in terms of international cooperation, to make sure that adaptation to climate change can be managed without spikes in spontaneous and disorderly migration flows.

Revolutions in technology, communications and transport

Over the last thirty years, the world has witnessed a revolution in terms of technical developments and their social consequences. In 2003, about 10 percent of the world's population used the internet; today it is 65 percent (or 5.3 billion people in total).[25] In 2003, 22 percent of the world's population had a mobile phone: in Sub-Saharan Africa it was only 5 percent, in the Middle East and North Africa 13 percent. Today an average 70 percent of the world's population owns a mobile phone and in many African, Middle Eastern and European countries mobile phone coverage is at 100 percent, at least in statistical terms. The smartphone provides access to almost unlimited information for its owners, allows for communication over large distances, and facilitates the sharing and analysing of information between hundreds of thousands of people at any given moment in time.

Core areas of humanity like work, learning and communication decouple from "location" in a specific geographic space. Those who master the new technologies can take large parts of their social, professional and cultural persona from one place to another without disrupting income or losing contacts to families or communities.

Along the way, the communications revolution also globalised values, views and aspirations towards a "good" and "rewarding" life. A growing number of people dispose of what is needed in terms of human capital and also have the will to move and live wherever opportunities appear most promising. Unhindered access to information and communication tools provides completely new possibilities for organising individual migration projects, not only in the area of legal migration but also when it comes to flight and irregular migration. But the impact of digitalisation on migration goes much deeper. Core areas of human life like work, learning and communication decouple from "location" in a specific geographic space. Those who master the new technologies can take large parts of their social, professional and cultural persona from one place to another without disrupting income or losing contacts with families or communities. This new era of mobility is facilitated by the continuing revolution in transport. In 1975, there were 9.2 million international flights, for 2023 it is estimated that the number will rise to 32.4 million flights.[26] Between 2016 and 2035, and despite all commitments to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, the total number of air travels is expected to almost double from 3.8 billion to 7.2 billion. This development facilitates actual migration projects, but also makes it easier to decide on them in the first place. The availability of affordable long-distance travel options allows people to maintain ties with their home communities after moving abroad. Migration decisions are taken more easily when they appear less final and far-reaching.

Migrant decisions and global opportunity structures

Considering the long list of migration drivers described above, their growing importance and their mutually reinforcing effects, one might come to a basic conclusion: The size of international migration is bound to increase rapidly and will reach unprecedented levels in the future. But before considering this as an inevitable development, a phenomenon should be considered that has characterised international migration since it became a subject of research and analysis. Simply put, the so-called "immobility paradox" implies that, given the multiplicity of drivers and the existence of major economic, political, demographic, and social imbalances in the world, many more people should migrate than actually do so. But when looking at the actual numbers, a fundamental question arises: Why is there so little migration, at least in relation to the share of international migrants among the world's population? In fact, more than 96 percent of the people living on our planet are considered non-migrants, e.g., people who have never intentionally crossed international borders to settle abroad.

Migration decisions are fraught with many uncertainties and not taken lightly. They are embedded in "global opportunity structures", which interact with other structural migration drivers, impact individual or group decisions, and influence concrete migration projects.

Obviously, migration does not follow mechanical processes of "push" and "pull", which occur without human intervention and on the basis of physical laws. Rather than that, migration is a deeply human phenomenon, which is based on individual or collective decision-making and embedded in complex social, political, and regulatory environments. Migrant decisions are taken in conjunction with economic factors, political and security factors, as well as cultural, social and network factors – or a combination thereof. They are taken, in descending order, at the individual,

24 International Displacement Monitoring Centre (iDMC), Global Internal Displacement Database, (data accessed 24 September 2024), https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data.

25 Shewale, R., Internet User Statistics in 2023 (Global Demographics), August 21, 2023 https://www.demandsage.com/internet-user-statistics/#:~:text=Internetpercent20Userpercent20Statisticspercent202023percent20(At,haspercent20accesspercent20topercent20thepercent20internet.

26 Statista, Number of flights performed by the global airline industry from 2004 to 2021, with forecasts until 2023, https://www.statista.com/statistics/564769/airline-industry-number-of-flights/.

intrapersonal, intimate partners and extended family level.[27] They are influenced by considerations regarding safety and stability at the old and the new home, presumed prospects for building a better future abroad, cultural and linguistic proximity, and a welcoming climate in the aspired new destination. Migration decisions are fraught with many uncertainties and not taken lightly. They are embedded in another set of factors that could be summarised as the "global opportunity structures", which interact with other structural migration drivers, impact individual or group decisions, and influence concrete migration projects. Such opportunity structures include amongst others: geographical proximity or distance; opportunities for legal and labour migration offered by legislative frameworks and migration regimes; the density and capacity of migration control; the existence and capacities of migrant smuggling networks; the characteristics of asylum and protection systems; job opportunities on formal and informal labour markets; the existence of family and social networks in countries of destination and en route; and the willingness of states along the routes to cooperate on migration control, return and legal migration. Migration policies do have an impact on opportunity structures and subsequent migration flows, and this impact is bigger than polarised public discourses and one-sided media portrayals would suggest.

Conclusions and consequences

In line with the drivers and megatrends described above, and taking into account how they might develop in the coming years, a **plausible scenario for the future of international migration** can be outlined as follows:

- The share of international migrants remains comparatively low in relation to the total world population. Due to the projected population growth until 2050, the absolute number of international migrants increases more significantly.
- Intra-regional migration gains in importance, also in the global south, but most flows continue to occur within and to destinations in the global north.
- Legal and labour migration grow along steady trends. Future numbers related to flight, displacement and irregular migration are a great unknown. Based on past experience, it must be assumed that conflict and instability stay highly relevant as drivers of forced migration, resulting in ever-growing populations of displaced within national territories and across international borders.
- Conflicts frequently cause sudden and large-scale arrivals in countries neighbouring a conflict but also in regions further abroad. The trend towards growing displacement is aggravated by the increasing effects of climate change and environmental degradation.
- Migration remains a central component of geopolitics. On the one hand, a rise in geopolitically motivated conflicts leads to an exponential increase in the number of displaced persons. On the other hand, the deliberate creation of irregular migratory movements remains a means of hybrid aggression that is regularly used against political adversaries in the event of conflict.
- Demographic change affects high-, middle- and low-income societies, albeit in different ways, and increases the demand for both emigration and immigration.
- Income disparities between world regions persist and even widen, and the prospect of migrating between regions becomes more attractive.
- Labour shortages affect an increasing number of economic sectors in ageing societies. Technological progress does not fully compensate for labour force losses. Competition for skilled and essential labour among high-income countries with ageing populations becomes fierce. Economies that fall behind in the fight for global talent experience tangible economic losses and growing pressures on their welfare systems.
- New tools and better access to technology, communications and transport support individual migration projects but also facilitate "transnational living" by decoupling core areas of human existence and development like work, learning, interaction, or communication from their spatial roots.
- This notwithstanding, decision-making and execution of individual migration projects is still determined by complex individual and collective decision-making processes and remains embedded in social contexts and existing opportunity structures.
- Politics matters, also in future, but governments and migration management systems must deal with situations that develop faster, have higher impact and are interlocked with a broad variety of other factors and challenges, directly and indirectly affecting mobility and migration.

For governments, this scenario implies an increased need for capacity, cooperation and preparedness. Short-term events, like displacement crises, unfold faster and with more complexity than in the past. Long-term developments, such as the increasing demand for skilled and essential migrant workers, require strategic foresight, the development of new capacities and perseverance over a long period of time. No country can meet the challenges and seize the opportunities of future migration on its own. Better migration solutions depend on close and trustful cooperation between all states connected by

Future migration scenarios imply the need for enhanced capacity, cooperation and preparedness. Short-term events, like displacement crises, unfold faster and with more complexity than in the past. Long-term developments, such as the increasing demand for skilled and essential migrant workers, require strategic foresight, the development of new capacities and perseverance over a long period of time.

27 Tabor A.S., Milfont, T.L., Ward, C., International Migration Decision-Making and Destination Selection Among Skilled Migrants, Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology, May 2015, p. 5

migration flows, based on standing dialogue, common goals and joint agendas. Future migration policies must strike a better balance between control and the expansion of legal migration channels and align both spheres more closely. To make functioning labour migration a reality, destination and origin countries should work on common vocational education and training standards that ensure smooth transition of workers between labour markets. Return policies should be made more intelligent by linking them to job creation and development cooperation. Countries should also work on a further alignment of protection and reception standards and faster yet legally sound procedures. The tackling of migrant-smuggling and human trafficking networks requires enhanced cooperation and capacities as well. Attention and resources allocated to this issue are still insufficient in view of the critical role these networks play in irregular migration processes. Ultimately, enhanced preparedness also implies that all members of the international community continue and strengthen their joint efforts in three major areas towards a more positive and less risk-prone migration environment: the evolution of a functioning, fair and global protection regime; the reduction of the number of violent conflicts that are the main driver of flight and irregular migration; and the development of a fair global economic order that provides opportunities for all the world's citizens and limits the need for disorderly and irregular migration.[28]

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WAR, CONFLICT & DISPLACEMENT

Forced Migration from Ukraine: Migration Scenarios 2.0

Franck Düvell
January 2024

Executive summary

Twenty months after the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a military stalemate has emerged. This current situation suggests that neither Russia will be able to capture further Ukrainian territory, nor will Ukraine be able to reclaim large parts of the occupied regions in the near future. However, as witnessed in the spring and autumn of 2022, when the Ukrainian armed forces drove back Russian invaders, surprises cannot be ruled out.

As of January 2024, 6.5 million Ukrainians seek shelter abroad, with 4.2 million in the EU (possibly fewer) and around 5 million remaining internally displaced, totalling 10.5 million. Within Ukraine, 17.6 million people require humanitarian assistance, even though the economy is slowly recovering. The overall situation for Ukrainians, both within and outside the country, is characterised by a protracted war and great uncertainty regarding the war's outcome, their legal status in host countries and integration prospects.

Various surveys indicate that less than half of the displaced Ukrainians in Europe are considering staying in the host countries in the foreseeable future, whereas another third contemplates a return. The remaining fifth, the trend decreasing, is still undecided. However, migration intentions are notoriously dynamic and predictions are unreliable. Nevertheless, it is clear that a large proportion – up to 2.3 million who could be joined by 460,000 family members bringing the total to 2.76 million – is unlikely to aspire to return any time soon.

This policy brief considers the displacement and forced migration inside and outside Ukraine's international border, the dynamics of these movements, the individuals' aspirations and the possible future developments in migration trends while reassessing scenarios developed in 2022.

Background

Two years ago, President Putin ordered the Russian Federation to invade Ukraine (ISW), deploying an army of around 160,000 soldiers. Reports of September 2023 claim that Russia deploys around 420,000 soldiers in Ukraine (Bloomberg). The total Russian army, estimated at 1.2 million (Forces.Net), compensated for the losses by mobilising an additional 335,000 recruits (Reuters). In contrast, the Ukrainian armed forces could have been expanded from pre-war levels of 300,000 to around one million (The Time). By 2023, there could be up to 700,000 soldiers on the battlefield on both sides, over 400,000 Russians including mercenaries and 200,000-300,000 Ukrainians. The continuous severe fighting has resulted in losses on both sides, reaching levels not seen since World War II potentially totalling up to 500,000 military personnel dead or wounded (New York Times), with Russian casualties possibly outnumbering Ukrainian ones at a ratio of 4:1.

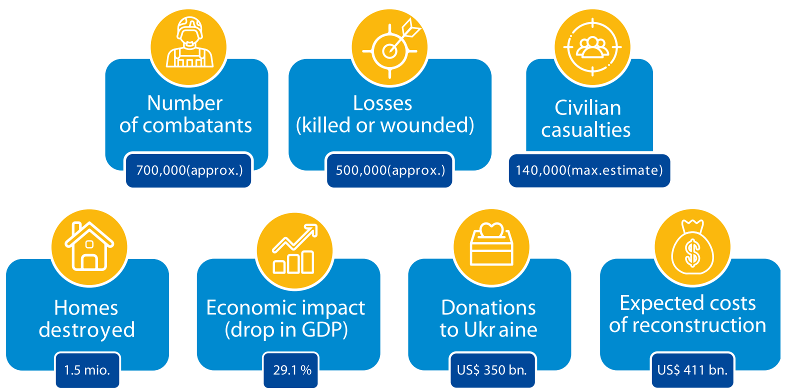
At the start of the invasion, large parts of northern, eastern, central, and southern Ukraine, including the capital Kyiv, came under attack. Up to 12 million people, comprising Ukrainians and also a few hundred thousand immigrants, almost a third of the population in government-controlled territory, fled from the fighting or the threat of occupation. Coordinated evacuations facilitated many of these movements. By April 2022, the Ukrainian armed forces managed to halt and partially push back the invaders from Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Chernihiv, Sumy, and Mykolaiv. In September 2022, they successfully liberated additional territory in the South and East of Ukraine, in Kherson and Kharkiv. Despite fierce Russian offensives (ISW) and Ukrainian counteroffensives (Financial Times), the military situation seems to have reached a stalemate (The Economist) by summer 2023. As of November 2023, Russia continued to occupy around 18% of Ukraine's territory (CfR), including Crimea, most of Luhansk, large parts of Donetsk, and sections of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson.

By September 2023, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recorded 27,149 civilian casualties in Ukraine, with 9,614 killed and 17,535 injured. Moreover, according to the Ministry for Reintegration of Ukraine, 11,000 people are missing. However, these numbers are deemed "likely higher" (OHCHR), especially considering the potential 87,000 to 100,000 casualties during the siege of Mariupol (Euromaidan Press). There has been a noticeable increase in civilian attacks using long-range missiles since the summer of 2022 (CSIS) and a surge in Russia's missile barrages and drone attacks (UN) since the summer of 2023, contributing to an unstable security situation across much of Ukraine.

Due to the war, thirteen cities with a total pre-war population of over one million (e.g. Mariupol, Lysychansk, Sievierodonetsk, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, Rubizhne and Izyum; author's calculation) as well as many villages have been almost completely destroyed. In total, 1.5 million homes (UNDP) were destroyed and millions of Ukrainians lost the roof over their head and most of their possessions.

Due to the war, thirteen cities with a total pre-war population of over one million as well as many villages have been almost completely destroyed.

Figure 1: Some key data on the war (all by mid, end 2023)



The economy experienced a significant setback with a 29.1% drop in 2022 (IMF), but it has recovered to +2% in 2023, partly due to the substantial funds flowing in from Ukraine's donors. By May 2022, the war had led to the loss of 4.8 million (ILO) to 6.4 million (ZOiS) jobs, but around a third of these jobs could have been recovered by summer 2023. While some normalcy (The Conversation) has returned to many parts of Ukraine, 17.6 million Ukrainians within the country require humanitarian assistance (UNHCR). Donors provided $350 billion to Ukraine, de facto subsidising the state, economy and society (Conflict Tracker). Additional expected costs of the post-war reconstruction are estimated at $411 billion (World Bank).

Stock of Ukrainians in diverse host countries

By November 2023, 4.2 million Ukrainians (increasing) (EUAA) were still registered under the Temporary Protection Directive in the EU, initially marking a 10% decrease from 4.6 million (EUAA) recorded in October 2022. In autumn 2023, forced migration largely came to a halt, with the level of women remaining stable or temporarily shrinking, while the number of men significantly increased by 300,360 (Eurostat) from September 2022 to September 2023. Presumably, many of these men, who are not permitted to leave the country under martial law, exited Ukraine irregularly, averaging 823 persons per day; however, because entry to the EU is visa-free, this does not affect their subsequent regular stay in the Union.

Another 1.27 million are claimed to be in Russia (UNHCR), but these numbers are likely false. Instead, there are probably fewer than 1 million and decreasing, due to onward migration (Kuzemska). Ukrainians also move to the US (271,000 as of February 2023), the UK (174,000), Canada (199,000), Türkiye (around 50,000), and Georgia (26,000). However, some of these figures are contested. For example, in Germany, a discrepancy is noted between registered Ukrainians and Ukrainians present, suggesting there could be 250,000 fewer of them (Düvell), a situation that may be mirrored in other countries.

By May 2023, an estimated 4.8 million Ukrainians had returned to their home, the majority of whom were returning internally displaced persons, and one million Ukrainians returning from abroad, mostly from Poland (412,000) and Germany (96,000) (IOM). It seems plausible to suggest that returning Ukrainians often do not revoke their Temporary Protection status, leading to an assumption that there are fewer than 4.2 million Ukrainian displaced persons in the EU, possibly around 3.9 million or less. Besides, around one million Ukrainians hold a Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) permit but have not (yet) moved to Canada (Government of Canada). Since arriving in Russia, Türkiye and Georgia, many Ukrainians have either returned or moved on to other destinations, explaining the significant decrease in numbers in these countries.

Another 3.7 million registered persons (IOM), 4.8 million, according to the Ukrainian government or even an estimated 5.1 million (IOM) are internally displaced. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is an issue with men living unregistered in other parts of the country in order to avoid conscription into the army. **Hence, between 9.31 million and 11.28 million Ukrainians are still displaced internally or internationally.** A notable proportion, up to 29%, is less likely to be in need of international protection and therefore represents "quasi-labour migrants", the Centre for Economic Strategy suggests. The high level of border crossings between Ukraine and the EU, averaging 1.1 million in either direction monthly since May 2022 (Centre for Economic Strategy), illustrates high levels of mobility and suggests significant transnational activities (DIW).

Between 9.31 million and 11.28 million Ukrainians are still displaced internally or internationally.

Table 1: Stock of Ukrainian displaced persons (summer 2023)

	Ukrainians in the EU	Ukrainians in Russia	Ukrainians in the US, UK, Canada, UK, Türkiye and Georgia	IDPs	Total
Min	3.9 mio.	< 1 mio.	710,000	3.7 mio.	9.31 mio.
Max	4.2 mio.	1.27 mio.	710,000	5.1 mio.	11.28 mio.

In addition, Ukrainians are residing in the EU and other countries on other types of largely "pre-war" permits or coming as visitors under the 90-day visa-free agreement and not intending to seek temporary protection but to return soon. On 31 December 2022, Eurostat recorded 1.41 million valid permits of Ukrainians in the EU (for employment, studies, family reasons and others but excluding temporary protection and asylum; the figure excludes Greece and Denmark for which no data was provided). Another 355,000 immigrants were in the USA before the war, 13,400 permanent permits were issued to Ukrainians in Canada five years before the war, and 30,000 were recorded in Türkiye. These must be added to the number of Ukrainians in the EU and other countries but are not considered in this paper, which focuses on forced migration alone.

Legal framework and reception conditions

The legal framework for temporary protection in the EU, which expires in March 2025 and cannot be extended according to the current law, leaves an uncertain legal perspective for Ukrainians (ICMPD) in the EU. Among other host destinations, Canada is presently an exception, offering a pathway to permanent residence, whereas Poland offers temporary residence. Labour market integration (OECD) is uneven across OECD and EU countries; however, it goes faster compared to other national groups. The EUAA survey of September 2023 suggested that 58% of Ukrainians are employed across the EU. In Poland, for example, 65% of Ukrainian refugees of war have already been employed (Notes from Poland), and 56% found a job within the first three months (EWL). In the Netherlands, around 50% or 34,000 worked. At the same time, only 19% or 140,000 worked in Germany in April 2023 (BfA). Meanwhile, about 19% of the employed may continue working remotely for Ukrainian employers (EUAA).

Situation is characterised by uncertainty.

The current situation for Ukrainians is characterised by significant uncertainty due to the military stalemate, volatile security situation in Ukraine, the limited duration of the temporary protection status and uneven labour integration progress across the various countries hosting Ukrainians.

Scenarios of the war

The Prague Process Policy Brief of June 2022 outlined six scenarios depicting the possible outcome of the war, ranging from the complete withdrawal of Russia to the complete defeat of Ukraine, and the resulting migration dynamics. Since then, very little has changed on the battlefield, in diplomatic efforts or in terms of migration movements. What has changed, however, is the outlook of the war.

It is fair to conclude that the most likely scenario of the war's further development is the continuation of the current combat situation and the partial Russian occupation of Ukraine in the foreseeable future.

The war is already taking longer (Defence News) than initially projected by Russia or expected by various commentators. It has taken the form of a war of attrition (CSIS) and is likely to last well into 2024 or even 2025. Notably, the military situation in spring 2023 largely mirrored the current status quo, with the same territories affected by fighting or occupation. **It is fair to conclude that the most likely scenario of the war's further development is the continuation of the current combat situation and the partial Russian occupation of Ukraine in the foreseeable future.** Presently, there are no signs of the Russian army faltering or withdrawing or the Kremlin leadership changing its ambitions, nor is there evidence of the Ukrainian defence weakening, and much less proof that additional Ukrainian territory comes under Russian control. However, akin to the events in winter 2022, Russia intensified its rocket assault against Ukraine's critical infrastructure in winter 2023/2024, though with less effect. The move is less aimed at weakening the military but rather at undermining the resilience of the Ukrainian people. Meanwhile, international funds continue to be made available, though at a decreasing level, to bolster the resilience of the Ukrainian people and country, and keep the Ukrainian economy afloat.

Migration prospects

In June 2022, the most likely scenario was that "2.9 million [Ukrainians] could stay in the EU, 20% would aspire family reunification and thus could be joined by 580,000 family members. Therefore, a total of 3.48 million Ukrainians could settle in the EU longer term" (Prague Process). Methodologically, this assumption was based on a few surveys and extrapolation of forced migration patterns observed during the period 2014-2021 in Ukraine.

Since then, several surveys and qualitative studies have been conducted across the EU, in various countries hosting Ukrainians, in Ukraine itself, as well as in different time periods to study the future migration of Ukrainians. A caveat remains, however: the methodologies and the survey questions diverge, making comparison of outcomes difficult if not impossible. In the following, the main survey results shall be considered, and some key differences and themes highlighted.

Drivers of migration

Based on the diverse survey results that address potential drivers of migration, **the reasoning to stay home or leave Ukraine strongly rests on security considerations, which is typical for refugees.** Thus, the survey of the Agency for Legislative Initiatives found that "79% of forced migrants indicated at least one security reason for leaving". The joint EUAA-OECD survey captured that a "reason to flee Ukraine was to escape possible (but not yet materialised) military actions (53 %) or because of actual military attacks (49 %), followed … by the deprivation of basic needs (food, water, housing) (33 %), the fear of unemployment and poverty (20 %)". According to the Gallup survey conducted in July and August 2023, "a record-high 53% of Ukrainians said there were times in the past year when they could not afford food they or their families needed, while nearly half (48%) said they struggled to afford adequate shelter". Another survey by NDI in January 2023 showed that, nevertheless, 89% of respondents were optimistic about Ukraine's future, however, according to the Rating Lab, 40% believed that achieving victory would take more than a year.

The drivers compelling return home or stay in the host country, the reasoning rather rests on the utility of the host country with regards to the quality of life and overall well-being, and thus rather resembles the rea- soning of economic migrants.

The five surveys conducted by Cedos between March 2022 and September 2023 also reflected that within Ukraine safety and uncertainty are key concerns followed by employment and financial situation. Separation from relatives and related negative repercussions are another worry. Air raids, shelling and power outages led to delays in work and undermined planning and organising work. Grief over the loss of their previous lifestyle and uncertainty is common. Chronic stress, fatigue and psychological problems are an increasing concern. On the other hand, a new type of solidarity and pride is emerging as is the desire for change.

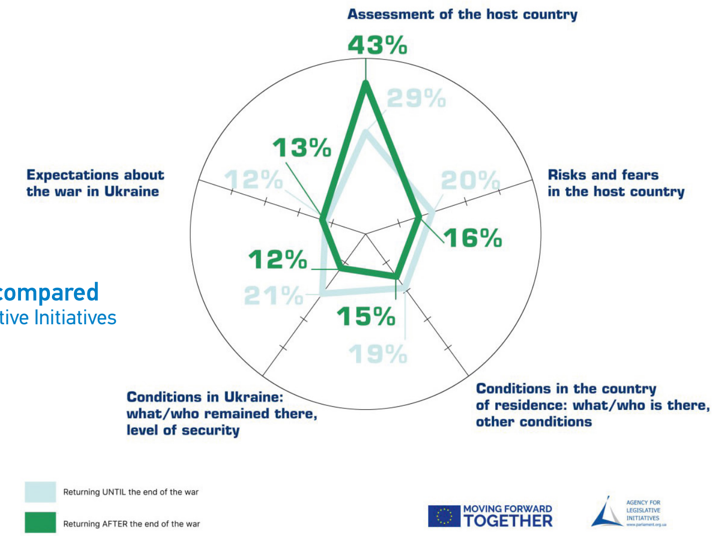
When survey results are analysed against **the drivers compelling return home or stay in the host country, the reasoning rather rests on the utility of the host country with regards to the quality of life and overall well-being, and thus rather resembles the reasoning of economic migrants.**

The overwhelming majority, 87%, perceive opportunities in Europe better than in Ukraine; notably, 87% believe income is higher in the host countries (Centre for Economic Strategy). However, among Ukrainian refugees in Poland, Romania and Moldova, 68% of respondents to the NRC survey of January 2023 say that the income and support they are receiving are not enough to cover their basic needs, putting them "at risk of falling into poverty". According to the Centre for Economic Strategy, 67% are satisfied with conditions in the host country, with Rating Lab survey capturing an even higher figure of 85%. However, dissatisfaction arises from issues such as bureaucracy, lack of e-governance, education, medical services, affordable housing and restrictions to self-employment and business opportunities, with younger people being even more critical than older people. Three-quarters of Ukrainians also believe that language is a barrier to employment, and more than one-quarter believe that there is only access to low-skilled jobs. The Rating Lab, at the same time, concludes that "the longer Ukrainians stay abroad, the better they evaluate the country of stay".

The reasoning to leave Ukraine strongly rests on security considerations, which is typical for refugees; however, the reasoning for staying or returning rather rests on the utility of the host country with regards to quality of life and overall well-being and thus rather resembles the reasoning of economic migrants.

The elderly, those separated from family still in Ukraine, or those facing inclusion challenges in host countries are more likely to want to return (UNHCR, IOM). Also of the refugees in Poland, Romania and Moldova, 44% of respondents left family members behind, which may serve as a driver of return migration, as well as family reunification aspirations (NRC). For 58% of returnees, financial assistance "is the most critical need" (IOM). According to the Agency for Legislative Initiatives, "the most important reason that reduces the desire to return is the expectation of a low quality of life in Ukraine".

Not covered in the surveys are men escaping Ukraine to avoid mobilisation/ conscription into the army and, related to this, the aspiration to reunite with family already abroad under temporary protection. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that returnees, notably men, may face resentment from those who did not leave, although surveys indicate that so far only 6% report discrimination.



Graphic 1:
Drivers of migration compared
Source: Agency for Legislative Initiatives

Migration aspirations

Examining various survey results with a focus on migration aspirations expressed by respondents allows to make a careful observation about a shift of aspirations in favour of staying in host countries. However, no clear trend can be depicted given that questions about return aspiration range from return in general terms, return within three months, return within one year to return after the war or return following a temporary stay after the end of the war.

In September 2022, only 9% of Ukrainians still had the aspiration to migrate from Ukraine, a decrease from 35% recorded before the war according to Gallup or from 26% according to Delmi. This drop can be attributed in part to the fact that a large part of the population with pre-war migration aspirations has left the country.

One of the earliest multi-country surveys (FRA) found that in autumn 2022 the proportion of those who would like to return to Ukraine (35%) was similar to the proportion of those who would like to stay in their host country (38%), while almost one in four respondents were undecided and about 4% planned to move elsewhere. Of the refugees surveyed by UNHCR six months after displacement, 13% wanted to return home within three months, 44% had no such plans and 43% were undecided, which shows a greater level of uncertainty and undecidedness at the beginning of the war. Meanwhile, UNHCR's survey of spring 2023 showed that 14% aspired to return within three months and 62% in the future, only 6% had no return aspirations and 18% were undecided. Notably, 68% did not aspire to return in any near future.

The Centre for Economic Strategy (CES) survey of November 2022 suggests that 63% eventually planned to return to Ukraine, 14% did not, and 23% were undecided. However, 40.9% have changed their plans since late 2022 and 32% were less inclined to return than anticipated previously. Accordingly, the CES concludes that between 1.3 million and 3.3 million are staying abroad, respectively 2.1-3 million could be returning (June 2023), while those who are staying could be joined after the war and the end of martial law by 100,000 to 745,000 relatives. The elderly, 65+, and those with lower education are most likely to return (Centre for Economic Strategy). The results of the July 2023 survey by the Agency for Legislative Initiatives equally highlight higher return likelihood among the elderly compared to youth, while concluding that over "two-thirds of forced migrants are unlikely to return to Ukraine before the end of the war; two-thirds of forced migrants plan to return to Ukraine after the end of the war".

Of those surveyed within Ukraine in early 2023 by the Ukrainian Institute of the Future, 37% noted that they have close relatives who left the country, 36% believe that their relatives will definitely return to the country (they have firmly decided on this), 32% - that their relatives may return if it is safe and there is work in Ukraine, 14% - that their relatives are unlikely to return, because they are already settling in a new place. Only 5% believe that their relatives will definitely not return and 10% could not answer this question.

With regards to actual visits to Ukraine, the EUAA-OECD joint surveys (2022) revealed that only 12% of respondents visited the country once, 5% visited occasionally and 1% came regularly. 50% planned to visit Ukraine, with the West, Kyiv and North being the most likely destinations, and the East being the least likely. Yet, 34% expressed their reluctance to ever return. Put bluntly, a significant proportion, presumably from the East and possibly those displaced twice, lost faith in Ukraine. By June 2023, 46% of Ukrainians had visited Ukraine (Rating Lab survey), whereas 60% did not, and this share is even higher among Ukrainians from the East or women with children. 49% of Ukrainian refugees would not like to stay living abroad but 33% aspire to stay abroad permanently.

Put bluntly, a significant proportion, presumably from the East and possibly those displaced twice, lost faith in Ukraine.

Looking at the return aspirations of IDPs, the IOM survey (June 2023) suggests that 1.06 million IDPs, roughly a fifth of all IDPs, consider returning. Decision-making on relocation or re-displacement is largely related to economic factors, public participation, and access to adequate housing in areas of return. 95% of returnees do not consider re-displacement, hence return appears sustainable.

If only Poland and Germany are considered, hosting most displaced Ukrainians under temporary protection in the EU, more respondents are favouring stay over return in 2023 compared to 2022. In Germany, the share of responses has increased by 2-3% when it comes to those aspiring for permanent stay (29 % in 2023 vs 27% in 2022) or temporary stay (15% vs 12%). Conversely, the share decreased among respondents aspiring to return after the end of the war, from 33% to 31%, and among undecided from 26% to 21%, with only 2% wanting to return within one year. Women, refugees with partners in Ukraine and those from Kyiv and the North exhibit higher aspiration to return. Those without children, possessing stronger language proficiency, employed or in education are less likely to want to return. In other words, the better Ukrainians are integrated, the less likely they are to return. A considerable 30% aspire to maintain close contact with Germany and to temporarily live there (DIW). In Poland, fewer but still "almost half of the refugees intend to stay for at least a year after the war has ended", while in March 2022 such a desire was prevalent among 31% of war refugees. 31% aspire to return as soon as possible, 22% one year after the war ends, 17% aspire to stay for several years and 6% permanently, whereas 16% were undecided (EWL).

If only Poland and Germany are considered, hosting most displaced Ukrainians under temporary protection in the EU, more respondents are favouring stay over return in 2023 compared to 2022.

Table 2: Overview of survey results (2022 and 2023)

Survey agency	Time	Sample size	Coverage	Stay	Return	Undecided	Further details
FRA	8-9/2022	14,685	Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Czechia, Germany, Italy, Spain, Estonia	38%	35%	23%	23% want to commute regularly
UNHCR	8-9/2022	4,800	43 countries	44% no plans to return	13% within 3 month; 81% hope to return one day	43%	
UNHCR	12/2022-1/2023,	3200	EU		77-79%	18%	
EUAA	2/2022 – 1/2023	5317	EU	34%	./.	./.	
UIF	3/2023	1200	Globally	19%	68%	10%	Survey of relatives in Ukraine
CES	11/2022, 4/2023	1003, 404	EU	63% (11/2022)	32% (4/2023)	23% (11/2022)	Aspiration to stay increasing
UNHCR	4-5/2023	3850	Europe, incl. Russia, Turkey and Georgia	68%	76%	18%	Due to awkward question stay and return intentions overlap
Rating Lab	6/2023	2116	EU	33%	49%	./.	
ALI	7/2023	1032	EU	./.	2/3	./.	After end of war
IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP	8-10/2022, N=11,225, 1-3/2023	6754	Germany	44%	33%	21%	30% aspire transnational ties
EWL	2/2023	400	Poland	45%	31%	16%	

Although, as was noted above, no clear trend can be drawn, three surveys conducted in 2022 suggest high return aspirations of up to 68%-80%, whereas five surveys conducted from April to July 2023, one year since the onset of the war, suggest increasing aspirations of staying in the host countries of 31% to 49%. In the meantime, the proportion of the undecided seems to fluctuate around 16% to 23%.

Scenarios of future migration

By conflating the above survey results with the number of Ukrainians in the EU, amounting to 3.9 million assumed to 4.2 million registered, between 1.3 million and 1.89 million Ukrainians aspire to stay in the EU as of summer 2023. On the other hand, between 1.2 million and 2.058 million aspire to return, whereas between 624,000 and 966,000 remain undecided. If the undecided Ukrainians follow the overall trend, another 206,000 to 435,000 of them could stay. Therefore, **the estimated number of Ukrainians staying in the EU ranges between 1.5 million and 2.3 million.**

Furthermore, this number needs to reflect potential family reunification. As one of the German surveys implies, of 46.5 % women, 36% have partners abroad and 46% of them could aspire to get their partners to the EU. The family reunification-driven migration by male Ukrainians would be negligible not exceeding 13,300 persons. The number of Ukrainians residing in the EU who still have children in Ukraine (9% of women) and who consider having these children join them is small too (max. 25,000). Overall, another 335,000 (low estimate) to 366,000 (high estimate) Ukrainians would enter the EU after the end of the war and the martial law. To this, family reunification of other relatives (e.g. parents) needs to be added, though there are no sufficient survey data on this type of family reunification aspirations. The limitation of this calculation is that it is based on a German survey extrapolated to the entire EU. Therefore, one also needs to consider that in countries bordering Ukraine, such as Poland, where commuting is an alternative to relocation, the wish to reunite families might be less widespread, hence, actual family reunification might be lower than this extrapolation implies.

Overall, if both Ukrainians with an aspiration to stay and those who could come through family reunification are considered, the total number of Ukrainians in the EU due to the war could go up to anywhere between 1.82 million and 2.67 million with a medium figure of 2,25 million.

Overall, if both Ukrainians with an aspiration to stay and those who could come through family reunification are considered, the total number of Ukrainians in the EU due to the war could go up to anywhere between 1.82 million and 2.67 million with a medium figure of 2,25 million[1]. An unknown factor is the future (irregular) migration of men, on average 23,100 per month since September 2022. If arrivals remain at this level, this will increase the estimated total up to 10% per year.

However, the survey results suggest that significantly fewer displaced Ukrainians are likely to stay in the EU as was assumed in the Prague Process Policy Brief of June 2022 when scenarios were based on assumptions, non-representative or preliminary surveys and scenarios.

Table 3: Migration scenarios (as of autumn 2023)

Stock	Staying Min/max	Returning Min/max	Undecided (subsequently staying)	Subsequently staying	Family reunification*	Total	Mean
3.9 mio.	1.3 mio.	1.2 mio.	624,000 (207,000	1.5 mio.	330,500 (incl. 9,500 women and 17,000 children)	1.83 mio.	2.25 mio.
	1,8 mio.	1.9 mio.	819,000 (270,000)	2.07 mio.			
4.2 mio.	1,4 mio.	1.3 mio.	672,000 (221,000)	1.62 mio.			
	1.89 mio.	2.058 mio.	966,000 (staying 435, 000)	2.3 mio.	366,000 men (incl. 13,600 women and 25,000 children)	2.66 mio.	

* Formulas: stock: 46% (women): 17% (who aspire family reunification) = total of post-war Ukrainians through family reunification. 19.9 % (men), 6% have partners in Ukraine, of these 61% aspire family reunification (all only according to a German study, hence, here, total results are extrapolated to entire EU)

Importantly, those staying in the EU are more likely to be younger, without children, better educated, employed, and more likely from eastern Ukraine. **Both in demographic as well as in economic terms the loss for Ukraine but also the gain for the host countries would be significant.**

Having said this, one needs to bear in mind that any significant detrimental change in the security and policy situation in Ukraine, any major advances of Russia or any policy changes that reflect the goals of Russia will likely result in another major outflow of Ukrainians to the EU, possibly another several million people, 4.8 million or even more.

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Conclusion

With regards to future migration between Ukraine and the EU or other host countries, the Ukrainian government has an interest and promotes the return of its citizens (Ministry for Reintegration) as soon as the security situation allows. The State Migration Service of Ukraine even "requests that Ukrainian citizens not be classified as refugees and that programs for their integration in the host country not be established" to almost compel return. However, it seems, "Ukraine did not formulate a policy for the return of forced migrants" (Agency for Legislative Initiatives), and the Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine only occasionally refers to the return of internationally displaced citizens. On the other hand, several host countries, which have by now invested significantly in the integration of Ukrainians to compensate for own labour force shortages, may well have an interest in retaining a certain proportion of these Ukrainians. Meanwhile, Ukrainians have human agency and make their own choices based on the security and economic conditions in Ukraine, in the host country, their family situation and a range of other factors. As a result, a potential conflict of interest may arise between these three actors with regard to migrating, staying, returning or moving to a third country. Conversely, as is widespread in international migration, beyond the options of 'being either here or there', there are the in-between transnational strategies of a life partly spent in Ukraine and partly in the host country. Addressing the matter will require certain diplomatic efforts and partnership approaches.

Political reasoning (safety) and economic reasoning (overall well-being) in migration decision-making appear to increasingly overlap as a result of dire economic and social conditions within Ukraine and, so far, comparably stable legal and comfortable social conditions in the various host countries. **This suggests that future migration will not only be shaped by the outcome of the war and the security situation, but also by Ukraine's economic prospects, as well as the outcome of integration and overall well-being in host countries.**

It remains decisive how and to what extent the allies of Ukraine continue supporting the country to defend itself. In case of deteriorating conditions in Ukraine, Europe might well be confronted with another several million Ukrainian refugees.

Scenarios of War and Forced Migration from Ukraine: How many more Ukrainians could flee if Russia wins?

Franck Düvell
May 2024

Executive summary

This is the third Prague Process Policy brief on the topic of forced migration from Ukraine as the direct result of Russia's military aggression. In this iteration, the brief deliberates forced migration flows from Ukraine under four potential war scenarios, ranging between a stalemate situation to a hypothetical victory of Russia. These scenarios are informed by observed migration patterns to date. The brief utilises the methodology developed by the author in 2021, which allowed to predict the number of forcibly displaced in early 2022 with a high degree of accuracy. Subsequently, this method has been continually refined to account for newly available data.

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has precipitated a significant displacement crisis, resulting in millions of Ukrainians and hundreds of thousands foreign residents and immigrants fleeing the country. At its peak, the number of forcibly displaced persons amounted to nearly 14 million. As of early 2024, between 9.6 and 10.8 million persons remain displaced either internally or internationally, while an estimated 31.1 million people reside in the government-controlled parts of Ukraine.

In the event of Ukraine falling entirely under Russian occupation, an additional 9.44 to 19.05 million people could be compelled to flee. Of these, between 7.7 and 16.3 million (83,3%) could move west, approximately 1.55 to 3.3 million destined for Poland, a similar number for Germany, and between 847,000 to 1.7 million (11%) potentially leaving for North America. The scale of such an exodus and the substantial influx to the EU would be unprecedented in recent history. The potential ramifications of such a scenario vary, but all should be carefully considered in discussions surrounding allies' support for Ukraine, or any potential lack thereof.

Recapitulation of events

In spring 2022, Russia invaded large swathes of Ukraine targeting the northern, eastern and southern provinces including most of the largest cities and the capital Kyiv. By summer 2022, the Ukrainian army managed to halt and partially repel the invasion, notably in the northeast. A counteroffensive in autumn 2022 allowed to liberate the partly occupied province Kharkiv and the western half of Kherson. However, another counteroffensive in Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk in summer 2023 largely failed, with Ukrainian forces reclaiming control only in the western parts of the Black Sea. As of winter 2023/24, Russia gained the upper-hand, slowly expanding the occupied territory, though at the expense of high losses of personnel and equipment. Meanwhile, the Western support is waning, notably of the US, and the Ukrainian army lacks ammunition and soldiers.

By October 2022, 4.6 million people from Ukraine sought protection in the EU. Up to 2 million, as was claimed initially, moved to Russia, whereas around 6.54 million were displaced internally. Since autumn/winter 2022, the migration situation has been fairly stable, prompting return of several million Ukrainians, mostly IDPs, and return of third-country nationals who resided in Ukraine before the war to their origin countries. By the end of 2023, there were about 3.9 to 4.2 million displaced persons from Ukraine in the EU , and some 700,000 in other western countries (USA, Canada, the UK) and Türkiye. Possibly only around one million or even less are still in Russia due to the war. Another 3.7 million to 4.8 million remain displaced within Ukraine. As of early 2024, 9.6-10.8 million persons remain displaced internally or internationally.

Launching the invasion, Russia, it appeared, was hoping to take over control of Ukraine and its people within a few days or weeks. Conversely, Ukraine largely united to defend its sovereignty. Most Ukrainians still believe that Ukraine can win this war. At the same time, staying in the Russia-occupied territories is rather unviable for many, since the occupied territory is "plundered" by Russia, living conditions are extremely precarious and severe human rights violations are reported, including up 122,000 suspected war crimes. It appears that Russia still aims to bring the entirety of Ukraine under its control though not necessarily its entire population, given that millions of Ukrainians are either displaced or deported, while the occupied territories are partly repopulated by individuals from Russia.

Important considerations and methodological remarks

To date, Russia occupies 17% of Ukraine, roughly all of Luhansk, half of Donetsk, two thirds of Zaporizhzhia and three quarters of Kherson. The situation is extremely volatile and could be at a watershed. **How many more Ukrainians could be displaced in case Russia gains more ground or if Ukraine loses the fight for its sovereignty?** Some German government sources recently suggested that up to 10 million more people could be displaced. Given the observed high propensity of Ukrainians to flee from Russia-controlled territories (up to 75%), the numbers could be twice as high.

To address this question a dedicated method has been developed. First, four scenarios of the possible outcome of the war are sketched. Second, displacement due to the 2022 invasion and partial occupation of Ukraine is analysed and the key migration patterns identified. Third, the results serve as precedence and the patterns observed since 2022 are applied to the scenarios of the war. For the purpose of this brief, the second stage is presented first, while scenarios of war and forced migration come in a joint section.

The method was developed in 2021 to discuss the potential forced migration in case of a Russian invasion. Initial projections from this methodology suggested that approximately 10 million people could face displacement, a figure that closely mirrored the actual displacement in 2022. This alignment validated the efficacy of the method. In the interim period, a wealth of additional data has become available leading to the enhancement of the method's complexity while also rendering it more transparent and accurate.

Before proceeding with the analysis, the population and migration data must be adjusted to several limitations:

(a) Ukrainian population statistics are flawed because the last census in Ukraine was conducted in 2001, resulting in all subsequent population data being derived from estimates. The substantial levels of internal and international (forced) migration distorts all population data. Therefore, most data on the whereabouts of people in Ukraine come with a caveat.

(b) The baseline population statistics applied below predominantly reflect pre-war conditions. Hence, it is imperative to deduct the population that has already left Ukraine, estimated at around 6 million or 15.38% from the total. However, recent generic estimates of the total population by Libanova (2023) are applied where appropriate.

(c) Data of Ukrainians who have fled or been deported to Russia are both unreliable and scarce; for example, a breakdown by province (oblast) of origin or gender is not available.

(d) On the other hand, IDPs from Russia-occupied provinces and the warzone who moved to the eastern provinces, still remaining under Ukraine's control, offset people who left these areas by 60%-80%[1].

(e) Varied responses to Russian occupation exist within Ukraine, particularly evident between the predominantly Russian-speaking and partly Russia-leaning east welcoming Russian occupation, and the partly Ukrainian-speaking and largely Ukraine-leaning centre and west, which need to be accounted for.

(f) The characteristics of the population that has already left differ from those who remain within Ukraine. Those who left are mostly aged between 18 to 44 years, most of them are female. In 2021, their share in the population was 40%, totalling 17.2 million. In 2023, approximately 45% of the remaining population, totalling 14.1 million, fall within the age group of 45-90, a group that has been only half as likely to migrate compared to 18-44 year olds. Many of those who stayed are thus less mobile, notably the elderly and those with care responsibilities, people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the less educated, those with fewer resources, individuals with disabilities and people in isolated villages. Therefore, separate calculations for migration propensity are required for each age group. Consequently, generic prospective migration estimates for the entire population should be reduced by one quarter, reflecting the fact that half of the affected population has been only half as likely to migrate, resulting in a 25% adjustment factor.

(g) Additionally, the gender and family composition of the population has changed due to the disproportionally high level of migration among women with their children. There is now a higher proportion of men in the country, often separated from their families[2]. It is essential to acknowledge that the migration pattern of women with children fleeing under conditions of war cannot be applied to the men left behind. Instead, it can be assumed that, for three reasons, the propensity of men to flee Ukraine if it comes under Russian control might be higher than that of women. First, men are more likely to seek to join their families already abroad. Second, men may be more inclined to escape expected Russian repression, persecution, and reprisals. Thirdly, there could potentially be a reverse effect of martial law, as men aged 18-60 are currently restricted from leaving the country. If martial law were to become unenforceable, such as in case of occupation and subsequent breakdown of Ukrainian authorities, it is conceivable that more men might seek to leave the country.

(h) Finally, only the population residing in the territories still under the control of the Ukrainian government is considered.

Displacement dynamics and patterns as of 2022 to date

In 2022, a staggering 13.8 million Ukrainians experienced displacement, with around half (7.14 million) displaced within the country and the other half (6.8 million) forced to seek refuge abroad. This figure represented 36% of the total population of Ukraine or roughly equivalent to 75% of the population of the provinces (oblast) directly affected by fighting or occupation. Within 24 months, about 4.24 million displaced people returned. In early 2024, around 6 million people were still displaced internationally and 3.7 million were displaced internally. More than half or 1.99 million IDPs reside in the provinces bordering Russia-occupied territories[3].

Among the estimated 3.7 million IDPs, the majority are from Donetsk (814,000), Luhansk (814,000), Zaporizhzhia (440,000) and Kherson (440,000) provinces (see Table 1, IDPs in government-controlled territories). Additionally, individuals deported or relocated to Luhansk, Donetsk, and Crimea should be included in this count. The share of displaced persons from the same four provinces among Ukrainians seeking temporary protection in the EU range between 8.1% (340,000) originating from Donetsk, 3.9% (163,000) from Kherson, 3.2% (134,400) from Zaporizhzhia and 1.4% (58,000) from Luhansk. To this we need to add the number of people who relocated to non-EU countries – at least another 1.7 million people fled to Russia, North America, the UK, Türkiye or elsewhere – representing an equivalent of 40% of all relocations. This means that the total number of internally and internationally displaced persons from these four regions could be up to 40% higher[4]: Donetsk 1,29 million, Luhansk

1 While 6 million Ukrainians left the country, mostly government-controlled territory, there are 3.7-4.8 million IDPs, an equivalent to 60-80% of those who went abroad.

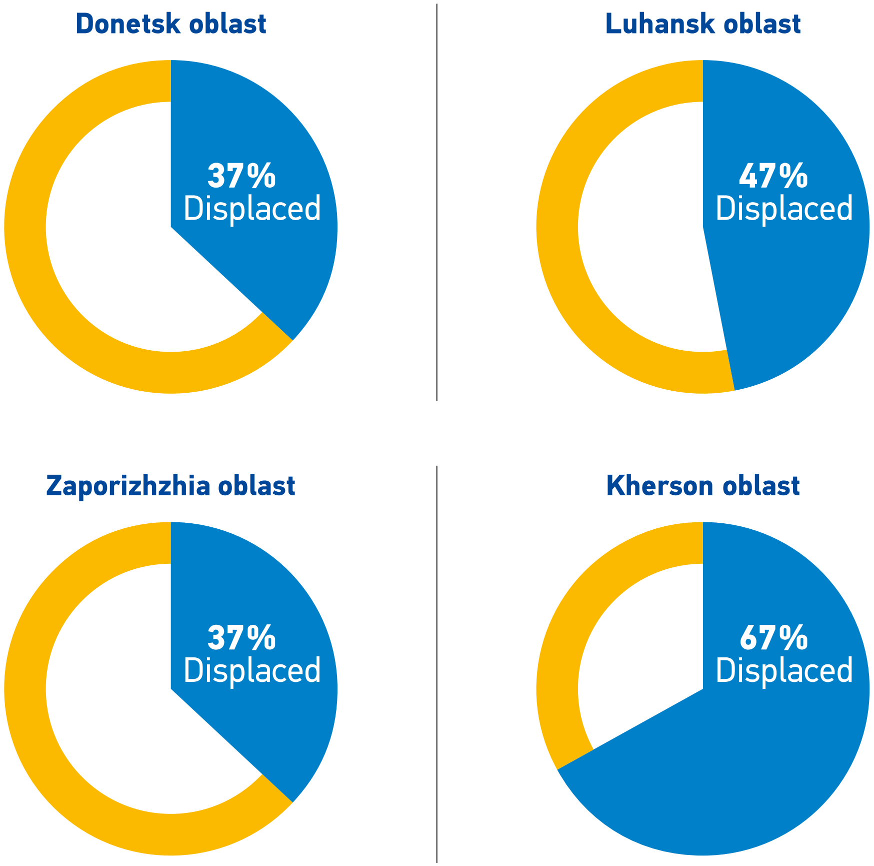
2 Of all Ukrainian refugees in the EU, 37,6% are male, only 20% are adult men (about 862,000), while the majority is female. Hence, there are still 9,28 million men in the age group 18-60 in Ukraine.

3 Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, Poltava, Kharkiv, Dnepropetrovsk and Mykolaiv

4 At least 1.7 million Ukrainians relocated to Russia, the UK, US and Canada, equivalent to 40% of all relocated Ukrainians. Because all calculations are based on data on Ukrainians in the EU these 40% are added to the total.

896,000, Zaporizhzhia 616,000 and Kherson 669,000 . Moreover, 668,000 Ukrainians, supposedly mostly from Donetsk and Luhansk, moved to Russia already as of 2014. Due to various unknowns – such as the number of IDPs in Russia-occupied territory, male IDPs not registered and not responding to surveys, under-coverage in surveys of IDPs in and from certain regions – these estimates likely understate the real numbers and levels of internal and international displacement.

Figure 1: Total estimated shares of displaced population from the four provinces



Furthermore, all statistics other than those from Luhansk pertain to the entire territory of each province, while only parts of them are occupied. Since the exact proportion of displaced persons from the occupied territories cannot be determined based on the data analysed here, the calculations are triangulated with various other reports.

Table 1: Displacement from Russia-occupied territories and attacked provinces

	Donetsk	Luhansk	Zaporizhzhia	Kherson
Population estimates before occupation	4,380,000 (2013)	2,260,000 (2013)	1,700,000 (2021)	1,000,000 (2021)
Displaced to the EU	340,000	58,000	134,000	163,000
Internally displaced to government-controlled Ukraine	814,000	814,000	440,000	440,000
Possibly displaced to non-EU countries	137,700	24,000	54,000	66,300
Displaced to Russia as of 2014	500,000[5]		n/a	n/a
Share of displaced of total population	37,1%	46,9%	36,9	66,9%

It is claimed that only 70,000, mostly the elderly, remain in Russia-occupied Kherson city, which represents 25% of its pre-war population of 290,000. Similarly, in the largely destroyed city of Mariupol in the Donetsk oblast, only 120,000 or 25% of the original 480,000 residents still live in the city. Only some 1.5 million people, or 67% of the pre-occupation population, remain in Luhansk city whereas up to 33% left it. Meanwhile, in the occupied parts of Zaporizhzhia oblast still seem to live some 250,000 of its pre-war population, whereas "around half the region's population have left voluntarily, in addition to those deported or kidnapped", accordingly to some sources. Consider the case of the occupied city of Melitopol in the Zaporizhzhia oblast: presently, only 60,000 to 70,000 remain in the city, which is 39-45% of its pre-war population of 155,000 people. Ukrainians are said to be actively deported under the guise of 'evacuation'. In contrast, in the Donetsk region, which has been occupied since 2014, the population has decreased by one third,[6] with the Russia-occupied parts now hosting only around 2 million inhabitants or less. Whereas the working-age population has probably decreased by 65% those who have chosen to stay are thus likely predominantly the elderly. However, Donetsk and Luhansk, being largely Russian-speaking and leaning towards Russia, represent exceptions. In contrast, Kherson, an average Ukrainian city[7], is more likely to represent an example of the average effect of Russian occupation on the central part of Ukraine. Meanwhile, the western part of Ukraine is an entirely different matter.

5 According to the size of the population of the two provinces, two thirds of those who moved to Russia were from Donetsk (333,000), and one third from Luhansk (166,000).

6 In 2010, the entire Donbass, including Donetsk and Luhansk provinces, had an estimated pre-war population of 6.2 million. Due to the 2014 events, 1.5 million moved to other parts of Ukraine and 600,000 migrated or were deported to Russia (550,000) and Belarus (60,000). Hence, around 33% remained the region.

7 14.1% identified themselves Russian in the last 2001 census.

The examples examined above suggest that between 33% and 75% of the pre-war Ukrainian population has either left or fled from the Russia-occupied provinces and cities. Excluding the exceptional case of Donetsk, the main pattern suggests that between 50% and 75% of the remaining population could flee from Russian occupation, with fewer people leaving from the eastern provinces and more from the western provinces. “Eastern residents brace for Russian advance” BBC reported, “Russia slowly destroys Ukraine’s cities as it tries to take them”; only a “small minority” holds out or might even welcome Russian control while most will want flee.

One to two thirds of Ukrainians fled the Russia-occupied territories.

In case more parts of eastern or even central Ukraine come under Russian control, the capacity of the remaining government-controlled parts of Ukraine – the smaller, poorer, and less densely populated oblasts – to accommodate more IDPs is limited[8]. It is very likely that their capacities are already partly exhausted. This means that, unlike in 2022 and 2023, most displaced persons, many of whom would relive their second or third displacement, will need to move abroad. In case Ukraine loses the war, rendering martial law ineffective, a significant exodus of men aged 18-60 can be anticipated. Notably, up to one million men and women who have served in the Ukrainian army will need to flee, as they are at risk of persecution by Russia.

On the other hand, Russia brings in thousands or tens of thousands of people, including military personnel, workers, some civilians and their families to populate the occupied and partly depopulated territories, as reports from Zaporizhzhia and Luhansk claim. In Mariupol, Russia has reportedly resettled several tens of thousands new residents from Russia. This could suggest that Russia might prepare for some population exchange strategy through dispersal and colonisation tactics.

Scenarios of the war and scenarios of possible forced displacement

There exist multiple scenarios regarding the potential trajectory of the war, some of which were discussed in publications predating Russia’s large-scale invasion. Several were discussed in the first Prague Process policy brief on this topic, released in spring 2022. These scenarios stem from research developed by a range of institutes. Present policy brief only considers scenarios that foresee the continuation of the war.

Each potential outcome of the war lends itself to the development of corresponding scenario regarding the type and magnitude of forced migration. However, a large number of variations is possible depending on the extent of Russian occupation and/or control. For the purpose of developing these scenarios, the lower figures of displaced people in 2023/24 were applied, rather than the higher figures observed in 2022. Utilising the latter would yield even higher estimates.

8 There is no data on the absorption capacity of IDPs in government-controlled Ukraine; however, various reports on the situation of IDPs suggest that means are insufficient to cater for all of them, and the situation is deteriorating.

Basic data

Total population of Ukraine as of 2021
39M
(44M incl. occ. territory)

Population in the occupied territories
6M

Ukrainians seeking protection who already were in the EU at the time of the invasion
>294,900 (7%)

IDPs in the Eastern regions
1.99M

Proportion of people fleeing the occupied territory
35-75%
(ex. Donetsk 50-75%)

Propensity to migrate among the age group II, 45-95 (8.78M, 45% of remaining population)
17,5% - 37,5% = 1.5-3.3M

Population in the government-controlled Ukraine as of 2024
31.1M

Population seeking protection abroad
>6M (15%)

Population internally displaced
3.7-4.8M

Total number of displaced internally and internationally
9.7-10.8M
(max. 27.7%)

Propensity to migrate among the age group 0-44 (10.7M, 55% of remaining population)
35-75% = 3.78-8.03M

Men in the age group 18-60, conscription age (men in the armed forces)
9.28M (1M)

Scenario 1

A stalemate persists. Russia does not gain additional territory, and Ukraine does not liberate more territory. The conflict becomes frozen. Fighting and bombing might continue along the frontline, but it diminishes. The security situation stabilises, reconstruction gains pace and the economy recover.

A portion of the currently internationally displaced Ukrainians will return, with estimates ranging between 33% and 45%, as indicated in the previous Policy Brief derived from recent surveys. As a result, around 1.2 million to 2.058 million of the 3.9-4.2 million Ukrainians currently residing in the EU aspire to return, along with potentially 312,000 to 483,000 individuals of the currently undecided. Those who choose to stay abroad will likely be joined by family members currently still in Ukraine, mostly husbands and other close relatives, amounting to another 330,000 to 366,000 Ukrainians.

Scenario 2

The war continues. Russia achieves further but minor territorial gains in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. Neither side makes major advances. The security situation remains volatile, with sporadic reconstructions efforts underway, yet the economy shows sluggish signs of recovers, if any at all.

Few more Ukrainians will be displaced from the smaller newly occupied parts of Donetsk, Lugansk, Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia. Many individuals near the frontline have already left or been evacuated. Given that those remaining in the region are mostly the elderly and their close relatives (carers) – thus the least mobile group – they are more likely to stay or seek protection within Ukraine. Meanwhile, much fewer Ukrainians who currently reside abroad will return, as the 'end of the war' is the main precondition for their return, according to surveys. Finally, the longer the war takes, and the slower the economic recovery, the more people will opt to leave, and if only temporarily. Hence, forced migration is anticipated to slowly though, albeit moderately, increase over time.

Scenario 3a

The war continues. Russia makes significant gains in northern, eastern, and southern Ukraine, notably in Donetsk, Kharkiv, Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia and potentially even Kyiv, Mykolaiv and Odesa. In the west, an independent rump-state of Ukraine remains, though on Russian terms. While, under scenario 3b, less territory comes under Russian control.

The scope of displacement depends on the territory - oblasts and cities - that come under Russian control. If it is actual occupation or even annexation by the Russian military, forced migration can be expected to be significantly higher depending on the level of suppression of Ukrainian culture. Meanwhile, if a puppet regime is installed but no Russian occupation forces deployed, the level of forced migration might be lower.

In the affected provinces and cities, some 33% to 75% of their remaining population (but rather 50% to 75%) are likely to flee Russian occupation or annexation, more among the youth and fewer among the elderly. According to largely outdated population data, the affected provinces had a pre-war population of approximately 19.5 million. However, this figure must be adjusted to account for those who have already left the country, thus 15.38% should be deducted. This brings the actual population in the affected provinces down to 16.5 million. Of these, 6.47-11.58 million people may flee,[9] including IDPs who are already in the affected areas[10]. Because the government-controlled areas are saturated with IDPs, the majority would probably be departing Ukraine west-bound.

Scenario 3b

Above scenario must be adapted to reflect the actual Russian advances and any subsequent occupation. For instance, if Kyiv and/or Odesa and/or Mykolaiv (et cetera) remain unoccupied, the number of displaced persons will likely be lower. Conversely, if cities like Cherkassy and Kropyvnytskyi (previously known as Kirovograd) are also affected, the number of displaced persons would correspondingly increase.

Table 3: Cities and Provinces (oblasts), level of displacement, 50% to 75%

(minus 15%, rounded, of the pre-war population who already left)[11]

	City	minus 15%, in mil.	Province (oblast)	minus 15%, in mil.
Kyiv	1,500,000 - 2,000,000	1,3 - 1,7	2,400,000 - 3,600,000	2,1 – 3,1
Kharkiv	700,000 - 1,050,000	0,6 – 0,9	1,300,000 - 1,950,000	1,1 – 1,7
Dnipro	490,000 - 735,000	0,42 – 0,63	1,550,000 - 2,330,000	1,3 – 2
Zaporizhzhia	355,000 – 480,000	0,3 – 0,4	850,000 - 1,270,000	0,72-1,1
Sumy	127,000 – 190,000	0,11 – 0,16	550,000 - 775,000	0,47 – 0,66
Poltava	150,000 - 225,000	0,13 – 0,19	700,000 - 1,050,000	0,6 – 0,89
Chernihiv	140,000 - 210,000	0,12-0,18	500,000 - 750,000	0,43 – 0,64
Odesa	490,000 - 735,000	0,42 – 0,63	1,200,000 - 1,800,000	1 – 1,5
Mykolaiv	240,000 - 360,000	0,2 – 0,31	650,000 - 975,000	0,55-0,83

9 Age group I, 1-44, 9.08 million (55% of population), propensity to migrate 35% - 75% = 3.18-6.81 million; age group II, 45-95, 8.78 million (45% of population), propensity to migrate 17,5% - 37,5% = 1.3-2.78 million.

10 There are already about 1.99 million IDPs in the affected regions. Most IDPs will probably flee again as they already demonstrated once that they are unwilling to live under Russian occupation.

11 Figures are based on pre-war population statistics, hence 15%, those who already fled, must be deducted.

Cherkassy	140,000 – 210,000	0,12 – 0,8	600,000 – 750,000	0,5 – 0,64
Kropyvnytskyi (Kirovograd)	115,000 – 172,000		450,000 – 675,000	

Other regions, including the government-controlled parts of Donetsk, as well as major cities such as Kryvyi Rih, Melitopol, Berdyansk or Kramatorsk, are not listed separately here.

Scenario 4

Ukraine loses the war. The Ukrainian army surrenders and may even disintegrate. The entire country comes under Russian control, with large parts facing annexation and Russification. In the remaining territory, the government will be replaced by a puppet regime. Due to guerrilla warfare, the security situation will be precarious.

An estimated 31.1 million Ukrainians still live in the territory controlled by the government. Precedence shows that on average, between 35% and 75% of Ukrainians, or rather 50% to 75%, would be unwilling to live under Russian control or even occupation. This suggests that between 8.4 million (taking the lower estimate) or rather 12 million (medium estimate) to 18.5 million (higher estimate) Ukrainians (corrected by age groups) would leave the country[12]. In addition, the figure needs to be corrected for the higher propensity of the remaining 9.3 million men to migrate, notably among those in the age group 18-60, specifically those in the army and with their families already abroad[13]. There is no further correction needed for IDPs as they are already included in above population estimate of 31.1 million. As a result, between 9.44 to 13 to 19.05 million people could potentially leave Ukraine[14]. If current migration patterns persist, roughly 15% could move to Russia, while 85% could move westward, with 20% leaving for Poland, another 20% for Germany, 8-10% for the Czech Republic, 11% for the US and Canada, and the rest dispersing across other EU member states.

Table 4: War vs Migration scenarios

	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4
War	No change	Small Russian gains	Russia occupies eastern Ukraine	Russia controls or occupies all Ukraine
Migration	1.5-2.9 million return	Less return, moderately increasing migration	min. 6.47, max. 11.58 million	min. 9.44, max. 19.05 million

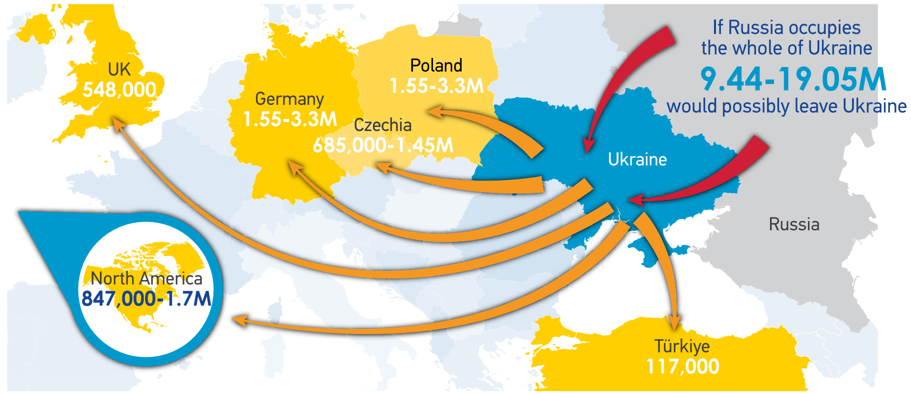
12 Age group I (1-44), 55% of the population (17.1 million), propensity to migrate 35%-75% = 5.99-12.8 million, Age group II (45-95), 45% of the population (14 million), propensity to migrate 17.5%-37,5% = 2.45-5,25 million

13 One million extra refugees are added here randomly.

14 Developing a mean value is not helpful as the migration behaviour of western Ukrainians is not and cannot be accounted for by these scenarios as considerably more might leave the country.

Conclusion & discussion

The war of Russia against Ukraine extends into its third year. There are no signs that it will end any time soon. The situation is volatile. Currently Russia seems to have the upper hand and still strives to win the war. If Russia takes under control or occupies the eastern part of Ukraine, accommodating 18.5 million or 63% of the Ukrainian population, including most of the current IDPs[15], around 6.47-11.58 million people might flee, with over 80% or 5.4-9.7 million moving to the west. In the extreme case, where Russia occupies the whole of Ukraine, twice as many, 9.44-19.05 million would possibly leave Ukraine. Of these, 7.7-16.3 million (83,3%) could move west, 6.85-14.5 mil. to the EU – 1.55-3.3 million to Poland and another 1.55 to 3.3 million to Germany – while 847,000 to 1.7 million (11%) might want to move on to North America. The actual numbers might be lower because a larger proportion of the population remaining in Ukraine falls into the less mobile or immobile category.



These scenarios exclusively consider the drivers within the origin country, without accounting for individual-level factors, as well as conditions in destination countries of forced migration. The actual migration levels also depend on individual capability to migrate, such as the existence of social networks and financial resources. Furthermore, migration is determined by the legal opportunities and the social conditions in target countries. If migration is restricted or reception conditions are harsh, fewer people will endure risks and hardship.

Regardless, the projected numbers would likely amount to many millions, and the scale of such an exodus and the substantial influx to the EU within such a brief timeframe would be unprecedented in recent history. It can only be compared with the displacement levels witnessed at the end of World War II, where some 12,5 million were displaced in Western Europe, 22,5 million across all of Europe, along with 12 million displaced Germans. Although the total figures could be similar to immigration

15 Because they are currently mostly residing in the eastern provinces which could possibly come under Russian occupation.

from third countries to the EU, which was recorded at 23.8 million in 2022, the rapid pace at which this forced migration would occur represents a unique challenge.

On the other hand, the current labour shortage of approximately 6 million vacancies in the EU, coupled with rapid population ageing[16] and an anticipated decline of seven million in the working age population over the next seven years implies that in numerical terms labour market integration might not be the key challenge. Nevertheless, with over 4 million displaced Ukrainians already being in the EU, around one million refugees coming annually from other countries, and with growing reluctance to accept more migrants and refugees, the arrival of several million more Ukrainians could shift public attitude and lead to social unrest and political instability. These potential consequences should also be considered when discussing the allies' support for Ukraine, or the lack thereof.

16 Population shrinking though is only expected after 2030.

Emigration from Russia after 24 February 2022: Main Patterns and Developments

Olga R. Gulina

June 2023

Executive summary

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has contributed to a large outflow of active and able-bodied individuals, skilled professionals, and business owners from Russia. Due to the bureaucratic and institutional challenges of traveling to the EU and other Western countries, the majority of Russian migrants settled in Central Asian and South Caucasus countries such as Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, which had been the main donors of migrants to Russia over the previous two decades.

One year after the invasion, Russia's emigration potential is nearly depleted. Neither new mobilisation nor increased combat will result in a new exodus of Russians from the country in the coming years. The countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus are faced with the challenge of properly regulating the influx of Russians in order to reap benefits without exacerbating social tensions in the hosting communities, which may require international actors to interfere. The EU member states will have to develop a more uniform strategy for accepting Russians from risk groups, as well as legal migration pathways for Russians who may benefit the EU labour market. This Policy Brief looks at the main patterns and key developments of migration from Russia after 24 February 2022.[1]

Background

Russia's military aggression in Ukraine and the subsequent curtailment of civil rights and freedoms within Russia, which resulted in the persecution of people of certain occupations and vulnerable groups such as journalists, human rights and social activists, LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as massive international sanctions, prompted an exodus of Russians from the Russian Federation in 2022.

Compared to 2021, the migration outflow of the Russian population increased both to the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)[2] – by 339,400 people, or 2.7 times, and to the so-called far abroad (non-CIS countries) – by 51,100 people or 2.9 times more[1]. According to the statistics of Russia and host countries, between 700,000 and 1,200,000 people allegedly left Russia from 24 February 2022 to 24 February 2023. Some left shortly after the open hostilities broke out on 24 February 2022, while others left after mobilisation was declared on 21 September 2022.

Among the first-wave migrants (February – September 2022), there were primarily freelancers and representatives of small and medium-sized businesses, as well as individuals facing substantial threats to life and safety and experiencing diminishing quality of life. Young people (26-41 years old), both women and men, mostly educated and financially independent, left Moscow, St. Petersburg and other large Russian cities.[2]

1 The data covers period from 24 February 2022 until March (exceptionally also May) 2023.

2 The CIS includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan Turkmenistan is an associate member of the CIS.

According to the statistics of Russia and host countries, between 700,000 and 1,200,000 people allegedly left Russia from 24 February 2022 to 24 February 2023.

Most of them spoke English or other foreign languages,[3] were politically motivated, donated money to independent NGOs, signed petitions and shared information on social media. Subsequently, they faced one or another form of political and/or economic pressure that compelled them to flee the country. According to opinion polls, people were leaving on the spur of the moment, without giving it another thought, and have chosen visa-free countries[4] as the key destinations for migration. One fifth of those polled planned to stay in the first receiving country, while 43% intended to move further.[5] Not all migrants who left Russia between February and September 2022 were able to establish themselves outside the country and were forced to return. People were returning because of family, pets and other commitments[6] in Russia; for not being able to get prescription drugs or undergo regular medical check-ups, or for fear of losing a job or being unable to provide for their families. According to polls conducted in March 2022, half of those who had left had adequate financial means to stay outside Russia[7] for three months, while for the majority the only income sources were and continue to be in the Russian Federation. According to the statement made by Maksut Shadayev, Russian Federation Minister of Digital Development, with a reference to mobile carrier statistics,[8] by May 2022, 80% of individuals who departed after 24 February 2022, had returned to Russia.

After the partial mobilisation was announced on 21 September 2022, and the adoption of new articles in the Russian Federation's Criminal Code, such as Article 352.1 Voluntary Surrender into Captivity, Russia experienced a second wave of emigration. The bulk of persons leaving virtually every region of Russia were men aged 18–50 with little interest in politics, no military (combat) experience, and varying physical health[9]. They fled Russia spontaneously, not believing the Russian authorities' assertions regarding the applied criteria and categories of people who are not subject to mobilisation (e.g., fathers of many children; people with chronic illnesses, or those beyond the draft age).

Only 15% of Russia's urban population considered leaving the country in August-October 2022, but even they are unlikely to leave given that many lack the necessary contacts, savings and skills.

The adoption by Russia's State Duma in April 2023 of a law on launching a unified register of reservists and persons liable for military service on the Public Services information portal, as well as the introduction of new rules for obtaining electronic summonses to appear in the military registration and enlistment offices, and the loss of civil rights of individuals evading military service, will all contribute to individual cases of departure, but will not cause a new mass emigration from the country. According to the ***Romir*** poll, only 15% of Russia's urban population considered leaving the country in August-October2022.[10] However, even those considering emigration are unlikely to leave, given that many lack the necessary contacts, savings and skills. Commitments to family and friends represent other deterrents, as are psychological defence mechanisms that maintain hope for improvement within the country, as well as real or make-believe stigmatization of Russians who have left, both within Russia and abroad.

Routes and scenarios of outward migration from Russia

In search of safety, Russians left not only for visa-free countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, Serbia and Montenegro, but also sailed on yachts to South Korea[11]; moved to Mongolia and the UAE[12]; sought refuge in Argentina[13] and Mexico[3]; sought asylum in the United States, and repatriated to Israel and Germany.

Migration from Russia after 24 February 2022 featured the following types:

1. 'Ethnic repatriation', which remains available only to a small number of Russian citizens of various ethnic origins.
2. 'Transit migration' covered a number of countries that became temporary entry points for Russians. It is applicable to everyone who left. The duration and geographic destination were heavily conditioned by subjective factors, ethnic origin, occupation, and command of languages.
3. 'Foothold' in countries such as Mongolia, Germany, France and the Czech Republic with some elements of institutional support for Russians from risk groups.
4. 'Business relocation' affected representations of international and Russian companies that left the Russian Federation. Türkiye, Armenia and Central Asia have become the relocation places for the majority of small and medium-sized businesses from Russia.
5. The 'return to Russia' has already affected some of those who left. In the absence of further dedicated humanitarian admission mechanisms, and in view of the continued visa tightening by EU member states and ambiguity in granting asylum to Russian citizens, this will be the most plausible scenario for the majority of Russian migrants who left the country in 2022.

Ethnic repatriation

Israel approved accelerated entry procedures for Russians entitled to repatriation. From 24 February to 31 July 2022, over 35,000 immigrants arrived in the country, of which nearly 19,000 came from Russia (49.2% Russian men and 50.8% Russian women[14]). Given that *Sokhnut*, the Israeli Agency for Repatriation, has opened transit camps in Azerbaijan and Finland for Russian citizens of Jewish origin interested in repatriation, the return of Russian Jews to their historical homeland will likely continue.

3 During the first two months of the war, more than 30,000 Russians arrived in Mexico (2.5 times more than in 2017, 2019, 2021). See also: Alicia Caldwell. Ukrainian Refugees Find Easier Path to Enter U.S. at the Mexican Border. Meanwhile, Russians fleeing sanctions and their government have a harder time getting into U.S. 25 March 2022 Available at https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukrainian-migrants-find-easier-path-to-enter-u-s-at-the-mexican-border-11648200602. Accessed 27 September 2022.

The number of appeals for the return of ethnic Germans from Russia to **Germany** reached 3,300 in 2022, exceeding previous years' records. According to the German Commissioner for Minorities and Late Immigrants, the mobilisation of Russians of German descent should be considered by the immigration services as a 'special case' that does not require consent for repatriation in Russia. Under these circumstances, ethnic Germans and members of their families should promptly contact the competent authority, the Federal Administrative Office in Friedland, which has to facilitate the expedited entry, issuance of visas and the postponement of entry dates for persons who have already received return documents and/or who are at risk (males aged 18 to 50 and their family members)[15]. This offers reason to believe that repatriation from Russia to Germany will also continue.

Ethnic emigration from Russia was also observed to the countries of **Central Asia and the South Caucasus**. In the first nine months of 2022, 1,631 Russians applied for **Kyrgyz citizenship**, which constitutes a fourfold increase as compared to the same period of 2021.[16] Kyrgyzstan has also introduced the 'meken card', which grants compatriots with foreign citizenship access to a special procedure for crossing the state border, as well as the right to stay in Kyrgyzstan and obtain education, treatment and employment.

For the first time since the Soviet Union's demise, over 25,000 Russian citizens of Armenian origin filed for Armenian citizenship.

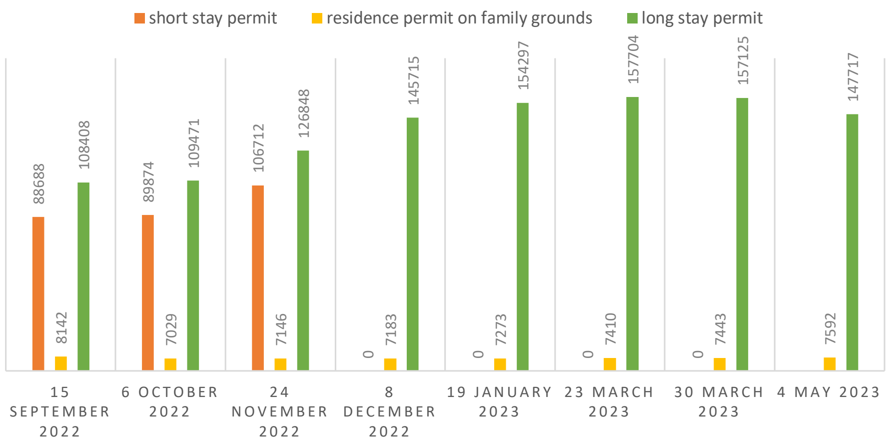
Between the beginning of 2022 and March 2023, around 700 ethnic Kazakhs received the 'kandas' status and repatriated **to Kazakhstan.**[17] The quota for receiving kandas and immigrants for 2023 was increased and set at 8,652 people by order of the Kazakhstani Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. In contrast to the growing trend of leaving Russia for Kazakhstan, the long-term trend of the return of Russian-speaking Kazakhstanis to Russia decreased by 30-50% in 2022, compared to 2012-2019.[18] A similar pattern is observed in **Armenia**, where the migration balance of Russian flows to and from the country totalled 39,000 persons from January to August 2022. For the first time since the Soviet Union's demise, over 25,000 Russian citizens of Armenian origin filed for Armenian citizenship.[19]

According to the Uzbek Department of Migration and Citizenship of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 318,156 Russians arrived in **Uzbekistan** from Russia during the first nine months of 2022, with males constituting two-thirds of the total. When Russia declared mobilisation, another 189,175 Russians entered the country.[20] According to the Uzbek Directorate of Migration and Citizenship of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 128,981 Russians applied for a residence permit in the country, indicating that the majority of Russian migrants in Uzbekistan consider the country as a long-term destination rather than a transit country. The presence of Russian emigrants in Uzbekistan necessitates additional research and attention.

Transit migration

Countries that have become transit hubs and safe havens for Russians who had no chance and/or desire to return to Russia and have not found a (legal) opportunity to move elsewhere, include Türkiye, Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, all of which allow visa-free entry to Russians. In 2022, the number of Russians applying for short-term and long-term permits in **Türkiye** was steadily growing, even after the end of the tourist season (see Fig. 1). By the end of 2022, however, the Turkish Statistics Department stopped showing an increase in short-term residence permits, and reflected a decrease in the number of long-term residence permits issued to Russians.

Fig. 1. Number of Russian citizens by legal status in Türkiye in 2022–2023



Source: Turkish Ministry of Internal Affairs[21]

The number of Russian citizens arriving in **Georgia** also grew daily after the mobilisation was announced in September 2022. The peak came on 25 and 26 September, when 11,143 and 10,804 Russian nationals entered Georgia, respectively.[22] Over 700,000 Russians crossed the Georgian border in late September 2022, but by mid-October 2022, more than 600,000 Russians left for Europe, Türkiye or Armenia. Only 100,000 migrants settled in Georgia.

Kazakhstan, particularly its northern regions, has become the largest transit point for Russians, owing primarily to its 7,000-kilometer-long common border with Russia. The height of the Russian migratory surge to Kazakhstan occurred in September, when 406,000 Russian citizens entered the country. Between 21 and 30 September, the average daily inflow of Russians was 30,000 people against 6,000–8,000 in other months.[23] Although Russia and **Kyrgyzstan** have no common land border, the flow of Russian citizens in 2022 was also significant (450,463 people arrived, 425,934 departed), with 273,000 Russian citizens registering for temporary or permanent residency.[24]

Kazakhstan, particularly its northern regions, has become the largest transit point for Russians, owing primarily to its 7,000-kilometer-long common border with Russia.

Business relocation

During the first nine months of 2022, 15,400 companies with Russian capital and founders registered their businesses in **Kazakhstan**, operating mainly in trade, communications and information technology, and consulting spheres.[25] Between April and October 2022, over 170,000 Russian citizens received individual identification codes[26] required for opening and running a business, opening a bank account, registering a car and real estate in Kazakhstan.[27] In the first quarter of 2023, 76 million USD were transferred from Russia to Kazakhstan, representing a 400% increase compared to the first quarter of 2022.[28]

A similar trend was observed in **Uzbekistan**, where the number of newly registered Russian companies has gradually increased from as few as three in January 2022 to as many as 189 in May 2022. The number of firms registered by In the number of registered businesses Russians in Uzbekistan also surpassed those of Chinese and Turkish citizens, which have been visible on the local market in the past years.[29]

Armenia and Türkiye have also emerged as popular destinations for Russian business migration. According to the Armenian Ministry of Economy, Russians opened 2,541 new companies in the country in the first nine months of 2022.[30] During the first half of 2022, 720 Russian companies registered in Türkiye.[31] By the end of the same year, this figure grew to 1,300 (+670% compared to 2021).[32]

Foothold

According to media reports, between 21 and 29 of September 2022, 6,268 Russians, mainly residents of the Republic of Buryatia, entered **Mongolia.[33]** Russian citizens can stay in Mongolia visa-free for 30 days with the possibility of extending this period for another 30 days. Following the announced mobilisation and the subsequent influx of Russians into Mongolia, the country's Immigration Agency announced that citizens of the Russian Federation could obtain a simplified temporary residence permit in Mongolia depending on the purpose of their stay (work, study, entrepreneurial activity) and as part of the existing 56 grounds for stay in the country.

Germany and France created special programs for reception and support, including visa assistance, for Russians in risk groups.

Germany and France created special programs for reception and support, including visa assistance, for Russians in risk groups, which are carried out by international and/or national NGOs, such as ***Reporters sans frontières*** or the ***International Memorial***. To issue a humanitarian visa, German authorities de facto check the applicants against four criteria: long-term cooperation and interaction with German organisations; inclusion of the applicant's name in the list of persons seeking protection and asylum[4]; confirmed facts of persecution by the Russian authorities; political, journalistic and other socially useful activity. Meanwhile, the French authorities issue visas and subsequent residence permits to Russians at risk, primarily if they are proficient in French.[5] Both countries have also emphasised the importance of revising visa policies for Russian citizens and supporting Russians fleeing mobilization[6].

On 20 May 2022, the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a special program to accept and relocate activists, journalists and NGO employees from Russia and Belarus to the **Czech Republic**. The program was launched in 2022 and extended for another year in April 2023. The annual reception and relocation quota is 500 people.[34] Citizens of Russia or Belarus who are (1) freedom fighters, human rights defenders, representatives of civil society, independent media or academia; or (2) forced to leave their country of origin due to active protection of democratic principles, in particular freedom of speech, or due to the impossibility of freely and with impunity to engage in professional activities, or for other reasons related to the threat to human rights and freedoms, are eligible to participate in the program. The program also provides institutional and visa assistance to spouses, minors or adult children in care, and partners in LGBT couples. To participate in the program, candidates have to send an e-mail with supporting documents to the authorized department for human rights of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Czech Republic, however, has chosen not to issue humanitarian visas and grant asylum to Russians who evade mobilisation.[35]

Host countries' policies in response to the influx of Russians

Visa-free countries

As of May 2023, attitudes towards Russian migrants varied by county and were heavily influenced by the migrants' professional qualifications and demographics.

The attitude of Central Asian and South Caucasus countries, which have visa-free regime with Russia, to the mass migration of Russians evolved in 2022. Having common cultural and historical links with Russia, they were more receptive to Russian emigrants of the first wave, but less so to the second-wave emigrants. After a year of war, these counties were forced to weight the benefits and drawbacks of migration from Russia, taking into account rising geopolitical tensions, calls for national identity preservation, the weakness of national labour markets and the low competitive advantages of their economies. As of May 2023, attitudes towards Russian migrants varied by county and were heavily influenced by the migrants' professional qualifications and demographics.

Georgia's position altered the most prominently, as it accepted the whole range of Russian emigration, including political emigrants, dissidents of the Putin regime, as well as representatives of NGOs and independent media, who faced repressions. In the second half of 2022, many Russian oppositionists, independent journalists[36] and Kremlin[37] opponents were denied entry to Georgia. Nona Mamulashvili, a spokeswoman for the United National Movement in Georgia, said that Russians fleeing mobilisation posed "a serious problem for the country[38]." The official data nevertheless reveal that there are still thousands of Russians in Georgia, for whom the one-year visa-free entry and stay remain in effect.

It will be important to monitor how the opening of Georgian airspace and direct flights from Georgia to Russia,[39] as well as Russia's lifting of the visa for Georgian citizens, announced by relevant decrees of the Russian President in May 2023,[40] will affect the status of Russian emigrants in Georgia.

The influx of Russian citizens into **Kazakhstan** sparked public and political debates, as well as media coverage. In 2022, more than half of the 5.6 million foreigners who entered Kazakhstan were citizens of the Russian Federation. Although the President of Kazakhstan announced the need "... to take care and ensure the safety [of Russians coming to the country]"[41] and officials formally stated that Kazakhstan will not extradite Russian citizens evading mobilisation, by the end of 2022, the country's migration services introduced new rules for the stay and movement of Russians. As of 26 January 2023[42], Russians, as citizens of a Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) member state, can lawfully stay in Kazakhstan for 90 out of 180 calendar days from the date of crossing the border. At the end of this period, they must seek permits to remain in Kazakhstan, whereas formerly Russians could re-cross the border and thereby prolong their visa-free stay. In addition, the migration services changed the rules for issuing a long-term residence permit, requiring foreigners to present a valid foreign passport, rather than an internal passport of their country of origin. Each foreign citizen will require the actual presence of the accommodation owner or a person acting on their behalf by proxy, or the notarized consent of the owner of the premises where the foreigner will live and be registered, to receive a temporary residence permit.

At the same time, Kazakhstan is interested in the human capital that had left Russia. On 28 February 2023, the Kazakhstani Ministry of Labour issued a list of 21 professions, holders of which among foreigners are subject to a simplified procedure for obtaining a residence permit.[43] This will allow Russian engineers, physicians and IT specialists to get legal status in Kazakhstan for up to ten years without having to prove solvency.

Along with Kazakhstan, other **Central Asian and Caucasus** countries are looking for Russian engineers and IT specialists. **Uzbekistan** has officially become one of the popular destinations for relocation of Russian IT experts, sales and customer service managers, thanks to the relocation program from the Uzbek ***IT Park*** and a special IT visa valid for up to three years. According to ***HeadHunter***, almost 10,000 Russian IT

4 Such lists are prepared by public organizations in Germany, confirming long-term and fruitful cooperation with the applicant and threats to his/her life. The lists are submitted for consideration and approval to the German Foreign Ministry.

5 This practice has existed for lawyers, attorneys and human rights defenders of a number of human rights organizations, including lawyers of the Memorial network.

6 France's ambassador to the United Nations and the United States, Gérard Araud, wrote, "It may be the moment to rethink the issue of visas to Russians... Helping the men who want to flee from being mobilized would be a humanitarian and military good decision". 21 September 2022. Available at https://twitter.com/GerardAraud/status/1572568547611770880

specialists were searching for jobs in Uzbekistan between November 2022 and January 2023.[44]

Kyrgyzstan also launched its *Digital Nomad* program in 2022, open to IT professionals from Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Russia. The program allows a foreign citizen to obtain a personal identification code in Kyrgyzstan without requiring a work permit, and grants the right to open and use accounts in the country's banks. In 2022, some 1,000 IT workers from the Russian Federation, who already had an employment contract in Kyrgyzstan, received the 'digital nomad' status.

Kyrgyz hospitality towards newly arrived Russian emigrants has given way to media[45] and parliamentary discussions on the issues associated with this immigration. Kyrgyzstan is becoming more aware of the geopolitical price of recognising Russians as refugees and offering them humanitarian legal status.[46]

The situation with Russians in **Türkiye** was fast changing. While Türkiye first opened its doors to Russian emigrants, it has subsequently tightened the rules for issuing visas and registering Russian citizens. In early October 2022, Kovcheg, a service helping Russians to relocate, reported a number of revoked residency permits in Türkiye, as well as refusals to entry based on tourist visas. In June 2022, Türkiye imposed restrictions on the geography of registering Russians in large Turkish cities, establishing lists of city districts that, even with a rental contract, do not allow the issuance of a residence permit to foreigners.

EU member states

The attitude of the EU countries toward Russian migrants gradually tightened during 2022, despite the increase in the number of Russian citizens seeking international protection and asylum in the EU.

The attitude of the EU countries toward Russian migrants gradually tightened during 2022, beginning with the closure of the EU airspace for aircraft from/to Russia in the spring and the suspension of the simplified visa regime in the autumn of 2022, despite the increase in the number of Russian citizens seeking international protection and asylum in the EU. In December 2022, the authorised departments of the EU states were considering 15,767 asylum applications submitted by Russians (up from 7,353 in 2021), while the success rate in the first instance courts stood at 34%.[47] As of May 2023, there are no prerequisites for changing this restrictive stance laid down by the Baltic countries and other EU states having land borders with the Russian Federation.

Within the EU, there are three different approaches to issuing visas, granting asylum and providing support to at-risk Russian citizens:

1. Humanitarian-oriented policy: Germany, the Czech Republic, Lithuania (prior to the adoption of the law 'On additional measures to protect national interests' in April 2023[48]);
2. Relatively flexible visa policy, respecting the rules and restrictions imposed by the EU countries following the abolition of the EU-Russia visa facilitation agreement: Greece, Hungary, etc.;
3. Tight policy: the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Finland, Estonia.

Quite many EU countries, including **Hungary, Greece, Italy, Malta, and Slovenia**, do not have humanitarian programs or mechanisms in place to accept at-risk Russian citizens; however, they do not tighten the visa regime for Russians, maintaining only visa and institutional restrictions in accordance with the EU sanctions. Thus, **Greece** suspended visa applications for Russian citizens in June 2022, but in the autumn Greek visa centres in the Russian cities of Moscow, Yekaterinburg, Kaliningrad, Kazan, Samara and Ufa were accepting documents for long-term visas (Type D).

Only a few EU countries take a humanitarian-oriented stance towards Russians.

Only a few EU countries take a humanitarian-oriented stance towards Russians. Since the outbreak of the war, **Lithuania and the Czech Republic** have continued to offer open support to at-risk Russians while also maintaining the procedure for issuing visas to other categories of Russians in accordance with the general restrictions imposed by the EU. The Lithuanian Seimas[49] established a procedure for thorough verification of Russian citizens for threats to national security, public order, public policy, internal security, public health and international relations of Lithuania, and also suspended the issuance of visas for citizens of the Russian Federation in the general order. However, if Russians have family members who are Lithuanian or EU nationals, the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry continues to issue visas to them. Furthermore, Lithuania issues humanitarian visas to at-risk Russians.

However, in April 2023, members of the Seimas suspended the Lithuanian e-resident status and the acceptance of new applications from citizens of Russia and Belarus. They also imposed restrictions on acquiring visas, short-term and long-term residence permits, as well as limitations on the acquisition and circulation of real estate in Lithuania, purchased by Russian citizens and/or legal entities controlled by Russians. The exception applies only to Russians with a permanent or temporary residence permit, as well as those who inherit real estate.[7]

Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Estonia and the Scandinavian countries take a tough stance. Since March 2022, **Estonia** has completely suspended the issuance of both national visas (Type D) and short-term Schengen visas (Type C) for citizens of the Russian Federation.[50] **Poland**, suspending the issuance of D and C visas[51] for Russians, has a de jure mechanism for granting humanitarian visas to citizens of Russia and Belarus.

7 Article 3(2) of the Law on Imposing Restrictive Measures Regarding the Military Aggression Against Ukraine applies from 1 July 2023 until 2 May 2024. https://www.lrs.lt/sip/portal.show?p_r=35403&p_k=2&p_t=284347&p_kade_id=9

On 29 September 2022, the President and Government of **Finland**[52] approved restrictions on the entry of Russian citizens into the country, commencing 30 September 2022, for an indefinite period of time until withdrawal. Russia's mobilisation constitutes a 'threat to the international relations of Finland', according to Art. 6 §1 of the Schengen Code, and hence the granting of short-term Schengen visas (Type C) for at-risk persons and/or those seeking asylum is not subject to approval. Although **Finland** does not issue humanitarian visas to citizens of the Russian Federation, they can apply for asylum on the Finland-Russia border, according to a press release of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the country's border service.[53] The country is still discussing the feasibility of developing humanitarian programs and/or visas for Russians in need of asylum and international protection.

Due to Russia declaring the personnel of the Dutch consulate persona non grata,[54] **the Netherlands** has not issued short-term Schengen visas (Type C) to Russian citizens since 27 April 2022. The country halted processing of asylum applications from Russians subject to mobilisation,[55] but allowed Russians already present in the Kingdom to remain. At the same time, the period for considering asylum applications from Russian citizens who arrived in the Netherlands before February 2022 has increased to 18–21 months. The Secretary of State for Asylum, Eric van der Burgh, announced in December 2022 that 'the threat of being mobilised in Russia cannot be the legal basis for asylum in the Netherlands'.[56]

Norway also announced the temporary suspension of the Norwegian-Russian agreement on simplified visa issuance beginning 22 September 2022; however, it allows Russian citizens with valid documents (visa, residence permit) to enter with certain restrictions and accepts visa applications from Russian citizens. Norway, which has received about 300 asylum applications since Russia's mobilisation, will not evaluate these claims until a new procedure for considering asylum applications from Russian citizens is approved.[57]

Conclusions and recommendations

After Russia's adoption of the law on the creation of an electronic register of Russian reservists in April 2023, new conscription rules with the use of electronic summonses, another wave of mobilisation or even if military clashes between Russia and Ukraine intensify, one should not expect a similar departure of Russians *en masse* from the country, comparable to the flows of 2022, since the emigration potential of Russians remaining in the country is limited. At the same time, return may become a more viable option for many. As was observed in 2022, Russian emigrants will be returning due to a lack of humanitarian reception programs and support outside their country of origin, as well as the load of personal, social or professional commitments.

One should not expect a similar departure of Russians en masse from the country, comparable to the flows of 2022. At the same time, return may become a more viable option for many.

Given fewer bureaucratic barriers and the possibility to communicate in Russian, as well as the understanding of political and legal realities, visa-free states of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, primarily Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, remain the main destination for Russian emigration. Along with Türkiye, these countries benefited the most from Russian emigration through the influx of qualified workers and the relocation of income-generating businesses. Throughout the coming year, they will retain their interest in qualified emigrants from Russia or repatriation of Russian citizens of Central Asian or Caucasian ethnic origin. In the near future (anywhere for up to three years) a new inflow of Russians into these countries might shift the ethnic balance of the titular nations and become a cause of social tension. It is unclear to what extent Central Asian and South Caucasus states will be able to capitalise on the gained economic, financial, human resources and emerging benefits. To optimise social processes inside these countries, including support for national labour markets and interaction between local and foreign populations, they may need financial and institutional support from international donors.

In comparison to the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, EU member states reaped far less from the migration of Russian human capital due to their disparate approaches towards Russians leaving their country. To unify the programs and efforts of humanitarian support for certain categories of Russians within the EU, EU member states need to legally assess the programs for admitting at-risk Russian citizens existing in the Czech Republic, Germany and France. Based on the practice of the EU Court of Justice and the courts of EU member states, it is also necessary to analyse and provide a legal evaluation of the feasibility of granting asylum and humanitarian protection to citizens of the Russian Federation evading mobilisation and unwilling to participate in hostilities in Ukraine. With the tightened visa regime and the suspension of the EU-Russia visa facilitation agreement, it would be important to maintain a flexible visa policy and consider additional ways of legal migration to EU countries for at-risk Russian nationals, as well as certain groups of the Russian population, such as young people, researchers and qualified workers, as well as Russian citizens who have family and/or relatives in the EU, to avoid a new ***iron curtain***. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to consider creating additional legal migration pathways for Russian qualified or skilled labour that is of interest to the EU labour market.

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Russian "Relokanty" in the Caucasus and Central Asia: Cooperation and Tensions Between States and Societies

Jeff Sahadeo

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Executive summary

Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have absorbed hundreds of thousands of migrants who left Russia in the two years since its invasion of Ukraine. These Russians, who call themselves "*relokanty*", have transformed national economies and urban spaces. Inflows of talent and capital have also delivered societal challenges. These range from increased inflation to renewed memories of the negative impacts of Russian and Soviet colonization, as well as fears that these *relokanty* might constitute a new vehicle for Russian influence.

As the war appears to have reached a stalemate in 2024, these Russian migrants must consider short- and long-term strategies for residence. They share knowledge on current relationships with host societies, costs, economic opportunities and political stability as they "shop" for homes. Georgians, Armenians, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz have not yet openly protested Russian migrants, but their welcome is wearing thin as economic growth decelerates and inflation and other indicators that affect daily life worsen. Each government must consider the risks of the issue of Russian migrants becoming e politicized in these young national states. Especially if Russia chooses to intervene regionally, these migrants could become a destabilizing element.

Introduction: The scale and the stakes

Two years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens who objected to the conflict, feared mobilisation or sought new opportunities remain outside their home country. As the United States and European Union's doors to these out-migrants stay largely closed, Caucasus and Central Asian countries continue to play host to substantial émigré communities. Russians there live in a state of suspended animation – at once unwilling to return to a wartime Russia and wary of putting down roots in countries they do not see as home.

Governments in these destination states, even as they tout economic growth, must manage internal tensions while dealing with a wartime Russia offering both carrots and sticks to keep them outside a Western coalition.

This inflow of Russians has transformed the host states and societies of Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Each has gained human talent and financial capital. Russian arrivals are clustered in major cities, where they have had a dramatic effect – in Tbilisi's restaurants and Yerevan's boardrooms, in Almaty's parks and the now facial-recognition camera-equipped street corners of Bishkek. Urban dynamism has come at a cost. Housing prices skyrocketed and social services are strained. The waves of Russian *"relokanty"*[1], as they call themselves, offer an uncomfortable reminder of colonial legacies and the continued regional dominance of a powerful northern neighbour. Governments in these destination states, even as they tout economic growth, must manage internal tensions while dealing with a wartime Russia offering both carrots and sticks to keep them outside a Western coalition. Russians and host societies alike face the situation of war in stalemate, where the possibilities of return to a changed Russia appear distant in states where social and political stability are far from given.

Russian relokanty: Where is home?

The Policy Platform Re: Russia estimates between 817 000 to 922 000 Russians abandoned their country through mid-2023,[I] although the economist Vladislav Inozemstev pegs the number at over one million.[II] The choices of those leaving – especially those of lesser means – have been constrained. European Union countries, the most desirable potential shelters for many who fled, still refuse to accept most Russian citizens. They link bans to objections to Russian state behaviour and fears of admitting pro-war, pro-regime elements.[III] As of late 2023, asylum application numbers from Russian citizens hover around 1500 monthly, with recognition rates of 35%.[IV] The United States has no special pathway to accept Russians, even as growing numbers make their way to Mexico and claim asylum at the border.[V] Some wealthier Russian citizens had existing connections in the Gulf States[VI] but for most expediency was the main factor in their initial destination choice. *Relokanty* clustered in nearby states, which were cheaper to get to and did not require a visa. Serbia and Türkiye have hosted tens of thousands of such migrants, but their impact has been greatest in Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Historical connections, familiarity through tourism and existing Russian communities joined ease of travel to make these four states points of arrival. As Eurasian Union countries (EEU), Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan do not require international passports for entry and many Russians may only carry national ID cards.[VII] Georgia allows Russian citizens to stay in the country visa-free for 12 months, which can be renewed by leaving and re-entering the country for one day. As of early 2024, only Kazakhstan has placed new limits on Russian citizens. Those who lack an employment contract or other reason to stay (work, study, etc.) will be required to leave the country for 90 days after a visa-free period of 90 days.[VIII] Migrants follow developments in destination states as they "shop" for homes. Websites such as https://relokatz.com/

1 Russians use the term "relokanty" – derived from "relokatsiia" [relocation] employed in Russian to signal the movement of enterprises – to distinguish themselves as a category of human mobility, much in the way Westerners employ "expatriates." "Relokanty" allows Russians to differ themselves from Georgians, Armenians, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz who come to Russia and are labelled "migranty" or "gastarbeitery" [guest workers], terms with racialized connotations. Caucasus and Central Asians have their own names for relokanty – Georgians might call them "guests" with an ironic tone as do Kyrgyz when they say, "Russian Russians." Some Western observers prefer the term "draft dodgers."

and telegram channels allow Russians to evaluate entry requirements, living costs and other features in dozens of potential host countries.[IX]

Russian legislation introduced in April 2023 makes an exodus of citizens fleeing potential or actual military enlistment on the scale of February-March or September-October 2022 unlikely.

Russian legislation introduced in April 2023 makes an exodus of citizens fleeing potential or actual military enlistment on the scale of February-March or September-October 2022 unlikely. Draft notices are no longer required to be served in person. This is now done through the electronic portal "*Gosuslugi,*" which Russians use for everyday services such as paying fines and applying for passports. Even if a draftee is not registered for *Gosuslugi* or on the internet, they will be considered served and forbidden from leaving the country.[X] The Russian government is thus better prepared for any future mobilization and to guard its human capital in the country if it decides to do so.

The pressing question of these *relokanty* has become their fate. Following the two distinct spikes in departures from Russia in 2022 – right after the invasion and then following Putin's announcement of 'partial mobilisation' in September 2022 – small numbers have returned home but most are now considering extended stays abroad. Some fear persecution by the Putin regime – either forced enlistment, prison sentences or more fantastical plans floated by politicians such as Russian duma speaker Viacheslav Volodin, who proposed that Russians abroad deemed to have supported Ukraine should be sent on return to gulag-style prison camps in the Far East.[XI] Putin has designated those who left as "traitors" and "scum."[XII] Families of those who have departed continue to receive summonses to recruitment centres.[XIII] Some *relokanty* report strained relations with family members and close friends who support the war. At the same time, the Russian government could enact measures to compel a return – including seizing the property of absent IT workers and returning it to the state or giving it to soldiers.

Most Russians see countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia as transit points – hopeful that if they cannot return to their homes in the near to medium-term future, they can eventually make their way to the European Union, North America or elsewhere. One survey of *relokanty* in the Caucasus found only 14% plan to stay in Georgia and 12% in Armenia. Yet, as the war stretches on, *relokanty* confront lives in-between. With families split, savings evaporating and possessions in both Russia and these destination countries, many migrants risk short- or medium-term returns to see loved ones, sell their flats or collect goods. They weigh decisions to move to other countries based on economic opportunity, personal connections or passport/visa issues. The state of vulnerability, of nomadism, affects both them and the hosting countries, for who knows how long?

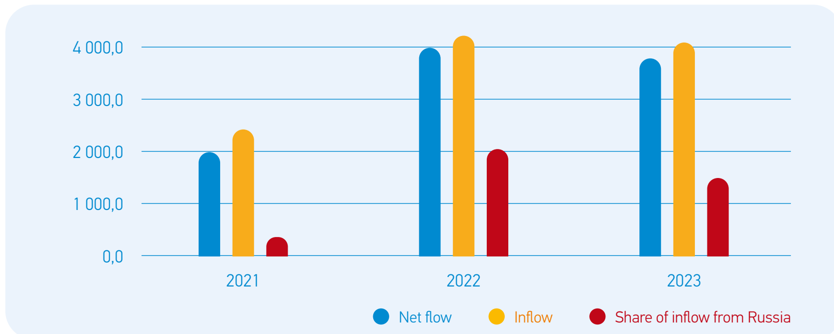
Georgia

Georgian Dream, the political party which forms the current government, has remained largely silent on the influx of Russian *relokanty*. But it has beaten back efforts to punish Russia, and Russians, for the invasion of Ukraine. Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili has refused to implement sanctions on the Russian government. Chairman Irakli Kobakhidze stated on pro-government Imedi TV that claims of Russians fleeing mobilization posing a threat to national security were "completely absurd."[XV]

Estimates of Russians staying long-term in Georgia range from 62 000 to 130 000.[XVI] Government officials point to the substantial increase in GDP that has accompanied the influx of Russian migrants and the benefits of Russian capital and investments. The Georgian lari has also risen significantly.[XVII] On 19 May 2023, Georgian Dream agreed to the restoration of direct flights between Moscow and Tbilisi, to the anger of local citizens and opposition politicians.

Georgian Dream policies have aroused the ire of non-government politicians and activists in the overwhelmingly pro-European country. Opposition proposals have ranged from imposing "entry taxes" on new arrivals to visas, which would be issued contingent on recognition that Russia currently occupies sovereign Georgian territory.[XVIII] Georgia's president Salome Zourabichvili has taken the most vocal position against Russian migration. On 26 October 2023, she appeared on the US current affairs show "60 Minutes" where she stated that Russian *relokanty* "speak the language of the enemy and believe that they are at home."[XIX] Zourabichvili lacks powers to alter government policy; nonetheless, Russian media attacked her remarks, claiming she is plotting politically against the current government. The media repeat Georgian Dream's line that Russian migrants benefit Georgia's economy, even as increasing numbers are returning to the homeland, realising that sanctions have not hurt the economy and they are safer in Russia.[XX]

Chart. 1: Remittances to Georgia (in million USD, 2021-2023)



Source: based on the National Bank of Georgia data

Georgia has provided the most fraught host environment for relokanty.

Georgia has provided the most fraught host environment for *relokanty*. The streets of the capital, Tbilisi, are replete with anti-Russian graffiti. Seventy-nine percent of Georgians have a "strictly negative attitude" towards these Russian "guests."[XXI] Few Georgians under 50 willingly speak Russian in their own country.

Even as they recognize that many Russians arrived because of political opposition to the Putin regime, most Georgians believe their presence has negatively altered the character of Tbilisi and Batumi, a Black Sea resort city also housing tens of thousands of *relokanty*. One piece of graffiti that might best summarize this attitude is "Good Russian? Go Home." On an individual level, though, relations are generally cordial – especially for Russians who respect the complicated imperial history of the region. One relokant who opened a falafel stand in late 2022 recalled: "I never got as much help as here…I haven't seen a more welcoming place." [XXII]

Still, Russian *relokanty* have constructed a parallel society in Georgia. They open their own businesses, not only cafés and restaurants but also bookstores, co-working spaces, boutiques and salons.[XXIII] Service establishments are notable by the predominance of English-language signage, Slavic staff and goods popular with Russians. Some hang Ukrainian flags to denote their political position. Russians who patronize these establishments need not worry about signing pledges that they support Ukraine and the return of Georgia's occupied territories, a popular trend in Georgian-owned restaurants.

Relokanty to this point remain largely bystanders in Georgian society's economic challenges. An October 2023 poll saw Georgians consider the most critical social problems as unemployment (47%), inflation (45%) and poverty (43%). Migration of Russians to Georgia came in ninth place, at 13%.[XXVI] Eighty-six percent of Georgians support European Union membership, however, and it is possible – and the subject of speculation in the Russian media – that *relokanty* could become political footballs between pro-EU forces and Georgian Dream as elections approach in 2024.

In this country with EU aspirations, dependence on the Russian economy has increased since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. [XXV] Transparency International notes that since the war, "the number of Russian companies has tripled compared to…1995-2021."[XXVI] Seventy-four percent of companies in Georgia whose owners are legal entities and/or citizens of the Russian Federation have been registered since the war. A sense of economic competition between Russian- and Georgian-owned businesses might emerge as another flashpoint. Georgian Dream is likely already concerned about this possibility.[XXVII] The government has reduced the percentage of residence permits issued to eligible Russians – generally entrepreneurs – from 90% before the invasion to 60% afterwards.[2] Some Russians have been refused entry, or re-entry, to Georgia. These include those of North Caucasus ethnicity or political activists, including LGBTQI+ figures – migrants the Georgian Dream government might not see as welcome.[XXVIII] Opposition figures are finding Germany, which has eased conditions for Russians who have been persecuted by Putin's regime to receive humanitarian visas, a more comfortable destination.[XXIX]

2 Foreign citizens who purchase real estate worth over $100,000, invest over $300,000, or create a business with annual turnover over 50,000 lari are eligible to apply for a residence permit in Georgia.

Armenia

Armenia remains a welcoming environment for Russian migrants, even following the turmoil surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh events of October 2023. Until recently, Russia and Armenia have enjoyed a close relationship. Anywhere from 80 000 to 300 000 Armenians (of a population of 2.8 million) work in Russia.[XXX] Russian is spoken about equally to Armenian in the capital of Yerevan and Armenians throughout the country are able and willing to speak Russian. Armenia's pre-2022 efforts to develop an IT industry proved attractive to Russian high-skilled workers who left in the invasion's immediate aftermath. In October 2022, the Russian ambassador to Armenia Sergei Koprykin noted the warmth with which Armenians received Russian migrants and the boost they have provided to the economy. [XXXI] *Relokanty* serving as teachers staff increased numbers of Russian-language positions at Armenian schools.

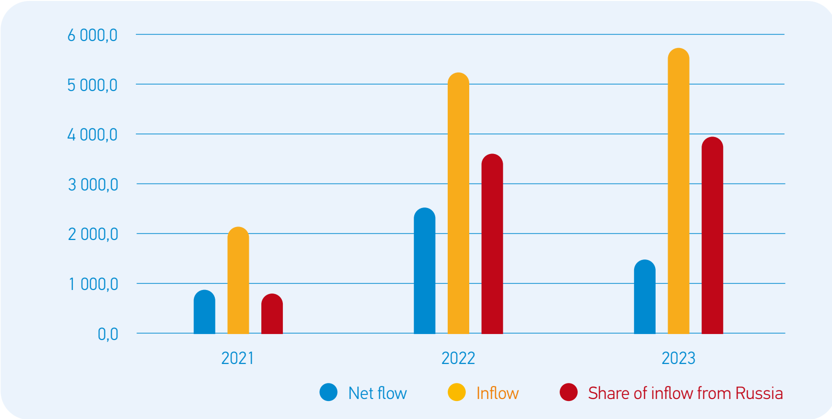
Late 2023 has seen a rapid deterioration of the Armenia-Russia relationship. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan seeks to move Armenia closer to the West after Russia's failure to assist its fellow Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member in its conflict with Azerbaijan. Pashinyan told the Wall Street Journal in October 2023 that he saw "no advantage" in Russian troop presence in Armenia.[XXXII] Russian media has advocated a change in government in Armenia and anti-Armenian accusations have prompted heated diplomatic exchanges and summonses.[XXIII]

Russian migrants in Armenia remain in the eye of the diplomatic hurricane.

Russian migrants in Armenia remain in the eye of the diplomatic hurricane. Armenian diplomats and government members stress the benefits of Russian migration to the economy and friendly relationships between locals and migrants.[XXXI] Russian migrants have provided a substantial economic boost to Armenia. Comparing World Bank and IMF data, an expected 4.8% GDP growth in 2022 mushroomed to 12.6%, placing Armenia as a top global performer. Russians transferred 1.75-2.5 billion USD to the country. [XXXV] Estimates of Russians in Armenia vary from 60 000-300 000, but their numbers appear to have decreased. [XXXVI] One local study has noted that the influx of private transfers to Armenia has declined 20% from the first nine months of 2022 to 2023 and the government recorded more exits of Russian citizens than entries. [XXXVII] Russians seek cheaper destinations as food and housing prices in Yerevan remain high; these include Cyprus and Egypt. [XXXVIII] The World Bank's October 2023 forecast predicts Armenian economic growth to be about half of 2022 at 6.6% and to decline thereafter. [XXXIX]

Relokanty remain critical to Armenia's IT sector, its main economic success story before and after its wars with Azerbaijan. Armenia's reputation in this field attracted substantial numbers of Russian IT workers, who compose perhaps even the majority of Russian newcomers – one estimate places their numbers at 30 000-40 000.[XL] Major Russian technology companies, including Miro and Yandex, have opened offices in Armenia.[XLI] The head of one Armenian IT company, Picsart, notes that: "Having so many new Russian colleagues on the ground has expanded the creativity, the mindset, the solutions."[XLII] The presence of Russian IT workers is helping to globalize the sector. English is now the workplace language, which will expand the types of work employees can do, towards the European Union and North America.

Chart. 2: Remittances to Armenia (in million USD, 2021-2023)



Source: based on the Central Bank of Armenia data

As in Georgia, Russian migrants have founded their own small-scale organizations to help not just Russian migrants, but those from Ukraine as well as Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh.

Russian migrants to Armenia, according to a Zentrum für Osteuropa und internationale Studien study, are characterized by youth, higher education and socially progressive values. Many women came as part of the initial February 2022 wave – more *relokanty* arrived in Armenia then as compared to the September mobilisation.[XLIII] *Relokanty* mobilized quickly after the invasion to assist those subsequently arriving from Russia. Kovcheg [The Ark] provides start-up housing for Russians in Yerevan and Istanbul. It focuses on those who left explicitly in opposition to Putin's regime.[XLIV] As in Georgia, Russian migrants have founded their own small-scale organizations to help not just Russian migrants, but those from Ukraine as well as Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh.[XLV]

Armenia's closer ties to Russia have facilitated far different modes of everyday interactions than in Georgia. New businesses do not need to conceal links to Russia. Volchok, a streetwear shop founded in Moscow, has opened a branch in Yerevan. ArtDocFest, a film festival once held annually in Moscow, opened in November 2022 in Yerevan, attracting homesick Russian *relokanty*.[XLVI] In Yerevan, Armenians who studied or worked in Russia are attracted to new cafés and restaurants that recreate the style of cities they see as more cosmopolitan.

How long this vibrancy can endure is uncertain. Russian IT workers remain tentative as to their future. Many employed by Russian companies worry that the Russian government might end the practice of remote working at any time.[XLVII] Russians who operate businesses in Yerevan are not committing for the long haul: "Our planning horizon is about a month" stated one restaurant owner.[XLVIII] One US embassy diplomat in Yerevan has noted an increase in late 2023 in Russians seeking entry to the United States directly, or through travelling to Mexico to claim asylum at the US-Mexico border.

Relokanty use their experience, temporary or not, to broaden their views of Russia's relationship to its southern neighbours. Guzel Yusupova, an anthropologist who herself left Russia in early 2022, recounts Russians claiming their stay in Armenia as making them aware of their chauvinism towards "Blacks" [chernye], as Armenians and other southern peoples are known.[XLIX] But most rationalize a lack of desire to adapt to their new environment and learn the language. *Relokanty* consider their presence as a gift to an Armenia undergoing intense suffering. They bring capital, talent, patronize local businesses and give Yerevan a global feel.[L] However, many Russian migrants from lower social strata struggle, as do local Armenians, with rising costs of living. They settle in the food delivery industry, delivering groceries or restaurant meals on bikes, scooters or motorcycles.[LI]

Unknown is how the Russian government might see these migrants as a potential tool of foreign policy, especially as diplomatic relations deteriorate. Russia has substantial leverage over Armenia, supplying basic goods, energy resources and a labour market. To this point Russia has avoided such a temptation.

Kazakhstan

The Kazakh government keeps a close watch on potential separatism in the North, charging several Russians with separatist activities and criminalizing Russian passports.

Kazakhstan shares the second-largest land border in the world (7664 km) with Russia and has witnessed significant in-migration. In December 2022, the Kazakh migration service reported that 2.9 million Russians had crossed the border over the year, including almost a million in the immediate aftermath of the September mobilisation. Those who remain in the country in late 2023 number, according to most estimates, range from 150 000-300 000.[LII] The numbers are less notable in a country with 3 million Russians among its population of 19.6 million, but the flow has had important political and societal effects.

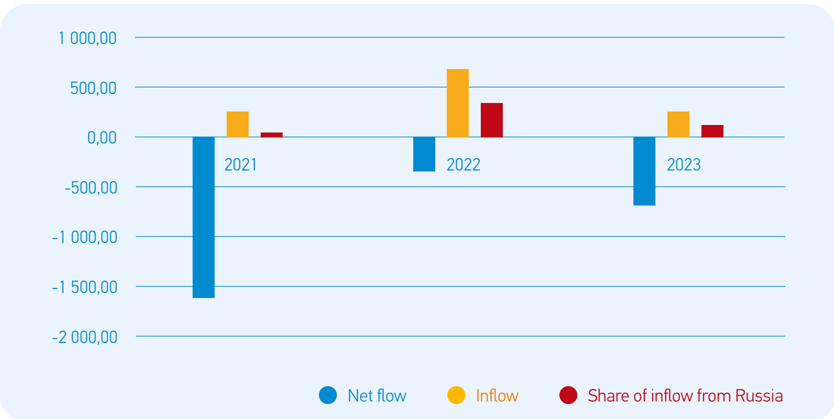
Kazakhstan's government walks a fine line in dealing with its Russian counterpart. Although, like Armenia, the country belongs to the EEU and the CSTO, Kazakhs are acutely aware that its significant Russian minority in the northern borderland regions might be a pretext for Russian expansion. The Kazakh government keeps a close watch on potential separatism in the North, charging several Russians with separatist activities and criminalizing Russian passports.[LIII]

Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev refused to recognize Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories based on September 2022 referenda, irritating the Kremlin.[LIV] Tokayev's stance solidified popular support behind him, as someone leading the country independently – less than two years after he needed Russian troops to supress a domestic insurrection.[LV] Moscow, in need of allies, has tread diplomatically. President Putin visited Kazakhstan in November 2023 for talks on energy, natural resource cooperation and other outstanding issues between the two countries.[LVI] The visit followed one by French President Emmanuel Macron. Unlike Georgia, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan is extremely rich in natural resources, with a real GDP ranking among the highest in the post-Soviet space. [LVII] The country has tools to conduct a multivector foreign policy.

President Tokayev has urged Kazakhs to welcome fleeing Russians, stating: "We must take care of them and ensure their safety. This is a political and humanitarian issue." Kazakhstan has received a different palette of Russian migrants than the Caucasus. More have arrived from Eurasian regions of the country (Tatarstan, Tuva, Buryatia) – including significant numbers of non-ethnic Russians.[LVIII] The ease of border crossings has led many Russians in Siberia to establish themselves close to the border, where friends and family can easily visit.[LIX]

Kazakhstan has nonetheless faced pressure from Moscow – backed by bilateral treaty obligations – to return *relokanty* considered dangerous. Evgenia Baltatarova, a journalist and activist from Buryatia, fled Russia in early 2022 as police were opening a criminal case against her for spreading antiwar "fake news." Kazakh authorities learned of these charges when they stopped Baltatarova at a routine document check. They subsequently forbid her from leaving Kazakhstan – a treaty provision between Russia and Kazakhstan requires wanted exiles to be prohibited to leave for a third country.[LX] Baltatarova has been granted a reprieve. Kazakhstan is not required to extradite for crimes not in its own criminal code, which include Russia's wartime censorship laws. But Kazakh authorities have not renewed her work permit and refused to extend her residence permit.[LXI] "We are all hostages here," Baltatarova says "Kazakhstan doesn't need us, but, frankly, other countries are not too keen on hosting us either."[LXII] Random document inspections – common in Kazakhstan – will turn up warrants issued by Russia, threatening *relokanty's* status and future. Russians who apply to the Kazakh government for refugee status face a 90% rejection rate.[LXIII]

Chart. 3: Remittances to Kazakhstan (in billion KZT, 2021-2023)



Source: based on the National Bank of Kazakhstan data

The ideal Kazakh government solution would be for most migrants to quietly leave.

The ideal Kazakh government solution would be for most migrants to quietly leave. Russian *relokanty* provide less economic advantage in this large, wealthy republic and could potentially harm nationalizing efforts. In January 2023, the Kazakh government enacted a law that after a 90-day visa-free stay – allowed for all Russians – migrants without official permission to remain longer, attained primarily through work or study, would be required to exit the country for 90 days before returning (previously they might just cross an international border and immediately return, a practice known as "zeroing"). By the end of 2022, about 36 000 Russian *relokanty* had been granted residence permits for longer-term stays. [LXIV] The Kazakh government has offered little explanation for this law, but there have been concerns of Russians working in the shadow economy. Official registration will make it easier to track them and have them pay taxes.[LXV]

This legislation places Russians without international passports in a particularly difficult situation. Their future (legal) destinations are limited to other EEU countries. Otherwise, they require a third-country humanitarian visa. Some are crossing into Uzbekistan. Uzbek authorities are registering them as legal migrants, but they do not automatically have the option to work.[LXVI] The Migration Committee of Kazakhstan has stated that of the 937 000 Russians who entered Kazakhstan following September 2022, over two-thirds left by January 2023. [LXVII]

Russian migrants who remain have boosted local labour markets. From January to September 2022, Russian companies in Kazakhstan increased by around 4 000, with Almaty as a favoured destination.[LXVIII] *Relokanty* fill labour shortages in northern Kazakhstan. Russian is the common professional language in much of Kazakhstan – in major cities and the north. The Kazakh government supports nationalist movements to elevate the place of the Kazakh language, however, which has produced tension.[LXX] Some Kazakhs see these new arrivals as unwelcome as Kazakhstan establishes a national, decolonial history.[LXXI] *Relokanty* note a general feeling of comfort in Kazakhstan but suffer loneliness, missing family, partners, friends, home – not knowing if or when they can return without risking prison or military service.[LXXII]

Some antiwar Russian migrants who arrived in Kazakhstan have been surprised to find support for – or indifference towards – Putin's invasion. A poll carried out by Kazakh non-government organisations in May 2023 revealed that almost 60% are neutral regarding the war, 12.8% support Russia and 21.1% support Ukraine.[LXXIII]

Kyrgyzstan

Furthest from Russia by land of these four states, Kyrgyzstan nonetheless offers advantages for *relokanty*. Flights from multiple Russian cities are frequent, catering to still-substantial Kyrgyz migrant labour in Russia. Kyrgyzstan has a strong relationship with Russia and is an EEU state. Russian is commonly spoken in cities, and the cost of living is low. Estimates place the number of Russian *relokanty* to Kyrgyzstan between 30 000-60 000 at the end of 2022, though numbers appear to have declined over 2023.[LXXIV]

Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov remarked during the second wave of migration that Russians "can of course come here and work freely" and that "[w]e don't see any harm and lots of benefits" from this influx.[LXXV] Kyrgyz government officials started the Digital Nomad program to attract Russian IT workers with promises of long-term visas, simplified transition processes and tax benefits. Only about 1000 foreigners had received the status by February 2023.[LXXVI] The Kyrgyz economy grew by 7% in 2022, behind Georgia and Armenia but still impressive and likely somewhat driven by the 2.8 billion USD in transfers from Russia to Kyrgyzstan that year.[LXXVII]

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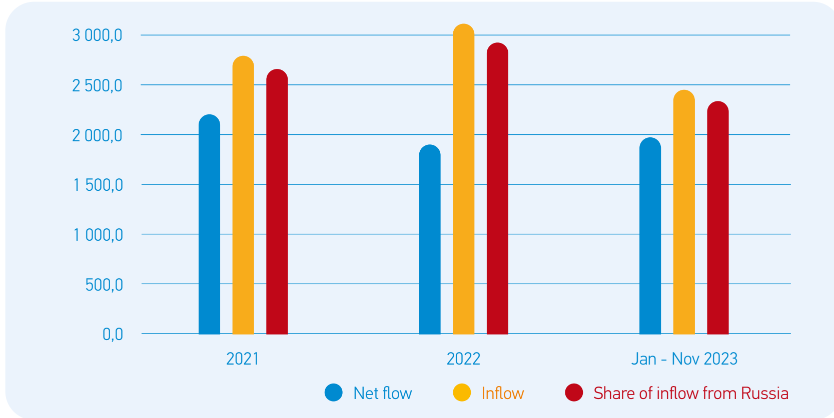
The Kyrgyz government retains its strong reliance on Russia for energy and basic supplies. [LXXVIII] Putin visited Bishkek in October 2023 to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of Russia's Kant military base – his first foreign trip since the International Criminal Court issued a warrant for his arrest. He reminded President Japarov in a meeting that Russia remained Kyrgyzstan's biggest investor. Unmentioned was the high volume of goods entering Kyrgyzstan that have travelled to Russia in violation of international sanctions.[LXXIX] The Kyrgyz parliament exempted Russian citizens from 2023 restrictions on foreign citizens who enter from visa-free countries.[LXXX]

Putin also stated that those who violate Russian laws will be held accountable regardless of their location.[LXXXI] A year after Japarov told Russians that they should have no fear of being extradited, Russian migrants have cause for concern. Over 2023, the Russian government has pressured the Kyrgyz government to track antiwar activists. In June 2023, Kyrgyzstan joined Russia and Kazakhstan in sharing personal data of citizens.[LXXXII] Alyona Krylova, a representative of the For Human Rights NGO in Russia, was arrested in Bishkek in June and remains in detention. Russian left-wing activist and anarchist Lev Skoryakin was abducted from prison in Kyrgyzstan in October 2023 and taken to Russia.[LXXXIII] Kyrgyz activist Kanat Nogoibaev stated: "Civil activists and regular Russian citizens [in Kyrgyzstan] have gone missing and been found in Russian military units. The National Security Committee [of Kyrgyzstan] collaborates with the [Russian] FSB."[LXXXIV] Kyrgyzstan has restricted the right to peaceful assembly to target antiwar rallies and silenced independent media.[LXXXV]

Russian migrants to Kyrgyzstan nonetheless note the ease of relationships with local Kyrgyz. Many arriving in 2022 recall heartfelt welcomes, including offers of free food and accommodation.[LXXXVI] Kyrgyz themselves have strong links to Russia. Over 1 million Kyrgyz work in the country. Migrant remittances account for about 30% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP, one of the highest rates in the world.[LXXXVII] Many houses in southern Kyrgyzstan hosting Russian migrants were built with funds from Kyrgyz migration to Russia.[LXXXVIII]

Chart. 4: Remittances to Kyrgyzstan (in million USD, 2021-2023)



Source: based on the National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic data

Bishkek, the main arrival point for *relokanty*, faced similar strains as other Caucasus and Central Asian capitals in 2022. But in Kyrgyzstan, as in other countries, blame for rising apartment prices – which hit students and low-income earners hardest – is diffused. Anger is often directed at local authorities who fail to intervene when landlords eject tenants who can't pay 200-300% increases.[LXXXIX] Kyrgyz support for Russia in the War in Ukraine is also significant among citizens, in a country where Russian TV is a prime source of information. Early in the conflict, some Kyrgyz sported "Z" paraphernalia. In September 2022, the Central Asian Barometer noted that only 14% of Kyrgyz considered Russia responsible for the war, as opposed to 56% who blamed Ukraine or the West.[XC] Hotels display Russian flags prominently. Prices in Bishkek have settled as *relokanty* have moved to different cities. Within Kyrgyzstan, Russians have gone to Lake Issyk-Kul's scenic villages. Many, including Karakol, were built by tsarist-era colonists. Osh, with its cheap cost of living, has proved a popular destination.[XCI]

Sentiment towards *relokanty* remain complicated. Frustration at the "Russian Russians" – as Kyrgyz ironically call new Russian emigres – simmers in private conversation and on social media.[XCII] Kyrgyz mock the term "*relokanty,*" which they see as trying to differentiate Russians in Kyrgyzstan from Kyrgyz in Russia, commonly known as "gastarbeitery" (guest workers) or simply as Blacks. This is mixed with smug satisfaction that, after having been the target of racism when they have worked or travelled in Russia, Kyrgyz can now feel superior to these Russian newcomers, who are far from home.

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Russians also debate each other on social media. Some chide fellow *relokanty* for not respecting local sensitivities. Others persist in complaints about their new surroundings, from bad taxi drivers to poor internet. Organizations and telegram channels however most often focus on mutual support. Early *relokanty* opened a centre, Red Roof, in Bishkek to offer communal space for newcomers. Red Roof seeks to inform recently-arrived Russians of Russia's colonial legacy in Kyrgyzstan as well as the state of LGBTQ+ rights, among other issues.[XCIII] As time goes on, mutual assistance has shifted to many Russians who have spent their savings over 2022-2023.

Private companies in Kyrgyzstan offer new pathways for wealthy *relokanty* seeking entry into the EU or other destinations. Kyrgyz passports are now for sale, with fees ranging from $1500-20 000 dollars (for "rush service").[XCIV] Russians applying for Kyrgyz passports grew 400% between 2021 and 2022 and a list approved by President Japarov in late 2022 includes members of Russia's business and political elites.[XCV] Kyrgyz citizenship offers a more appealing backdoor than longshot asylum claims in the West, abetted by corruption in government.

Conclusions, scenarios and recommendations

Privilege and precarity mark the position of *relokanty* as they search for stability and opportunity in these four host states and beyond in 2024. With the war at an apparent stalemate, Russians must consider short- and long-term scenarios for residence.

In Georgia, *relokanty* must confront what is certain to be a tense election between Georgian Dream and pro-European opposition in the shadow of the European Council decision to grant Georgia EU candidate status in December 2023. At any point in the campaign, likely in Fall 2024, Georgian politicians might mobilize the host population's frustration against *relokanty*. If pro-EU forces win the election, they will be tempted to impose taxes, visa restrictions or other measures against Russians in Georgia, but must be conscious of the Russian government's reaction. A Georgian Dream victory will likely preserve the status quo – but this "status quo" has seen increased numbers of Russians, from political opposition to businessmen and tourists, being denied visas for unknown reasons. Thirty thousand Russians have left Georgia in the last six months of 2023.[XCVI] This tense political environment could result in significant unrest in late 2024 if the election is seen to be manipulated.

In Armenia, the government's search for stability through greater engagement with Western countries remains shaky. The Russian government could enact sanctions or retaliatory measures that might severely damage Armenia's economy, even if the Armenian government is able to avoid a renewed conflict with Azerbaijan. Already, high prices are reducing Russian presence in Armenia – many of these telework for Russian IT companies, so are not tied to any one country or region. Instability and the cost of absorbing more than 100 000 Nagorno-Karabakh refugees will challenge Armenia's politicians, even as Yerevan remains a dynamic city.

Kazakhstan's political situation remains stable, even if it has only been two years since massive unrest forced the government to call on the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) peacekeepers[3]. Russians enjoy good relations with Kazakhs but the 2023 visa reforms mean that without steady employment or student status, remaining in Kazakhstan long-term would require a will to join the unofficial economy.

Both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have nationalist elements that might seek to downgrade the status of Russian language. It's unlikely they will target Russians themselves, unless "Kazakh Russians" in Kazakhstan's north mount a campaign to unite with Russia – an improbable but not impossible scenario if the Kremlin wants to stir up trouble. More worrisome, perhaps, is that any *relokanty* residing in these two countries who protest the war or have warrants against them in Russia for any reason might be returned home, where they would face potential imprisonment, even torture.

The most likely scenario in 2024 is a dispersal of *relokanty* outside these four states and even fewer arrivals. If worst-case scenarios for *relokanty* are realized in Georgia and Armenia, this will negatively affect economic growth in both states, even as it might tame inflationary pressures and improve social cohesion in Georgia. Regardless, there will be important local economic effects in cities and regions that form the main departure and arrival points. Türkiye, Cyprus and Egypt have gained popularity for weather, cheaper prices and greater stability The issue of *relokanty* is unlikely to be politicized and the possibility of forced repatriation minuscule. Serbia provides not only a reduced cost of living, but also a welcoming environment to Russians – especially those who are not actively anti-Putin,[XCVII] Russian migrants will continue to fly to Mexico, where they will join ethnic Georgians, Armenians, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz who seek their futures in the United States.

Small numbers of migrants are returning to Russia. Since the proposal to send *relokanty* to some form of the gulag, Russian media and politicians have taken a softer line. In early 2024, they highlight increased returns of Russians as signs of an ostensibly failed Western policy to tear apart the country. Only an end to active conflict, unlikely in 2024, would spur a significant return. Worries persist about government retribution as well as awkward professional or social encounters with Russians who remained. Significant numbers of Russians will stay in Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where they will form the latest wave of human movement and ethnic diversity that has characterized the Caucasus and Central Asia over centuries.

None of these countries, nevertheless, can rely on *relokanty* skills and money as a continued driver of economic growth. Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan now, after two years of in-migration, should conduct detailed studies of the benefits and costs of the presence of *relokanty* and develop relations with sectors likely to

3 The members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. On 5 January 2022, CSTO peacekeepers were announced to be deployed to Kazakhstan in response to anti-government unrest in the country. This was the first such instance for the CSTO peacekeeper troops.

bring economic benefits that outweigh costs, either in terms of internal politics or the potential of upsetting the Russian government.

Russia over 2023 has reasserted its status as a regional hegemon, even as the stalemate in Ukraine renders military intervention in neighbouring countries – Georgia would be the most plausible, but not only, target – unlikely. Given the diverse composition and views of *relokanty*, it is implausible that they could be used as an active "fifth column" in Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, the Russian government could employ their presence as a pretext for intervention – which would place *relokanty*, especially those with family in Russia, in an extremely difficult position.

Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan need to prepare therefore for a range of possible scenarios that have internal and international, political, economic and societal consequences. For the *relokanty* to remain, how much state support should they receive, in terms of Russian-language education and services? Understandably, the governments in these four states have avoided letting this issue bleed into one that might activate nationalist sentiments and lead to social disruption, but this scenario must also be contemplated. Governments should ensure that *relokanty* are paying taxes and that their contributions to the national economy are highlighted. *Relokanty* themselves should be made aware of the colonial legacies of their presence and should work, with government assistance, to integrate themselves into non-Russian states.

The European Union and the United States should assist these states in managing *relokanty* issues and reducing the possibility for domestic internal tension and other scenarios that might allow Russia to intervene. This might include opening pathways for entry to Russian migrants or economic assistance to integrate. International civil society organizations could develop programs for societal or cultural integration, especially for poor *relokanty*. They might assist in the deepening of environmental or other initiatives where Russian migrants work alongside local activists to improve the quality of life in host states.

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The Impact of Russia's War in Ukraine on Central Asia

Yan Matusevich
July 2024

Executive summary

After two decades of relying on Russia as a destination for its active labour force, Central Asia now faces new challenges and opportunities as a result of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. Although several million migrant workers from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan continue to live and work in Russia, many are starting to seek alternative destinations. Within the region, Kazakhstan is emerging as a new hub for labour migration while continuing to send migrants abroad. At the same time, new communities of Russian migrants have emerged in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, having fled political repression and military mobilisation at home. Amidst an unstable geopolitical situation, the migration landscape is rapidly changing as countries in the region become both countries of origin and destination. Central Asian states and their partners will need to rethink their approach to migration management to adapt to this new reality.

This Policy Brief explores the status quo of migration in and out of Central Asia two years since Russia invaded Ukraine, focusing on anticipated and unexpected developments that continue to shape migration realities in this part of the Prague Process region.

Central Asian workers in Russia: Sustained migration amid uncertainty

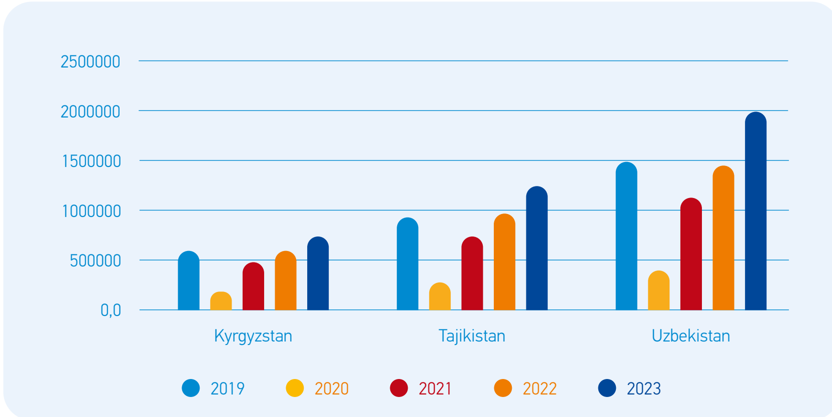
Since the mid-2000s, Russia has been the primary destination for labour migration from the Central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, over 4 million migrants indicated work as their purpose of stay when entering Russia. In addition to temporary labour migrants, the same year there were over 300,000 citizens of these three Central Asian countries residing in Russia on long-term residence permits.[1] If undocumented migrants are also considered, the total number of Central Asian migrants present on the territory of the Russian Federation was likely even higher.

The launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was expected to create a complex impact on migration flows in and out of Central Asia. Following the imposition of economic and trade sanctions against Russia in the immediate aftermath of the invasion in 2022, the value of the Russian rouble plummeted, leading many to predict an economic crisis that would harm the livelihoods of Russia's migrant labour force. Though the rouble has not reached pre-war levels, the exchange rate has remained relatively stable and Russia has so far avoided economic collapse. Remarkably, personal remittances sent from Russia to Central Asia have continued to increase year-to-year since 2021, reaching all-time records in 2022.[2] While some of this increase may be due to financial activity related to sanctions evasion, a substantial portion is attributed to remittances sent by labour migrants to their family members back home.

In contrast to many predictions, labour migration from Central Asia to Russia has continually increased since the start of the war in 2022. In 2023, there were 3.9 million crossings into Russia for employment purposes by citizens of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, an increase of just under 1 million compared to 2022. Based on statistics published by the Russia's Federal State Statistics Service, labour migration to Russia in 2023 surpassed pre-pandemic levels. Despite the geopolitical and economic uncertainties facing Russia's future, the lack of employment opportunities in Central Asia and the deepening labour deficit in Russia - exacerbated by the ongoing war, military conscription and mounting casualties - have reinforced existing dependencies between the Russian labour market and a young Central Asian workforce.

In contrast to many predictions labour migration from Central Asia to Russia has continually increased since the start of the war in 2022.

Chart 1. Number of entries into the Russian Federation for employment purposes from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in 2019-2023



Source: Federal State Statistics Service

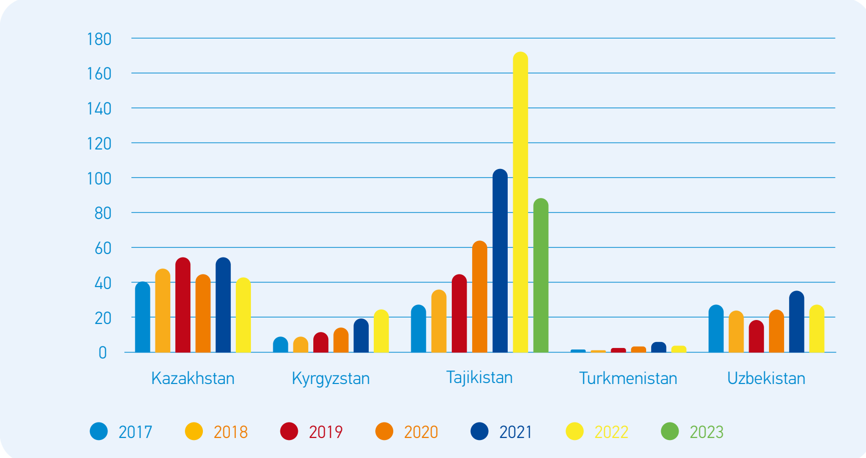
Acute labour shortages in Russia – recent studies estimate Russia needs 4.8 million workers to sustain economic growth – mean that there are significantly more vacancies in Russia for migrant workers from Central Asia.[3] At the same time, with increased job opportunities, there is now also the increased risk of military conscription as Russian authorities attempt to draw migrants into the military as soldiers or support staff. According to a new presidential decree issued in January 2024, foreigners who join the Russian army, as well as their dependents, are now eligible for fast-track naturalisation with a processing period of just one month.[4] While using the prospect of citizenship to recruit among foreign workers, Russian authorities have simultaneously introduced new rules that grant them the authority to deprive naturalised Russian citizens of their newly acquired citizenship for failing to register for military service within 14 days of naturalisation.[5]

Efforts by the Russian authorities to accelerate naturalisations have had mixed results. In 2022, the rate of naturalisation dropped slightly for citizens of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan with a very moderate increase in Kyrgyz applicants. Tajikistan, however, remains an outlier among Central Asian states with rates of Russian citizenship acquisition reaching a record-breaking 173,000 naturalisations in 2022. As the poorest country in the Central Asia, Tajikistan struggles the most to provide for its young and underemployed population. Citizens of Tajikistan have also faced increased fees and barriers to obtaining temporary work permits – known as ***patents*** in Russian – pushing many to consider naturalisation as a more durable solution.[6] Despite the risk of military conscription, Tajik migrants are continuing to naturalise, sometimes in the hope of using their newly acquired Russian passports to transit visa-free to Central and South America on their way to the US-Mexico border.[7] After the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack, reportedly perpetrated by several ethnic Tajiks on 22 March 2024 on the outskirts of Moscow, Tajik nationals in particular and Central Asian migrants as a whole have come under increasing suspicion and repression at the hands of Russian authorities. This heavy-handed response has led to an increase in the number of deportations and re-entry bans for Tajik migrants.[8] In response, the Tajik Ministry of Foreign Affairs has expressed concern at the difficulties and injustices experienced by Tajik migrant workers in Russia.[9]

Recent studies estimate Russia needs 4.8 million workers to sustain economic growth.

The terrorist attack spurred numerous proposals from Russian authorities, including the Parliament, the State Duma and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, to amend the existing migration policy, legislation and regulations, prioritising stricter migration control. The proposals ranged from implementing biometric identification and reducing the duration of temporary stays, to creating digital profiles for foreigners, increasing employer accountability, and enhancing deportation measures for irregular migrants. [10] Some Russian politicians have renewed calls for the introduction of a visa regime with Central Asian states and an end to the country's reliance on migrant labour.[11] Moreover, even before the attack, the Russian Ministry of Labour developed proposals calling for a shift towards a system of organised recruitment - referred to in Russian as *orgnabor* – that would tie migrant workers to specific employers, which would be responsible for housing, oversight, documentation and taxation. Under this system, work permits for migrants would be limited to two years.[12] Despite the harsh rhetoric and demonstrative securitisation of migrants at the official level, Russia continues to rely on migrant labour for key sectors of its economy and is unlikely to make a radical change in its (labour) migration policies, though certain adjustments, especially those related to digital profiles, can be expected.

Chart 2. Naturalisation for citizens of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in Russia in 2017-2023 (in thousands)



Source: Ministry of Interior of the Russian Federation

Looking beyond Russia

While migration to Russia remains the most accessible option for most Central Asian migrants, alternative destinations in Europe, Asia and the Middle East continue to grow in importance for would-be labour migrants from the region. Under the threat of military conscription and coercive recruitment to work in occupied Ukrainian territories, some Central Asian migrants, particularly dual citizens with Russian passports, are temporarily returning to their countries of origin and looking for alternative migration routes.

In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the Centre for Employment of Citizens Abroad under the authority of the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Migration facilitates the legal recruitment of Kyrgyz migrant workers in the EU, Türkiye, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Japan, Gulf states, and Egypt.[13] As of 2024, Kyrgyzstan has labour migration agreements with 21 countries and is actively looking to expand its cooperation with other countries in this domain.

Recruitment of Central Asian labour migrants in the EU is on the rise.

Under the UK's Seasonal Worker scheme, citizens of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are eligible to work on six-month visas in horticulture and on poultry farms. In 2023, approximately 6,000 Kyrgyz seasonal workers were selected to work in the UK's agricultural sector. In the first seven hours of online recruitment for the 2024 season, over 26,000 Kyrgyz citizens applied to participate in the program.[14]

Recruitment of Central Asian labour migrants in the EU is also on the rise. In Lithuania, the number of Uzbek migrants went from just 1,800 in 2023 to 9,700 in 2024 with the number of Kyrgyz nationals also increasing 2,000 to 6,000 in the same time period.[15] Similarly, in Bulgaria, Kyrgyz citizens represented the largest contingent of seasonal workers in 2023 with over 2,000 registered arrivals.[16] In 2022, there were almost 5,000 Uzbek and over 3,000 Kazakh migrant workers registered in Poland with recruitment set to increase in the coming years.[17]

Outside of Europe, South Korea offers lucrative employment opportunities for migrant workers from the region. Historically, Central Asia has been home to large community of ethnic Koreans, known as Koryo-saram, deported from the Russian Far-East under Joseph Stalin in the late 1930s. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, many Central Asian Koreans have moved to South Korea, turning the country into an important Central Asian migrant destination. More than 69,000 Uzbek citizens reside in South Korea, comprising the fifth largest diaspora in the country.[18]

In 2024, South Korea set its quota for Uzbek migrant workers at over 37,000 for a total of 100.000 applicants.[19] Though smaller by comparison, the quota for Kyrgyz nationals looking to work in South Korea increased by 18 % from 2023 to 2024 to more than 3,000.[20] Mandatory Korean language testing remains a barrier for many would-be migrants, but the popularity of Korean language courses is growing in the region. While much smaller in scale, Japan has also signed agreements on labour migration with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan with several hundred migrants already undergoing pre-departure trainings.[21] Though still relatively limited in scale, there is also increasing interest in seasonal employment in Gulf countries such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain.

More than 69,000 Uzbek citizens reside in South Korea, comprising the fifth largest diaspora in the country.

Due to strong economic growth and rising wages, Kazakhstan is also increasingly attracting migrants from neighbouring countries within Central Asia. In 2024, there were over 10,500 Tajik citizens residing in the country, working primarily in construction and retail.[22] According to the Kyrgyz Ministry of Labour, the number of Kyrgyz migrants in Kazakhstan is approximately 30,000.[23] Based on a report published by Uzbekistan's Statistics Agency, an estimated 76,000 Uzbek citizens relocated permanently to Kazakhstan in 2023. Some of this may be due to the ethnic Karakalpak citizens of Uzbekistan fleeing to neighbouring Kazakhstan, where many have personal and family ties, in the wake of the violence and crackdown in the Karakalpakstan, an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan that saw protests in 2022.[24]

Finally, the political and economic instability in Russia is also pushing many Central Asians who used to live and work in the country to search for a better life in the United States. According to US border officials, more than 50,000 citizens of Central Asian states crossed the US-Mexico border irregularly in 2023 – a record high for the region.[25] Many also carry a Russian passport and have applied for asylum in the United States as draft dodgers who refuse to participate in Russia's war on Ukraine. As a result of this unpresented rise in crossings into the United States, Central and South American transit countries have introduced more stringent controls of arrivals from Russia and Central Asia, under pressure from US authorities.[26] Moreover, in early June, some media sources circulated a US border patrol memo instructing border guards at the US-Mexico border in San Diego to disallow entry of irregular migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, along with migrants from Georgia, Moldova and Russia, and proceed with their immediate deportation.[27]

Japan has also signed agreements on labour migration with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

While Russia's dependency on Central Asian migrant labour will remain strong in the short to medium term, the migration profile of Central Asian countries is becoming gradually more mixed, diverse and complex. According to forecasts by the European Bank for Development and Reconstruction, Central Asia economies are expected to show strong growth in the coming years, particularly in the case of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.[28] As a result, rural-to-urban migration within Central Asian countries will only continue to increase, attracting internal migrants to the large cities in search of higher wages and employment opportunities. As long as sanctions against Russia remain in place, Central Asian economies are set to benefit financially as an economic lifeline between Russia, China and the rest of the world.

Central Asia as an emerging destination for migration

One of the most drastic and unexpected migration developments in the region has been the arrival of Russian migrants fleeing political repression, economic instability and military conscription. Starting in the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, migration from Russia to Central Asia began to gradually increase, reaching unprecedented levels in the weeks following the announcement of partial military mobilisation in Russia on 21 September 2022. A lack of transparency on migration data makes estimating the number of new Russian residents in the region difficult. In Kazakhstan, upwards of 150,000 new arrivals were registered from Russia in 2022, while in Kyrgyzstan it is estimated that approximately 30,000 Russian citizens remained in the country at the end of 2022.[29] Migration authorities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have not published any official data on foreign migrants present in the country since that period. There is concern in the region over the possibility of a new influx of Russian migrants in case of more military mobilisation or political repression within the Russian Federation. As migrant-sending countries, Central Asian states are poorly equipped to handle and process large numbers of migrants, particularly since they are already dealing with increased rural-to-urban migration within their countries and own migrant returnees from Russia.

In response to the mass arrival of Russian citizens fleeing the draft, Kazakhstan implemented new migration rules in early 2023 that allow citizens of Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) member states to remain in the country no longer than 90 days within any 180-day period.[30] This has limited the ability of Russians to remain indefinitely in the country without residence permits, but also negatively impacted circular labour migration from neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. In late 2023, Kyrgyzstan also introduced the same 90-day rule for Russian citizens, but has kept a rather liberal registration system in place that allows citizens of EEU to live and work in the country on condition of extending their registration every six months.[31]

In addition to new arrivals from Russia, Kyrgyzstan is now becoming a destination for migrant workers from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

In addition to new arrivals from Russia, Kyrgyzstan is now becoming a destination for migrant workers from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Despite being a migrant-sending country, Kyrgyzstan is also experiencing labour shortages with many Kyrgyz citizens preferring to work abroad than accept low wages on the local labour market. In Kyrgyzstan's garment industry, in particular, foreign workers from Bangladesh and Pakistan are an increasingly vital source of labour. In 2024, Kyrgyzstan increased its quota for foreign workers to a record-breaking 24,000 compared to just 16,000 in 2023.[32] On 18 May 2024, anti-migrant unrest broke out in Bishkek targeting South Asian migrant workers and students as a result of which several foreign citizens were injured.[33] This unprecedented violence shows the need for Kyrgyz authorities to acknowledge the country's changing migration landscape and develop policies to ensure the protection of migrant workers and their socioeconomic integration.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

The ripple effects of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine have been felt throughout Central Asia given the region's economic and political dependencies on Russia. While the feared mass return of labour migrants from Russia to Central Asia did not materialise, such a scenario remains possible due to the political and economic risks associated with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. With their national economies continuing to depend on remittances from labour migrants in Russia, the Central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan remain incredibly vulnerable to an economic crisis induced by instability within Russia. **A significant drop in money transfers from Russia to Central Asia, combined with a large-scale return of unemployed former labour migrants, would put these countries under severe economic and social strain.**

To mitigate this risk, **the governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan should develop contingency plans**. The respective ministries of labour and departments responsible for managing outward labour migration should lead these efforts to manage the potential effects of any disruption to labour migration to Russia. Since 2022, Kyrgyz and Uzbek labour ministry officials have taken significant steps in this direction by signing agreements with employment agencies in the United Kingdom, Slovakia, Hungary, Estonia, and Japan in an attempt to diversify the number of destination countries. Tajikistan has also undertaken similar efforts but still relies on migration to Russia to a greater extent than its neighbours.

European Union states, particularly those with increasing labour shortages in Central and Eastern Europe, **could play an important role in attracting Central Asian migrant workers for seasonal labour in key industries**. Such efforts are already taking place on a bilateral level with countries such as Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Poland, and Hungary, but currently, the demand exceeds the number of vacancies offered.

Migration management and the development of new labour migration pathways are two key areas of future cooperation between Central Asia, Europe, and East Asia.

Demand for migrant labour is particularly strong in agriculture, construction, manufacturing, hospitality and transportation. **Central Asian states, migrant-receiving countries, and international organisations should continue to expand vocational training and educational programmes that provide students with marketable practical and linguistic skills useful for employment abroad**. A successful example is the increasing number of Kyrgyz nurses who obtain training and specialisation in Kyrgyzstan by German companies that then help match graduates with German employers.[34] Similar public-private partnerships could be implemented for other in-demand professions as well.

More than a quarter of all seasonal agricultural labourers under the United Kingdom's Seasonal Worker scheme hail from Central Asia, highlighting the growing appeal of alternatives to Russia as a migration destination. Currently, Germany only allows citizens of the Western Balkans, Georgia, and Moldova to work as seasonal labourers on German farms, but this program could be expanded to include citizens of Central Asian countries. **While not an all-in-one solution to Central Asia's dependency on the Russian economy, diversifying legal labour migration pathways remains an important policy tool**.

Beyond Europe, Kazakhstan occupies a particularly important role in the region as both a migrant-sending and increasingly migrant-receiving country. In 2023, Kazakhstan attracted over 18,000 Tajik migrant workers, a significant rise compared to previous years.[35] According to Kazakh authorities, over 200,000 Uzbek migrants, both temporary and permanent, were present in the country in 2023.[36] While rising wages offer employment opportunities for Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek migrants in the cities of Astana and Almaty, residents of rural Kazakhstan embark on labour migration abroad, to destinations like the United Kingdom and South Korea.[37] Therefore, there is **a need to develop Kazakhstan's migration management capacity, both as receiving and sending country**. This would include **developing a modern and transparent labour migration permit system** to allow migrant workers to be legally employed in the country while respecting their rights. Similarly, Kazakh authorities could work closely with third countries to expand seasonal labour migration schemes, similar to those in place in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan.

Increasing support for migrant workers should go hand in hand with ensuring that their rights are respected abroad. The **setting up of Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and soon also in Uzbekistan by ICMPD** in tandem with local authorities is an important milestone for ensuring migrant workers from Central Asia are adequately prepared for their work and life overseas and protected while on-site. MRCs can also provide counselling for distressed migrants, refer returnees to support networks and service providers, and enhance their soft sills for re-migration or local employment.

Central Asian countries should also draw lessons from the sudden arrival of Russian draft-dodgers in 2022, which caused a temporary housing crisis and strained local infrastructure in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Although these countries managed to absorb the influx, as many Russian migrants either returned home or continued onward travel to other destinations, this experience should not be grounds for complacency. The risk of a serious political, social, and economic crisis in Russia because of the ongoing war remains a very real possibility – and one that could undermine the stability of Central Asia as a region. Another round of mobilisation could provoke another exodus into the region. It is therefore crucial for international organisations and partners to work together with local authorities to develop plans to manage such a scenario. **Central Asia should no longer be perceived purely as a net exporter of labour migrants, but as a complex and rapidly developing region with diverse set of migration policy needs that vary from country to country**.

Migration management and the development of new labour migration pathways are two key areas of future cooperation between Central Asia, Europe, and East Asia. However, the current unstable geopolitical climate calls for Central Asian countries to gradually diversify the structures of their economies. While remittances are an important engine of economic development, they are also a potential liability for long-term economic stability, meaning that Central Asian governments should expand other sectors of the economy. Situated at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, the region has enormous potential in trade, manufacturing, logistics and tourism. Investments in sustainable energy and transportation infrastructure are key to enhancing economic development in the region. This shift cannot occur overnight, but the international community should be prepared to assist in this process.

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Displaced Afghans in Central Asia: Barriers, Risks and Future Prospects

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Executive summary

More than two years since the Taliban takeover, Central Asian states have hosted a small, but overlooked population of displaced Afghans. While the fears of an exodus from Afghanistan into Central Asia did not materialise, those Afghans who fled to Central Asia face a precarious future with limited opportunities for permanent settlement or onward migration. This policy brief provides an overview of the situation around Afghans exiled in Central Asia, the responses of local governments and the international community. Looking towards the future, the brief also outlines what policy responses are needed to address the needs of Afghans in the region.

Current context

The roots of the existing Afghan diaspora in Central Asia can be traced to the late Soviet period. In the wake of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, many Afghan nationals who had studied or received military training in the Soviet Union remained in the newly independent Russia, Ukraine and the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. At the height of the Afghan Civil War between 1992 and 1996, it is estimated that over 100,000 Afghans resided on the territory of the former Soviet Union although accurate numbers from that period are not available.[1] While most Afghans from this time period eventually either resettled abroad or obtained citizenship in their respective countries of residence, some are still living as temporary asylum seekers unable to obtain citizenship or permanent residency status.[2]

For decades, Central Asian governments and Western partners have expressed concerns about the potential of a massive influx of Afghans into the region as the result of continued violence and instability in the country. As the Taliban gradually retook control over Afghanistan in 2020 and 2021, culminating in the capture of Kabul and the ousting of President Ashraf Ghani, Central Asian states braced for the arrival of Afghan refugees.

The region did not become a major destination for Afghans fleeing persecution and reprisals at home.

In the summer of 2021, about a month before the fall of Kabul, Tajikistan announced it was ready to host up to 100,000 displaced Afghans on its territory.[3] Despite promises by Tajik President Emomali Rahmon of support to co-ethnic Tajiks, who make up around 40 percent of Afghanistan's population, fleeing the Taliban regime, this assistance never materialized.[4] Instead, citing national security concerns and pressure from Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member states, including the Russian Federation, Tajik authorities have kept their 1,357-kilometer border with Afghanistan closed, preventing the arrival of any potential Afghans seeking international protection.[5]

Since the Taliban takeover, it is estimated that approximately 19,000 Afghans fled to neighbouring Uzbekistan (13,000) and Tajikistan (6,000).[6] While there are no data available for new arrivals in Turkmenistan, around 500 Afghan university students were relocated from Afghanistan to Kyrgyzstan where they are completing their studies.[7] Plans by Kazakhstan to host several hundred Afghan refugees in the city of Shymkent were scrapped in August 2021 in response to public discontent on Kazakh social media.[8]

Contrary to forecasts of an Afghan refugee crisis in Central Asia, the region did not become a major destination for Afghans fleeing persecution and reprisals at home. This is partly explained by the heavily militarised border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to the north, which acts as a deterrent for any potential migrant crossings. In the 2010s, cross-border incidents, including kidnappings of Tajik villagers and border guards, were a frequent occurrence on the Tajik-Afghan border, forcing Tajik authorities to request security aid from the international community.[9] Mounting security concerns over the presence of ISIS-Khorasan in some areas of Northern Afghanistan are only reinforcing the securitisation of the border area.

Moreover, since 2021, the Taliban gained control over all border crossings with Central Asian neighbours, a development that may prevent those opposed to the regime from fleeing. In addition to that, once in Central Asia, possibilities for onward migration through Kazakhstan and Russia are limited due to the ongoing war with Ukraine, which had served as a transit country in the past for Afghans headed to the EU. Worsening relations between the EU and Russia have also had an impact on border surveillance. In late 2023, for example, Finland announced that it would be closing its border with Russia in response to a spike in asylum seeker crossings.[10]

The five Central Asian states are not considered as viable destinations by Afghan migrants.

Despite their proximity to Afghanistan, the five Central Asian states are not considered as viable destinations by Afghan migrants due primarily to the lack of employment opportunities, access to protected status, and enduring stigma towards Afghan nationals. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, UNHCR has voiced concerns about decreasing refugee recognition rates and cases of refoulement to unsafe countries of origin.[11] As part of the Global Compact on Refugees, the Kyrgyz government has promised to work towards providing asylum seekers with access to basic social and health services, but these changes have yet to be implemented.[12]

Even in Tajikistan, where there is no language barrier between Afghans and Tajiks, displaced Afghans find themselves in a precarious position with limited prospects for the future.[13] Based on the Tajik government's Resolution #325, asylum seekers are only allowed to settle in designated districts, a law that limits their freedom of mobility within the country.[14] Forced returns of Afghan refugees to Afghanistan by Tajik authorities in recent years have only increased concerns within the Afghan refugee community about their long-term security in the country[15].

Fleeing the Taliban regime, Afghan families have found themselves dispersed across the region. Iran and Pakistan remain by far the most important destinations for Afghans fleeing the country given their long history of hosting Afghan refugee populations. Iran, in particular, is not only home to a large Afghan diaspora, but serves as the starting point of established irregular migration routes in the direction of Europe via neighbouring Türkiye.

In 2023, however, both Iran and Pakistan have increased deportations of Afghan nationals with over 500,000 of them being forcibly returned to Afghanistan.[16] Most of the 600,000 Afghans who arrived in Pakistan since the Taliban takeover have been unable to regularise their stay with Pakistani authorities, who have prevented UNHCR and local NGOs from issuing registration cards, leaving new arrivals undocumented.[17] The vast majority of displaced Afghans in Central Asian countries have family members stuck in precarious legal and financial situations in Pakistan, Iran and Türkiye, with no avenues for onward mobility or family reunification.

Afghan nationals currently in Central Asia find themselves in a liminal state with limited prospects of legalisation, integration, or resettlement.

Policy Measures

Dim prospects for resettlement

While comparatively small in size, the Afghan refugee population in Central Asia faces many of the same constraints as their compatriots in Pakistan and Iran. The primary concern is the lack of resettlement opportunities from Central Asian countries.

In October 2022, Germany announced a federal humanitarian admission program for Afghans who face persecution at the hands of the Taliban, with a monthly resettlement quota of 1,000 persons.[18] Displaced Afghans currently in Central Asia – even those who were affiliated with the German government or worked with German humanitarian organisations – are excluded from this program, which only applies to applicants from within Afghanistan or Pakistan.[19]

The United Kingdom also operates two resettlement programs for Afghans: the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS). While ARAP is reserved for Afghans who worked with the UK military, ACRS offers resettlement to human rights and democracy activists as well as vulnerable minorities, including women and LGBTQ+.[20] Within ACRS, there are two pathways for resettlement: referral by UNHCR or association with several accredited UK organisations. The pace of resettlement remains very slow, with just 107 Afghans resettled by 2023 under ACRS since the completion of the evacuation of UK-affiliated Afghans from Kabul in 2021.[21] According to UNHCR, referrals to the resettlement program will focus on Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran, without any mention of Central Asia.[22]

The United States administers several resettlement programs for Afghan nationals who are residing in third countries. Afghans formerly employed by the United States government are eligible for the Special Immigration Visa (SIV) program and more than 26,000 SIVs were issued at US diplomatic missions abroad, including in Central Asia countries.[23] In addition, the United States runs the P-1 and P-2 resettlement pathways that are designed to provide protection to Afghans who cooperated with US government organisations and contractors, NGOs, and media outlets. Afghans cannot apply to be considered for the program but must receive a referral from a US federal employee or an accredited institution or organisation.[24] According to the most recent public data available, around 45,000 have received such referrals, an unknown number of whom are in Central Asian countries.[25]

Many of these Afghan students evacuated to complete their studies at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek have received P-1/P-2 referrals. The process is, however, cumbersome and lengthy, lasting up to two years, exposing Afghans to the possibility of overstaying their student visas while waiting for a decision.

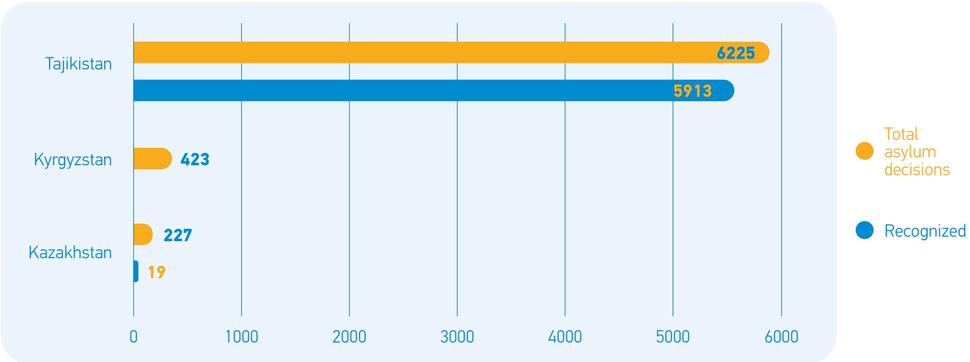
Since the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, more than 500 Afghan nationals have arrived in Kyrgyzstan on student visas to complete their university studies, primarily at the American University of Central Asia.[26] Upon graduation, however, these students can neither remain in Kyrgyzstan nor return to Afghanistan where many of them could face reprisals. Many of these Afghan students evacuated to complete their studies at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek have received P-1/P-2 referrals. The process is, however, cumbersome and lengthy, lasting up to two years, exposing Afghans to the possibility of overstaying their student visas while waiting for a decision.

Canada, which has resettled 40,000 Afghans since 2021 – the most of any Western country – provides an important avenue for protection, but the demand exceeds Canada's current capacities.[27] For Afghan nationals in Central Asia, Canada is the only country that allows them to be privately sponsored by Canadian citizens or organisations, even in cases where they are not under the UNHCR mandate or have been recognised as refugees by the host country. The application and nomination process remain difficult to access, particularly for Afghans looking for sponsorship opportunities, without any personal or professional ties to Canada.

Finally, Brazil offers a humanitarian visa program for Afghans but requires applicants to appear in person at a Brazilian diplomatic mission, of which there are none in Central Asia.

Limited access to protection in country

Chart 1. Asylum applications by Afghan citizens in Central Asia (2021 to mid-2023)



Source: UNHCR Refugee Data Finder

While awaiting resettlement, displaced Afghans face significant hurdles in accessing international protection and regularising their stays in the Central Asian states where they currently reside. Since the Taliban takeover, Central Asian countries have allowed a very limited number of displaced Afghans to seek shelter within their borders. Upon arrival, Afghan asylum seekers have faced a diverse set of hurdles in each country from the absence of an asylum procedure in Uzbekistan, to low recognition rates in Kyrgyzstan, and the lack of a path to permanent residency in Tajikistan.

Several generations of Afghan refugees currently live in Tajikistan, but they are effectively prevented from obtaining Tajik citizenship, forcing them to regularly renew their residency documents in the country.

Tajikistan, which hosts the largest population of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers (over 10,000) in Central Asia, allows Afghans to remain in the country but bans them from residing in the capital city of Dushanbe. Several generations of Afghan refugees currently live in Tajikistan, but they are effectively prevented from obtaining Tajik citizenship, forcing them to regularly renew their residency documents in the country.[28] There have been multiple media reports of Afghan nationals having to pay bribes to extend their residency permits and visas.[29] Currently, the Afghan embassy in Tajikistan is under the control of the deposed government and cannot issue valid travel documents, which means Afghan nationals cannot renew their expired Afghan passports.

In Kyrgyzstan, while the overall number of Afghan asylum seekers remains low, those who have sought international protection have been confronted with low recognition rates, bureaucratic hurdles, and long waiting times. Between 2021 and 2023, not a single Afghan asylum seeker was recognised out of a total of 423 decisions involving Afghan citizens.[30] When applying for asylum in Kyrgyzstan, asylum seekers are issued temporary three-month residency permits that must be renewed while the application is being processed. While the procedure is supposed to take up to six months, many Afghan asylum seekers are left in limbo for well over a year. During this time, they have no access to the labour market or social services, leaving them exposed to discrimination and harassment.[31] Some Afghan asylum seekers have, for example, been unable to obtain Kyrgyz birth certificates for their children born in the country.

Situated the farthest away from Afghanistan's borders, Kazakhstan hosted just over 300 refugees in 2023 with most being Afghan citizens who have been in the country for a long period of time.[32] Similar to other countries in the region, refugees in Kazakhstan live on renewable one-year temporary residence permits with fewer rights to education, employment, and healthcare than Kazakh citizens and other foreign citizens with permanent residency permits.[33] Recognition rates have remained low during the past decade, but changes to the asylum procedure enacted in 2022 severely limit the ability of new Afghan asylum seekers to obtain international protection. Since 2021, Kazakhstan's Ministry of Labour and Social Protection has been tasked with processing asylum claims instead of the Ministry of Interior as had been the case in the past. Internal ministry rules now dictate that asylum seekers must present documentary evidence of persecution at home and these documents can only be issued by the official government bodies of their country of citizenship.[34] Under these rules, Afghan asylum seekers must obtain official letters proving their persecution from the very Taliban government thay had fled in the first place. As a result, the likelihood of an Afghan citizen's asylum case receiving a positive verdict in Kazakhstan is minute.

The situation is particularly difficult in Uzbekistan, the only country in Central Asia that is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol. Since 2018, Uzbekistan has been reviewing the recommendations to accede to the Convention as outlined by the UNHCR and Uzbekistan's National Human Rights Centre (NHRC), but no changes to existing legislation are currently being developed.[35]

In the absence of national asylum legislation, Afghan nationals in Uzbekistan are left in a precarious position with few legal protections. Many live in Uzbekistan on temporary visas that must be renewed multiple times a year for a heavy fee without access to education, healthcare and the formal labour market.[36] In Uzbekistan's Surkhandarya region, bordering Afghanistan, the EU and UNDP have launched a programme to finance vocational education and entrepreneurship initiatives for over 400 displaced Afghans in the area.[37] At the same time, Afghan migrants currently residing in the region complain about the lack of a clear pathway to citizenship despite long-term residency.[38]

There is little willingness to host an Afghan refugee population, even with assistance from Western donors, on the part of Central Asian states that lack the economic, infrastructural and logistical capacities to provide adequate support to Afghans in need.

Overall, Central Asian governments are reticent to extend international protection to those Afghans already in the country due to fears that granting asylum or other forms of permanent residency would incentivise new arrivals. Moreover, the Afghan refugee issue is perceived to be the responsibility of Western countries and Central Asian states continue to perceive Afghan migrants as a burden and security liability.

Policy recommendations

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, Central Asian states have maintained a close-door policy towards Afghan refugees and asylum seekers. Central Asian governments usually cite security concerns as one of their primary motives for keeping displaced out of the region. In addition, Central Asian policymakers believe that the United States and NATO member states that were part of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan since 2001 should be responsible for the well-being of Afghan citizens affected by the Taliban's return to power. There is little willingness to host an Afghan refugee population, even with assistance from Western donors, on the part of Central Asian states that lack the economic, infrastructural and logistical capacities to provide adequate support to Afghans in need.[39]

Keeping this political reality in mind, the key to addressing the needs of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers currently in Central Asia is in the expansion of resettlement programs. The launch of WelcomeCorps by the U.S. Department of State in 2023, which allows private US citizens to sponsor refugees for resettlement, is a welcome step in the right direction.[40]

Resettlement pledges by EU countries for the humanitarian admission of Afghans at risk have remained low and underfilled.[41] At-risk groups, such as women, children, and ethnic minorities need to be prioritized in the resettlement process since they face the risk of violence in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

Currently, Canada administers resettlement programs for human rights defenders and allows for the private sponsorship of Afghan refugees, but its processing capacity is limited. While Canada's commitment to resettle 136,000 refugees through 2025, as expressed at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, is laudable, other countries should also contribute to the effort of protecting vulnerable Afghans. This would require countries to expand eligibility requirements and consider the barriers to accessing existing pathways as experienced by Afghans in Central Asia, Pakistan and Iran.

Sweden, Denmark and Finland all announced in 2022 and 2023 that they would be extending international protection to all Afghan women and girls, but this only applies to those who are already on their territory. No mechanisms were put into place to assist with the resettlement of Afghan women and girls currently stranded in and out of Afghanistan. Such statements do not extend any meaningful protection to Afghan women at risk abroad, but in fact incentivize them to use irregular – and often perilous - means, with the help of smugglers, to reach these EU countries.

The number of Afghans who fled to Central Asia may be small, but their situation remains precarious. While much of the focus of policymakers is on Pakistan and Iran, the Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in Central Asia face an equally uncertain future. Central Asian states are also gradually establishing diplomatic relations with the Taliban government, a development that could have negative consequences for Afghans exiled in Central Asia.[42] Such cooperation could facilitate the deportation or extradition of vulnerable groups to Afghanistan where they may face persecution. In 2023, the Adilet Legal Clinic, a NGO assisting asylum seekers with access to international protection in Kyrgyzstan, released a report criticising proposed legislation that would allow for the deportation of asylum-seekers in defiance of international law. While in Kyrgyzstan, these legal changes are still pending, these proposals show that the right to asylum and international protection is under threat in Central Asia.

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Considering the prevalence of negative prejudices towards Afghans in the region, it is crucial to invest in public awareness campaigns that humanise refugees and asylum-seekers from Afghanistan. On social media and within society, Afghans are often caricaturised as terrorists, drug traffickers and Islamic fundamentalists – an image that sows fear and distrust among the local population. More efforts should be made to counter these narratives and sensitise the host societies about the need for refugee protection, support and solidarity.

Finally, the EU nations and other Western donors to Central Asia should continue supporting capacity-building efforts in the region, to bolster local asylum procedures and increase the ability of states to process displaced populations, including Afghans. When paired with sincere commitments to resettlement, such support would be welcomed by local authorities.

Existing EU initiatives to support education for Afghan women in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan represent much needed forms of assistance, but they must be followed up by either resettlement opportunities abroad or pathways to permanent residency within the region. If asylum recognition rates remain as they are in Central Asia and no new resettlement programmes are put into place, the Afghan population currently in exile in Central Asia will face the choice of deportation, irregular migration or life as an undocumented migrant.

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DIGITALISATION & MODERN TECHNOLOGIES

Exploring the Potential of Digitalisationin Migration Management in the Prague Process Region

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Executive summary

This document has been created following the discussions among - and inputs from - participants of the Prague Process Workshop held in Tbilisi in October 2023, highlighting best practices, key success factors and stumbling blocks to digitalising the various aspects of the migration management cycle, as well as providing some recommendations for next steps. The Workshop focused on the increased role of digitalisation, and how this can be deployed to assist in migration management.

The overarching expectation is that digitalisation will yield substantial benefits in the Prague Process region, streamlining processes for officials and improving the overall experience for migrants. From a migrant's perspective, a single, comprehensive app could serve as a portal to access various services, encompassing applications, healthcare, education, social security, and identification. Furthermore, establishing centralised databases accessible to all government departments is recommended. This should be done while addressing privacy concerns through appropriate authorisations to facilitate data sharing and better support governments, ultimately enhancing the experiences of migrants through application processes. Internal interoperability among national government departments and public authorities is deemed crucial, and this interoperability should be extended to other countries to ensure trans-national compatibility.

In line with this, adopting a one-stop-shop approach for migrants and migration management is encouraged, based on best practices from the region. Training, effective communication around the roll out of new systems and feedback mechanisms are also identified as essential elements for successful system implementation and user engagement.

Introduction

During the fourth Prague Process Ministerial Conference in Prague in October 2022, the Prague Process participating states highlighted the growing role of digitalisation and the use of modern technologies in all spheres of migration management. States thereby called for the ongoing dynamic developments in this field to be addressed as a horizontal issue across the six thematic areas of the Prague Process Action Plan 2023-2027. As a result, a designated area of work within the Prague Process Migration Observatory and Training Academy – a so-called Digital Lab – was launched to address the cross-cutting area of digitalisation.

The *Digital Lab* shall explore the current state of play across the Prague Process region, facilitate intergovernmental exchange and learning, as well as provide strategic and practical guidance on the use of modern technologies within migration management and the related public services.

To kick-off the work of the *Digital Lab*, the Prague Process, upon the invitation of the Ministry of Justice of Georgia, organised a Workshop on the Potential of Digitalisation in the Migration Context. Held in Tbilisi on 24-26 October 2023, the Workshop brought together migration experts and IT specialists of the migration and asylum authorities from 16 Prague Process participating states (AL, AZ, CZ, DK, EE, GE, KG, LV, LT, MD, ME, MK, RO, SR, UA and UZ), as well as the European Commission, EUAA, IOM, EU Delegation to Georgia, Erasmus University Rotterdam, European Parliament, ICMPD, and independent experts from the private sector (Danube Tech and Netcompany).

The Workshop aimed to jointly explore the various benefits, challenges and overall applicability and potential of digitalisation in selected spheres of migration management. Participants explored the available tools and solutions applied in different countries across the region, exchanged ideas about existing gaps and needs in terms of digitalisation. Thematically, the Workshop focused primarily on the digital transformation in migration management as a whole, as well as on specific digital tools concerning legal (labour) migration, integration, migration & development and asylum. However, discussions also touched upon other areas including reintegration and border management-relevant technologies.

Advancing digitalisation

In this section we look at the digital solutions that were presented during the workshop as well as identify the factors that contribute to their success.

Over the past decade, the Prague Process states have been digitalising their services, modernising obsolete practices, and adopting innovative digital solutions. Digital tools encompass all fields related to migration management from automation to time-saving solutions which increase efficiency. This includes the use of AI and blockchain, border technologies such as biometrics, social security services for migrants and protecting personal data.

Although advancement on digitalisation is uneven across the region, a key consensus emerged on the necessity of reducing reliance on paper-based systems to enhance efficiency for all parties concerned. Digital solutions ranging from online applications to all-encompassing interfaces for migration management allow processes to operate more quickly, involve less paperwork (sustainable and environment-friendly) and tend to be less time-consuming for officials and migrants. In many instances, digitalisation also means that systems are less open to fraud.

e-Visa, online application and appointment scheduling systems, digital services for residency and work permits

Arguably, **e-Visa, appointment scheduling and online application systems** have become readily available in most countries of the Prague Process region. e-Visa systems of application, checking and delivery speed up the overall visa process.

Thanks to digitalisation, receiving a visa can now take only a matter of days in Albania, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan, to name a few countries. Mobile applications related to the e-visa portal are coming soon to most countries too since many migrants may not have a computer but do have a mobile phone. Oftentimes, developed mobile applications, as is the case with migAZ – an application of the State Migration Service of Azerbaijan – offer more than just e-visa services, depending on the needs and resources of national authorities and their level of digitisation and digitalisation. Moreover, integration of comparably simple AI features such as chatbots and voice bots as part of these portals and apps further reduce the need for human involvement and get ever more widespread across the region. The Czech Republic, for instance, uses chatbots in their online appointment system for migrants and foreigners[1].

Digitisation VS Digitalisation

Digitisation is the process of converting analogue information, such as physical documents, images, or sounds, into a digital format, which can be stored, manipulated, and transmitted using electronic devices and computer technology. This conversion involves representing data as discrete binary numbers (0s and 1s), making it easier to store, reproduce, and transmit with high fidelity. Digitalisation, on the other hand, is the process of leveraging digital technologies to transform various aspects of business, society, or processes. It involves reimagining and optimising traditional analogue practices by integrating digital tools, data, and automation. Digitalisation can encompass a wide range of activities, from automating manual tasks and using data analytics to make informed decisions to embracing online communication channels, e-commerce, and cloud computing.

The overall trend is to increase service offerings via mobile apps and desktop solutions, which requires interoperability of databases and different levels of access to data for responsible entities. Even a single country needs an appropriate level of digital advancement, which takes years of constant improvement and development. Moldova, for example, has been developing and fine-tuning this approach since 2012 through the roll out of new computer systems, increased training for staff and the availability of more e-services. The country is currently working on the development of a new IT system and an electronic register for foreigners, ensuring interoperability with other systems, including those related to security. This comprehensive database shall become operational by 2025. Meanwhile, the EU is still in the process of developing the needed infrastructure to offer online Schengen visa services, while the political decision has been finally reached in 2023. Given that the Schengen area unites 27 countries, the process to digitalise visa procedures is way lengthier and more complex.

1 Since 2023, the country rolled out a data box – a recognised email to communicate with various authorities, which can fully replace old-fashioned postal services – for own citizens. At the moment, Czech nationals can choose whether or not to use the data box, which may become mandatory in the future.

CASE: EU digital visa

The European Union has the objective of digitising Schengen visa procedures in the near future. This will take the form of an EU Visa application platform, which will become the single-entry point to apply for a Schengen Visa and replace the current visa sticker with a digital visa in the form of a cryptographically signed barcode. With all EU institutions in agreement from a legislative perspective, implementation will begin as of 2024 with the goal to make the platform operational as of 2028. The new platform will allow applications to be done online, as well as allow users to upload documents, check biometric data, pay fees and sign everything with an e-signature. It will also allow users to check information. The IT infrastructure will be decentralised, utilise digitally signed, encrypted 2D barcodes and will apply to short stay visas from the beginning.

In recent times, countries of the Prague Process, including Georgia, Denmark, Romania, Serbia, started launching digital services related to the issuing of residency and work permits. The implementation of these advancements has significantly slashed the processing time for applications, resulting in migrants in Albania now obtaining their permits within a timeframe of 30 days to three months, as opposed to the previous standard of six months. Albania also went a step further by offering a single permit for work and residence in the country, while Estonia offers e-residency for foreigners, who do not need to physically reside in the country but want to operate a business registered in Estonia. Other countries such as Uzbekistan offer online scheduling for residency applications, followed by in-person appointment. It is safe to assume that all countries will move down the path of digitalising the applications for residency in the future.

CASE: Estonia's pilot project on remote identity proofing for e-residency

In 2022, Estonia has launched a pilot project to look at proving identities remotely. This relates to e-residency and an e-resident's digital ID. The objective is to guarantee an equivalent solution to physical presence, increasing convenience for the clients, staying up with latest developments as well as connecting documents, biometrics and individuals. Remote identification is based on facial biometrics, video streaming, data reading from chips, authentication, comparison, fingerprints, voice, palmprints and iris recognition. Over 60 companies have taken part and the project is inter alia looking at fully automated vs assisted processes, OCR or NFS document reading, passive or active liveliness control and also the different mobile apps available. The procurement and development phase will run from 2024 to 2025.

When it comes to the acquisition of citizenship, the online application and processing has not yet become a reality and nearly all Prague Process states envisage only in-person procedure, with a few exceptions such as online scheduling or remote phone counselling as the first step. A long-term foreign resident would still need to turn in their paperwork in-person. Georgia is perhaps the only country that supports electronic citizenship applications, by way of exception, for foreigners who have made special contributions to Georgia.

CASE: Latvia's AI-based speech recognition system in citizenship procedure

The Latvian office of Citizenship & Migration Affairs has adopted a free self-check e-tool for citizenship applicants. The goal was the improvement and increased digitization of the citizenship process, the reduction of paper, the move away from old/obsolete technologies, and the promotion of public awareness. This is therefore a web-based electronic solution that uses artificial intelligence technologies for citizenship applicants. It is free for all, can be accessed by computer/mobile, provides information on the examination and allows simulating a test envisaged as part of the naturalisation procedure. The tool has a public and an administrative part. There is a Latvian language proficiency test that includes Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking parts. By means of an AI-based a speech recognition capability (Tilde ASR[2])., the tool produces automatic transcript of the user's speech and indicates mistakes or mispronunciations. The model is trained with various audio recordings: 5,000 to 10,000 hours required to achieve good result. Specific industry texts, terminology, dictionaries, etc. are used to train the speech model. To comprehensively develop this algorithm, text files containing at least 10-20 million words are required.

The success of online appointment and online scheduling systems, e-visas, as well as digital services for processing of residency and work permits is influenced by different factors, including the user-friendly interfaces of platforms, time-efficiency, secure handing of personal data, accessibility and inclusivity, multilingual support, as well as availability with minimal downtime and regular updates and maintenance. The Prague Process countries are gradually building up their capacities to account for these factors of success.

2 An automatic recognition language technology developed by Tilde for Latvia in 2021, allowing machines to recognize words and phrases in spoken language and then convert them into text. This technology is especially crucial for small languages such as Latvian to be equally represented in existing and developing technologies.

Comprehensive integrated systems

The countries of the region share the opinion that seamless integration of single-purpose digital tools with other government systems, databases, and relevant services contributes to a more comprehensive and efficient migration management ecosystem. It reduces redundancy and improves overall coordination. For this reason, the offering of a unified system for everything – starting with visa, employment permit and residence permit – is seen as the way forward. These services may be dealt with by separate ministries but instead of going through different parallel systems for issuing one or another permit, the end user benefits from services via a single point of access such as a virtual portal. Albania, Azerbaijan, Denmark, Estonia, Georgia, Lithuania, Serbia, Uzbekistan have rolled out their integrated systems of various levels of complexity by now. Moldova, North Macedonia, and Montenegro plan their launches in the future.

The more experienced the countries are, the more complex their systems become, with more features – interfaces in multiple languages, intuitive and simple to use APIs (check Annex for terminology) for public users as well as individuals – integrated over time. The availability of new features is equally important for authorities that deliver services to migrants and citizens. New solutions not only save time by ensuring easy access to the same data by government departments, public bodies and agencies but can also result in generating better data analytics, which can translate into policy decisions.

For countries without complex ecosystems, creation of a digital register containing foreigners' data is often an important step in their digitalisation journey. Others, such as Ukraine, which already has a single system containing all information about foreigners and stateless people, face new tasks. For Ukraine, the present objective is to create an information portal for foreign students and to allow them to have a profile and find information about the process to study and obtain a residence permit.

Internally, e-access to materials, decisions and documents for all relevant ministries need to be made available. Government departments cannot have their own separate, siloed computer systems. Building electronic bridges between legacy systems is a key part of digital interconnection between government services. Having as many ministries involved from the beginning is a recipe for success. Different levels of access to authenticated and unauthenticated users are the key to maintaining control and data protection here. A good example is that of Lithuania, where data is exchanged between ministries and agencies with more than 20 institutions able to access systems. By using one system - MIRGIS - there is a common core system architecture that improves efficiency and interconnectivity.

CASE: Lithuania

The need for digitalisation is based on an increasing number of foreigners coming to Lithuania, a lack of personnel, complex data exchanges between agencies and institutions and the demand for employees and investment from abroad. The core concept was the inclusion of all e-migration services in one single portal and the MIGRIS tool was therefore developed and launched in 2019. Since then, the services and functionality have been expanded to include a unique code for foreigners (ILTU), a solution for external service providers, and the addition of national visas. Services include residence permits, citizenship applications, citizens' identity documents, travel documents and the issuance of e-resident cards. Regarding data exchange, the MIGRIS solution provides integration with 20 other state registers. The next steps will feature the inclusion of automated and data-driven solutions, as well as the development of a mobile solution.

A one-stop-shop for applying for all services digitally and in person is a great example of best practice, applied in the Nordic and Baltic states. The combination of online and offline elements is important since some people prefer a face-to-face service (particularly elderly and individuals with mental/physical handicaps). Both approaches therefore need to be catered for. A good example takes the form of the facilities provided across Georgia where all services can be carried out under one roof.

CASE: Georgia

A successful digital transformation is built on a six-step process, which covers business strategy transformation, business operations realignment, adoption of new practices and people re-skilling, and change management. In this regard Georgia has built a Citizenship and Migration Electronic Management System DCM (regularly updated since its inception in 2009). This assures that inter alia migration services are provided through dedicated public service halls (117 branches), regional branches located throughout the country and also, by the remote, online "Distance Service". These deliver e-services like granting Residence Permits, Citizenship, Establishing the Status of Stateless People and Emigration permits. These are backed by electronic seals, time stamps, and e-signatures while assuring data and document security. Georgia also has a Consular Case Management Electronic System. This is characterised by e-processes, increased efficiencies, less bureaucracy, more user-friendliness and increased quality in the overall service (from registration to visas - including an eVisa portal - issuance of return travel documents, scheduling appointments and offering advice). Digital services in Georgia also extend to a Readmission Case Management Electronic System which covers all stages of the readmission process from registration to review, planning, travel documentation and the transfer of relevant information.

Integration of new technological solutions: ID identifiers, eSignatures, and Blockchain

The integration of unique ID identifiers and eSignatures is crucial in modernising migration management, offering efficiency and convenience. The use of unique ID identifiers for migrants (through a number or digital ID) is a key to facilitating the electronic system and ensuring that all information is in one place and relevant information can be accessed easily and efficiently. For example, in the Netherlands, migrants receive a special passport, which includes a unique identification number. This document is used for identification purposes and is linked to various administrative services. Considerations need to be made regarding the link to the identifiers that are required, such as a photograph, name, age and nationality as well as their current status and how biometric data will be stored and shared. Moldova is working on an electronic ID for applications for temporary residence permits, planning its launch in 2025.

One way to implement ID identifiers is the use of Blockchain. During the Workshop, Danube Tech profiled solutions that interconnect decentralised identity networks and enable interoperable identity applications. This included hosted platforms that help self-sovereign identity developers and solutions providers to work with decentralised identifiers. Solutions were also profiled that created and managed decentralised identity networks on the blockchain. It was also highlighted how verifiable credentials could be created and issued in different formats.

CASE: Danube Tech[3] and the use of Blockchain

Blockchain is a data structure (a "chain of blocks") whereby data entries can be appended to this data structure (like in a "ledger"). Usually, blockchains are operated by multiple nodes in a network (a "distributed ledger") and these blocks are linked together by cryptography ("hashes", "signatures"). Data entries are immutable and generally publicly visible. These technologies are being looked at for migration management and ID storage. This technology can be utilised to store and authenticate name, age, gender, ethnicity and citizenship for example. Blockchain technology therefore allows personal information to be stored on the relevant decentralised ledger. The issue however is that digital identities may not be safe. Blockchain makes surveillance easier while there is simultaneously no way of updating/deleting data and there are GDPR concerns associated with this technology. The states that opt for it should consider these limitations to ensure the technology brings benefits to migrant and refugee populations without harming them.

Yet blockchain can be used by migrants for remittances (via wallets and exchanges: countries where cryptocurrencies are most often used include Nigeria, Vietnam, Philippines). Blockchain can also be used for accountability and transparency. We are already seeing examples of this in Austria and Germany for the public administration, as well as property ownership in Georgia to raise two examples. There is also the European Qualification Passport for Refugees (EQPR): this allows refugees to apply to universities, find a suitable course and then a job in Europe.

Furthermore, digital ID wallets for immigration purposes are also being discussed. Netcompany supports the development of a sophisticated system, where migrants would be given a "digital wallet". This solution is built on the EU digital ID standard used since the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing migrants to seamlessly send and receive documents to and from state authorities. It centralises information sharing, certificates and the current status of migrants in one digital location. Beyond these functionalities, the digital wallet offers access to learning and integration courses, provides notification, maintains a calendar of upcoming activities/events, and enables migrants to digitally sign documents within the wallet. However, concerns persist around the ability of migrants to opt out, data protection and privacy concerns, and potential hesitancy to use the system, especially if their application for asylum is denied, for example.[3]

CASE: Netcompany's immigration wallet

The immigration wallet solution developed by Netcompany4 aims to aid migration management, considering the increasing migration flows into the EU, including irregular flows and asylum seeking. The wallet should allow governments and authorities to register migrants with relevant data and biometrics, speed up immigration processes, keep track of in-country immigration and detect fraud. On the other hand, the wallet enables migrants to digitally identify themselves everywhere in the EU, store and manage personal identity data and other official documents issued by governments or trusted private sources in electronic format, access public and private digital services, share personal data with public and private entities, as well as use the information as confirmation of the right to reside, work or study in a certain state. The system should support three pathways: 1) linking asylum with local integration; 2) digital support for the return journey to migrants whose claims were denied; 3) facilitate identification for prospective migrants and asylum seekers through a third country migrant ID.

An important development represents the use of eSignatures. These are available in some Prague Process countries, while they are under development in others. The objective is that these should be commonplace and rolled out across more countries. eSignatures play a significant role in streamlining migration processes, offering efficiency, security, and convenience. They are more and more often used in digital visa, residence permit or work permit applications as well as for other kinds of interactions offered through online portals, to ensure remote identity verification during consular services or even as part of reintegration processes for return migrants to sign partnership agreements outlining the support and services they will receive upon reintegration. Furthermore, eSignatures can be utilised to digitally authenticate documents such as certificates, diplomas or other credentials. This aids in the recognition of qualifications across borders. The implementation of eSignatures in migration processes often aligns with broader efforts toward digital transformation and the adoption of electronic government (eGovernment) initiatives.[4]

The role of social media and digital services in (re)integration processes

Social media plays a crucial role in the integration process for migrants, and leveraging key channels can significantly aid their journey. In the Netherlands, migrants are encouraged to create a LinkedIn account and profile as well as join Facebook community groups, with support provided to navigate information that can help in their life in the country. The provision of language courses and cultural training is deemed important for migrants, emphasising the relevance of partnership with NGOs as well as the business sector that can help to build the knowledge, skills, and expertise of governmental agencies in these areas.

CASE: TransLocal lives research project

The research project aims to identify the various ways in which refugee migrants creatively and/or effectively use technologies, and how this affects the social participation of refugee migrant groups within their host societies. The 6-week Digital Place-makers program in the Netherlands constitutes part of the TransLocal lives research project whereby eleven expert place-makers helped migrants with issues related to belonging, connecting, being themselves and facing challenges as a newcomer in Rotterdam and the Netherlands. Throughout six hands-on sessions, participants experiment with both analogue (collaging, story-boarding, writing) and digital tools (desktop filming, video-making, photography, voice recording) to co-produce knowledge using their everyday life digital practices as a starting point. The result includes eleven short films that explore how to make a place in the host society and give visibility to newcomers' experiences and stories of belonging. More can be found at: www.translocallives.com

Providing smartphone-friendly solutions and mobile technology in several languages is important to facilitate the integration process. Mobile tech can range from education and language learning to health, housing, employment, social inclusion and transitional ties. However, approaches tend to be top-down, much of the potential of mobile tech is linked to geographic location, and migrants are not included in the design and development of digital/mobile tech solutions.

3 Danube Tech is an Austria-based consulting and development company that works on decentralized identity infrastructure products.

4 Netcompany is a global company with its HQ in Denmark that works on responsible digitisation and digital transformation in public and private enterprises.

CASE: easyRights

The easyRights project combines co-creation and AI technology to make it easier for immigrants to understand and access the services they are entitled to. Bringing together immigrants, the public sector, and private organisations, easyRights have developed solutions that provide personalised, context-aware information to its users, taking into account background, demographics, and language skills. The tools support immigrants in their search for responses to different needs in a manner that saves time for both migrants and for social service staff and cutting costs for the public administration. Available tools that were developed within the easyRights project include, among others, CALST app to train language pronunciation and Capeesh offering courses to train migrants in vocabulary and expressions that can help them navigate specific services.

Supporting migrants on their journey, covering social and cultural differences as well as their rights and responsibilities in destination countries is important too. Uzbekistan has a mobile app to help its citizens in this regard, which supports the work of local consulates. Given the large number of Uzbeks moving to Russia to find work, the state has produced information that can be accessed digitally by labour emigrants. This includes information on work permits, the fees involved, the process and the documentation required, as well as language, cultural and legal support. There is also an SOS button available on the app which allows citizens to call for help. This connects citizens with consulates and allows them to access the support that they need.

In the realm of reintegration, digital tools play a pivotal role in enhancing support for returning migrants, providing financial assistance for resettlement or launching new ventures. The recognition of skills, knowledge, and training acquired abroad is equally crucial. Georgia exemplifies a proactive approach by running reintegration programs and offering a comprehensive e-platform that centralizes all the necessary services for returning migrants. The Georgian government places a strong emphasis on supporting the reintegration of its returning citizens, having prioritized this initiative since 2015.

CASE: Georgia's digital services to returning citizens

Georgia's Internally Displaced Persons, Ecomigrants, and Livelihood Agency administers a robust reintegration program. This program is designed to offer a range of digital services to returning citizens, aiding their seamless reintegration into communities. The State Programme for Supporting Reintegration of Returned Georgian Migrants, initiated in 2020, extends support in various forms. This includes the provision of medical and healthcare services, financial backing for social projects, assistance with vocational education and entrepreneurial ventures, and the facilitation of temporary livelihoods.

Albania, another exemplary case, has also embraced digital tools in its reintegration efforts for nationals returning home. The country offers comprehensive reintegration programs, incorporating digital resources for reception and assistance. Services encompass providing information about social security, education, initiating businesses, and vocational skills training. Albania's strategic approach includes the establishment of Migration Centres, a digital referral system, and the provision of online advice and counselling to returning individuals. This digital-centric approach underscores the commitment to leveraging technology for effective and streamlined reintegration processes.

Comprehensive and rights-based approach to digitalisation in migration

The digitalisation of services and processed in the migration context involves complex regulatory and policy considerations to ensure responsible and ethical implementation. Considerations related to data privacy and security is among the key ones, necessitating the need for compliance with existing data protection laws and regulations – for example, the EU's GDPR regulation – which define how migrant data, including personal and biometric information, is handled.

Another crucial consideration relates to the ethical use of technology, impact on human rights and non-discrimination policies. One of the ongoing debates revolves around the use of artificial intelligence in migration processes. In this regard, the work on the European AI legislation - the EU AI Act – is exemplary.

The political negotiations on the Act have been concluded in December 2023, with discussions at the technical level continuing until February 2024. This regulation aims to ensure that fundamental rights, democracy, the rule of law and environmental sustainability are protected from high-risk AI, while boosting innovation and making Europe a leader in the field.5 The AI Act will have implications for migrants, incorporating the law enforcement directive, GDPR regulation, and existing legislation in the migration area. The impact of the AI Act on migration management will depend on the risk level. Some EU states may need to halt the deployment of certain tools, such as predictive policing and biometrics. There will be obligations related to data governance applications, including the avoidance of bias, technical documentation, and human oversight. Transparency obligations will require systems like chatbots to clearly identify themselves as non-human. Overall, monitoring the market's digitalization of society is seen as positive. The AI Act is expected to add an explanatory dimension, requiring governments to explain their decisions.

On the whole, legislation pieces such as GDPR and the AI Act are considered beneficial for users, but there is a call for a measured approach, reducing legislative speed, and focusing on enforcement, guidelines, and clarity to avoid potential problems and confusion.

5 Read more about the reached political deal on the EU AI Act here

Stumbling blocks

In this section we detail the challenges, obstacles and common mistakes that are met in implementing digital solutions.

Limited resources

All states suffer from a shortage of financial resources and personnel when it comes to implementing new digital systems. This means that countries cannot create the perfect system but need to deal with the resources that they have to do as much as possible with as little as possible. A common issue encountered is that people get trained and then move departments, so the training of new people is an almost constant process, and thus very time-consuming.

Digital divide

The creation of a digital divide due to technology is also a source for concern. Older people and those without digital skills risk being left behind and not having the same access to services. Similarly, not all regions have good WiFi and cellular connectivity. At the same time, not everyone can afford a smartphone or a computer. This means that people cannot access the services that they need.

Communication is crucial

While adopting digitalisation and creating services is important, it was agreed that if no one knows about them then they go unused due to a lack of knowledge. There are various examples of this across the Prague Process region. It is therefore essential that education campaigns are launched to inform migrants and citizens of the digital services that are available and the benefits that they bring. In short, it is not sufficient for governments to create new services, they also need to market the services available.

Furthermore, people do not currently know what apps and solutions are available and which ones are the best to use. A user-centric design is crucial when designing and building these and it is vital to begin from the starting point that all migrants are not the same: they are a diverse group with different cultures, languages and approaches. Measuring success of apps and digital solutions over the medium to long term is important but rarely done today.

Linked to this point is the fact that many new systems are not used due to a resistance to change. Many countries experience that there is an overall resistance to change internally (among officials and state employees) as well as the general public (they get used to an old system and do not want to change it). This issue is linked to the fact that new systems are developed but training is not available immediately. It is essential that training is provided immediately to as broad a user group as possible. Training covers internal public officials as well as the general population who need to use the new services provided. This needs to be done regularly, and a "train the trainers" model is effective to spread competence within ministries and government agencies.

When it comes to the general population, e-training modules, 'how to' videos and short social media clips are very effective.

As stated previously, engagement with the broader civil society is still low. There is limited contact with NGOs as well as the private sector, and many of the systems are still developed in-house as opposed to being sourced from experienced commercial vendors.

Data protection and integrity

One of the concerns with digitalisation is that threats to privacy and compromising personal data are increased. Because new systems are being rolled out and things move fast, there is a trend to adopt as many digital processes as possible, as quickly as possible. This can result in corners being cut with regards to data protection since this is often a secondary consideration, especially regarding migrant populations. Furthermore, the ability to use and collect good and accurate data is crucial. This should be ensured, since without this data good decisions cannot be made.

Conclusions and takeaways

The digitalisation journey in migration management has begun for all countries in the Prague Process region, with many already harnessing results from the advancements in e-visas, online application systems, and unified platforms, while also looking into development of new digital solutions. It is anticipated that digitalisation will bring many advantages, including time and cost savings for officials and a more user-friendly experience for migrants. However, the journey is not without challenges, as highlighted in the stumbling blocks section. Such challenges as limited resources, the digital divide, and communication hurdles, the critical need for ongoing education campaigns and user-centric design will need to be addressed to make the most of digitalisation.

Key takeaways and recommendations for implementing digital solutions effectively

- Increased digitalisation will save time for officials, save money and ensure a better experience for users/migrants. eVisas, e-signatures and e-portals are particularly popular in this regard.
- Having one app as a portal to access all services is the way forward from a migrant perspective (i.e. applications, healthcare, education, social security, ID).
- When it comes to creating systems, all relevant entities need to be involved from the beginning.
- When it comes to updating their operations, it is important that officials have adequate training first, before the systems are rolled out.
- Creating centralised databases accessible and operable by all government departments and agencies is the way forward for sharing data, with the appropriate authorisations added to address any privacy concerns.

- Interoperability of systems internally between national government departments and public authorities is crucial. This should also be extended to other countries so that trans-national interoperability is secured.
- Countries across the Prague Process region should look to adopt a one-stop-shop approach for migrants and migration management. This should be based on best practices from across the region.
- A common and mutually recognised eID system should be adopted across Europe and Central Asia. This would feed into an interoperable migration information system for the Prague Process region. The best approach would be to have specific criteria that all can agree on and then develop a system from this harmonised starting point.
- Training for all user groups is essential when new systems are rolled out, as is communication on the new systems and services. Moreover, feedback should be gathered from a number of different user groups on new systems to ensure that problems are fixed and updates provided.
- Further links to the private sector and civil society should be explored across the whole region, as well as including migrants in the design and development of digital solutions (user-centric design) since a one-size fits-all approach will not work.
- Close cooperation with other countries is crucial in terms of developing common systems, sharing best practice, avoiding mistakes and ensuring mutual recognition. Workshops, standing committees, cooperation and dialogues are essential in this regard. This covers external activities with third countries as well as internal discussions between different ministries, agencies and government departments.

The first Workshop of the Prague Process Digital Lab provided the needed space to explore the evolving landscape of digital solutions, setting a base for future discussions. Based on the inputs received, the following topics can be considered for follow-up activities:

- Blockchain methodologies as a solution for migration management. This could take the form of a deeper information or training session on how blockchain technologies could be applied to migration management.
- Technical workshop on an eID: this could cover the elements (data and biometrics) to be stored, as well as the specifications and mutual recognition.
- Workshop on how AI can assist in the migration management process, as well as addressing the problems that it can create.

ANNEX I Key concepts

This section provides definitions of the key concepts and terms related to digital solutions in migration management as covered in the discussions.

Application Programming Interface (API) - An API is a set of rules and protocols that allows one software application or system to interact with another. It defines the methods and data formats that applications can use to request and exchange information. APIs are used to enable the integration and communication between different software systems, allowing them to work together and share data.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) - AI refers to the simulation of human-like intelligence in computers and machines. It encompasses a wide range of technologies and techniques that enable systems to perform tasks typically requiring human intelligence, such as understanding natural language, making decisions, learning from data, and recognizing patterns. AI systems can be rule-based, like traditional expert systems, or they can leverage machine learning algorithms, including neural networks, to improve their performance through data-driven insights. AI has applications in diverse fields, and it continues to advance rapidly, reshaping the way we interact with and benefit from technology.

Blockchain - Blockchain is a distributed and decentralized digital ledger technology that records transactions across a network of computers in a secure and transparent manner. Each new transaction, or "block," is linked to the previous one, forming a chain of blocks. This structure ensures the immutability of recorded data, as altering a single block would require changing every subsequent block, making it highly resistant to tampering and fraud. Blockchain technology is most commonly associated with cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin, where it is used to maintain a public ledger of all transactions. However, its applications extend beyond finance to supply chain management, voting systems, and more, offering a trustworthy and efficient way to verify and store data without the need for centralized intermediaries.

Digitisation - This is the process of converting analogue information, such as physical documents, images, or sounds, into a digital format, which can be stored, manipulated, and transmitted using electronic devices and computer technology. This conversion involves representing data as discrete binary numbers (0s and 1s), making it easier to store, reproduce, and transmit with high fidelity. Digitisation enables the preservation and efficient access to vast amounts of information, as well as facilitating the development of digital technologies, such as the internet, which have become integral to modern life.

Digital divide - The digital divide refers to the social and economic gap between those who have access to modern technology and information communication technologies, particularly the internet, and those who do not. It encompasses disparities in digital access, literacy, and the ability to effectively use technology. The digital divide can manifest as differences in internet connectivity, access to computer hardware, digital skills, and the opportunity to benefit from the advantages of the digital age. It is a global issue with far-reaching implications and efforts to bridge the digital divide often involve policies and initiatives aimed at increasing technology accessibility and digital literacy, ensuring that everyone can participate in the digital economy and society.

Digitalisation - This is the process of leveraging digital technologies to transform various aspects of business, society, or processes. It involves reimagining and optimising traditional analogue practices by integrating digital tools, data, and automation. Digitalisation can encompass a wide range of activities, from automating manual tasks and using data analytics to make informed decisions to embracing online communication channels, e-commerce, and cloud computing. The goal of digitalisation is to enhance efficiency, innovation, and responsiveness while often improving user experiences.

eGovernment - This refers to the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to deliver government services, information, and interactions to citizens, businesses, and other government entities. It involves the digitalisation and automation of administrative processes, making government services more accessible, efficient, and transparent. E-government initiatives encompass a wide range of activities, from online portals for accessing public services and information to digital communication channels for citizen engagement and participation. The goal of e-government is to improve the delivery of public services, streamline government operations, enhance transparency, and empower citizens to interact with their government more conveniently in the digital age.

eSignature - These are digital alternatives to traditional handwritten signatures used to authenticate and validate documents and agreements. These digital signatures are created using various electronic methods, such as typing a name, drawing a signature, or using specialized e-signature software and cryptographic techniques. E-signatures offer a secure and convenient way to sign documents and contracts electronically, saving time and resources compared to physical signatures. They are legally recognized in many jurisdictions, provided they meet certain authentication and security standards, making them a widely used tool in various industries for conducting business transactions, signing contracts, and authorizing digital documents.

GDPR - The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is a comprehensive data protection and privacy regulation enacted by the European Union (EU) in 2018. It establishes strict rules and principles for how personal data of EU citizens is collected, processed, and protected. GDPR gives individuals greater control over their personal information, requiring organizations to obtain clear consent for data collection, disclose how data will be used, and provide mechanisms for data access, correction, or deletion. It also imposes stringent data security and breach notification requirements, along with substantial fines for non-compliance. GDPR has had a significant impact worldwide, influencing data protection practices and policies well beyond the EU, as many international organizations that handle EU citizen data must adhere to its rules to ensure privacy and security.

Machine learning - Machine learning is a subset of artificial intelligence (AI) that involves the development of algorithms and models allowing computers to learn and make predictions or decisions based on data. It enables systems to improve their performance and make sense of complex patterns and information without being explicitly programmed. In essence, machine learning algorithms are trained on data, which could be anything from text and images to numerical data, to recognize patterns, correlations, and trends. The more data they are exposed to, the better they become at making accurate predictions or decisions.

Network File System (NFS) - NFS is a mechanism for storing files on a network. It is a distributed file system that allows users to access files and directories located on remote computers and treat those files and directories as if they were local. For example, users can use operating system commands to create, remove, read, write, and set file attributes for remote files and directories. Using the NFS protocol, you can transfer files between computers running Windows and other non-Windows operating systems, such as Linux or UNIX.

One-stop-shop - A "one-stop shop" is a concept commonly used in the context of business or government services, where it refers to a centralised location or platform that offers a wide range of products, services, or information, making it convenient for users to access everything they need in one place. Whether in e-commerce, government services, or other sectors, a one-stop shop simplifies the customer or user experience, streamlining processes and reducing the need to navigate multiple channels or entities. This approach aims to improve efficiency and customer satisfaction by providing a comprehensive and integrated solution to meet various needs or requirements.

Optical character recognition (OCR) - OCR is also referred to as text recognition or text extraction. Machine-learning-based OCR techniques allow you to extract printed or handwritten text from images such as posters, street signs and product labels, as well as from documents like articles, reports, forms, and invoices. The text is typically extracted as words, text lines, and paragraphs or text blocks, enabling access to digital version of the scanned text. This eliminates or significantly reduces the need for manual data entry.

Digitalisation and Labour Migration: The Use of Modern Technology, Challenges and Opportunities

Glen Hodgson

July 2023

Executive summary

Digitalisation has led to the development of new products, platforms and services, as well as fueled the demands of labour migrants for more information, training and online services. These changes can bring about efficiencies for the public sector by speeding up processes and freeing up employees' time. Digitalisation also represents an opportunity for countries to attract the best international talent, roll out e-government portals and educate citizens to ensure that they have the relevant digital skills to take advantage of the digital revolution underway while recognizing the skills and qualifications of third-country nationals. This Policy Brief explains the digital products and services available which facilitate labour migration, as well as the current barriers to the use of modern technology. This paper also analyses existing policy measures as well as looks at recommendations on how digitalisation can be leveraged to enable labour migration.

Current context

Migration for work reasons is one of the prominent forms of mobility, propelled by the ever-increasing wave of digitalisation. Such underlying labour market conditions as a shortage of workers (particularly in Europe), the continued globalisation of the economy and the demand for flexible arrangements have driven the need for digitalisation. In turn, the widespread adoption of digital tools, automation, and remote work capabilities has not only expanded opportunities for individuals to seek employment in different regions but has also reshaped the dynamics of work-related migration.

An increase in the **provision of labour migration information online and e-government services** across the Prague Process region aimed at supporting migrants has become one of the tangible outcomes of technological advancement. Examples include education services - particularly language courses - which have moved online, and, as a result, led to an increased availability of remote workers and a decrease in project costs. Countries such as Georgia, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan are strong here, in addition to EU Member States.

Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) established to provide neutral information on labour migration to individuals in origin countries have also been making use of digital channels in their operations. MRCs have been established in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Tajikistan (soon also in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) and can provide e-services (consultations, language and vocational training online) to help people make informed decisions when considering to migrate for employment reasons. Their services cover pre-departure orientation (where applicable) and information on work and living conditions abroad, rights and obligations, access to protection mechanisms and information in destination countries. Counsellors increasingly provide consultations via social media and online platforms, as the digital component in their activities has been expanded over recent years.

Furthermore, an increasing number of migrants are finding their first **jobs through platforms** that filter candidates for knowledge and competencies and then match these individuals with clients, also in physically distant locations. The number of such ***e-matching services***[1] has grown exponentially in recent years to include platforms like Uber, Wolt, Just Eat, Glovo and Bolt for food delivery and ride-hailing jobs; Distributed, Nerdapp, Topcoder and Ework for talent with specific IT skills; Appjobs, Upwork and Fiverr for individuals with a wider range of skills; as well as TalentPools, Sigma Software and EmployUkraine for companies to find Ukrainian talent via digital means as a timely response mechanism to the war in Ukraine. Most platforms require as little as an internet connection, a smartphone or computer with an app for one to start earning money without the need to possess extensive local market language skills and qualifications or to undergo administrative procedures.

The e-matching services have had a significant impact on labour markets across Europe and Central Asia. Revenues from the platform economy in 2020 were estimated to be as high as EUR 20 billion.

The *e-matching* services have had a significant impact on labour markets across Europe and Central Asia. Revenues from the platform economy in 2020 were estimated to be as high as EUR 20 billion. In the EU alone, there are more than 500 digital labour platforms and more than 28 million platform workers. In 2025, their number is expected to reach 43 million people.

In addition to matching services, there is an increasing demand for **online visa provisions**, so that migrants can work legally in destination countries, particularly since waiting times for visa issuance are significant across Europe and Central Asia. Through digitalisation, there is the desire to make visa application processes more secure and less vulnerable to theft and fraud, as well as easier for applicants. In the EU this can be witnessed in the adoption of the proposal to modernise the Visa Information System, the ongoing development of the Entry-Exit and ETIAS (European Travel Information Authorisation) systems and the implementation of the new Visa Code. While applicants may need to turn up in person at consulates in certain instances - for example, first-time applicants and individuals who need to update biometric data - appointments can be booked online.

Some non-EU countries now offer **e-visa** options too, with countries like Georgia, Armenia and Uzbekistan introducing new digital schemes in recent times. While electronic visa provisions are initially being offered for tourist services, this is likely to be a first step towards rolling out services which will be used by labour migrants too. Politicians, public authorities and the broader society are currently becoming familiar with e-visa systems, and there is a general shift towards more visa services being offered online. The benefit is shorter waiting times, better security controls and also the heightened image that the country is open to business and labour migration, as well as being forward-looking, progressive and attractive to talent.

1 This term covers platforms or systems that facilitate the connection and pairing of individuals or entities based on specific criteria or preferences, as well as use algorithms and data analysis techniques to identify compatible matches.

Politicians, public authorities and the broader society are currently becoming familiar with e-visa systems, and there is a general shift towards more visa services being offered online.

A first step down this route across Europe and Central Asia is that countries are capitalising on remote work by offering **digital nomad visas**. Branching out from pure tourism, countries are making it easier for foreigners to gain temporary residency visas while working for a foreign company or as a freelancer.

Such visas take the form of a temporary residency permit which affords visitors the right to stay in a country and work remotely and legally via a computer/laptop to a foreign-based employer or business, thus not contravening any employment or immigration laws in destination countries. Digital nomad visas also help with the creation of networks and facilitate collaboration through an increase in co-working spaces, networking events, and communities of like-minded individuals as migrants are drawn to specific locations. Typically such visas have a duration of 12 months (longer than a tourist visa) and can be extended for one or more years depending on the country issuing the visa. Fees apply and there is a minimum savings and monthly salary requirement in order to be eligible. In the EU, such visas are offered by Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Finland, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Malta, Italy, the Czech Republic, Portugal, Romania, Spain and Slovakia. Outside the EU, Albania[2], Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia[3] and Armenia[4] have launched such visas or similar schemes, while Montenegro and Serbia plan to make these operational in the near future.

In addition to outlined digital solutions, the use of **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** - simulation of human intelligence processes by machines, especially computer systems - is expanding in all sectors of business and society, and labour migration is no exception. AI is being used to scan high volumes of applications and match individuals to open positions. With AI involved in screening, companies and recruitment professionals can process candidates faster and shortlist who they want. This also has the added benefit of lowering the cost of talent acquisition.

AI language translation and communication tools, real-time translation apps and chatbots can now be used to improve communication between migrants and host communities, overcome language barriers, and facilitate provision of information in a preferred language. AI-based chatbots - digital virtual assistants trained to answer common questions and queries about labour migration - are used in a variety of countries, including Latvia, Ireland and Finland, to inform individuals requiring help about functions and services. These chatbots can respond quickly while communicating with many individuals at the same time, thus increasing efficiencies while reducing the burden on human staff. Georgia has also launched pilot projects and planned initiatives using AI for chatbots, migration forecasting, and tracing documentary fraud.

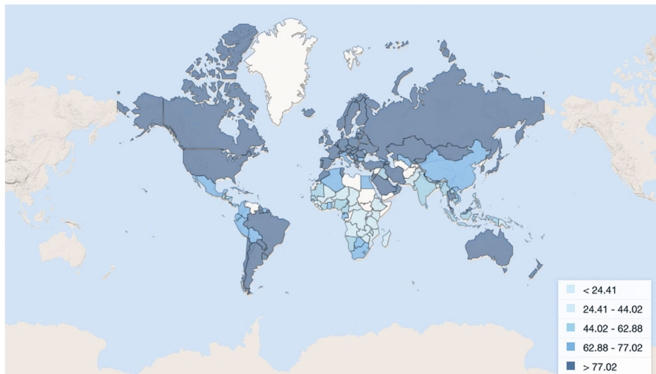
When it comes to AI at the public sector level, this can be used for labour migration as well as asylum services. The Netherlands and Germany use AI to confirm identity based on biometric data and to better detect fraudulent documents. In Finland, the pilot project TIKKA seeks to confirm the identity of applicants through a combination of open-source data, artificial intelligence and human analysis. In Hungary and Lithuania, AI is used for facial recognition to establish identities and prevent fraud. Moreover, host countries can use AI to process large amounts of data needed for the development of labour migration strategies and operational plans.

Challenges to the use of modern technology in labour migration

Assumingly, the most basic but also significant challenge represent the growing disparities in access to technology and digital skills that can hinder labour mobility, signifying the digital divide.

With the multitude of worth that the digital transition brings to all actors involved in labour migration, the rapid technological advancement equally exposes the gaps and weaknesses that systems, countries and migrants have to overcome to harness its full potential.

Assumingly, the most basic but also significant challenge represent the **growing disparities in access to technology and digital skills** that can hinder labour mobility, signifying the digital divide. For example, internet penetration rates vary across the Prague Process region with the percentage of the population using the internet standing at 99% in Norway, with this figure dropping to 90% in Kazakhstan, 81% in Serbia, 78% in Kyrgyzstan, 77% in Uzbekistan and 75% in Bulgaria. Fixed broadband subscriptions vary significantly too. 44% of the population have this in Germany while the figure drops to 31% in Romania, 22% in Tajikistan, 19% in Uzbekistan, 18% in Ukraine and 14% in Kazakhstan. This means that countries of origin of labour migrants have lower rates of internet penetration and access to broadband services than destination countries.



Map 1. Internet Penetration Rates across the Prague Process Region

Source: World Bank

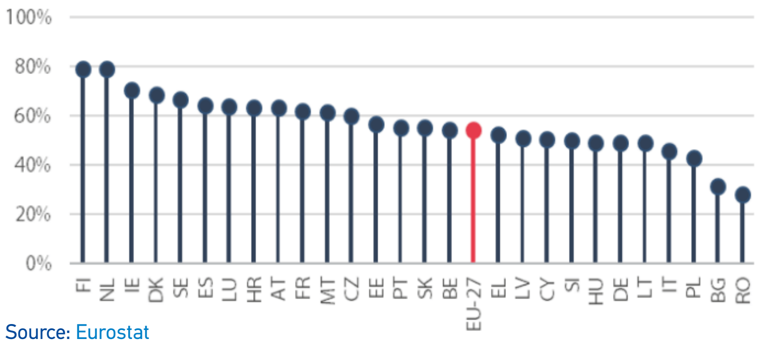
2 Albania has approved a law to make it easier for digital nomads to get a residency permit. The process has been streamlined and now only one permit is sufficient instead of the two that were required in the past. The Albania Digital Nomad Visa is for one year and can be extended for an additional year and after that for five years. After seven years, individuals can apply for permanent residency.

3 Georgia does not have a digital nomad visa per se but allows individuals to work remotely whilst staying in the country (provided a salary of USD 2,000 per month and evidence of a bank account containing over USD 24,000 is shown).

4 Armenia has a residency permit that allows foreign business owners to stay one year which can be renewed for up to five years. After this period, individuals can apply for permanent residency. The only requirement is registration as a sole entrepreneur.

Digital skills that allow individuals to make the most of digital services and use them to facilitate their labour migration vary widely too. The share of people with at least basic overall digital skills (as a percentage of the population aged 16 to 74) stands at 80% in Finland but drops to 30% in Romania. When it comes to the rest of the Prague Process region, countries outside Europe are at the lower end of the networked readiness index produced by UNECE. Sweden scores 78.9 and is ranked third, while Moldova was 67th with 49.5 and Albania was 80th with a score of 46.5.

Graph 1. Percentage of the population possessing basic digital skills in the EU



Source: Eurostat

These disparities in technologies and skills result in a mismatch, where destination countries provide e-services that migrants cannot access or do not have the skills to utilise, and would-be migrants are often not able to harness the potential benefits of the services that are being offered.

> **These disparities in technologies and skills result in a mismatch, where destination countries provide e-services that migrants cannot access or do not have the skills to utilise, and would-be migrants are often not able to harness the potential benefits of the services that are being offered.**

The **recognition of qualifications** - as well as the skills and talents that labour migrants have - is a serious issue since its absence affects their ability to be employed. Companies and organisations do not understand what migrants can deliver while governments and public authorities do not have the processes or means to endorse skills and abilities gained in other countries. Many actors raise the potential of digitalisation to resolve the skills' recognition issue but there is a number of obstacles to tackle before this becomes reality. These obstacles manifest themselves in the form of a lack of standardised and universally recognised credentials for skills, licenses and diplomas. Furthermore, no credential verification methods and systems exist to prove educational qualifications, work experience, and professional certifications across borders. The lack of adequate technology infrastructure - that we mention elsewhere in this policy paper - can also hinder the effective implementation of digital recognition systems for labour migrants' skills. Related to this technology topic is also the potential bias and discrimination embedded in the algorithms and systems used for skill recognition that can perpetuate existing inequalities and limit the recognition of skills among labour migrants.

In addition to these issues, there are more subtle obstacles too. Language and cultural barriers exist whereby certain nuances and context can be misunderstood. This makes it even more difficult to accurately assess the skills that migrants possess, even with translation tools and platforms. Another potential barrier is that digital systems can also fail to adequately capture cultural biases and variations in work practices.

All these elements can therefore create multiple barriers to migrants entering the labour market, forcing them to take jobs that they are over-qualified for. Digitalisation can help in addressing these issues by highlighting the abilities that individuals have in an easy to access, understandable and secure way. In doing so, individuals, companies and government authorities will gain trust as well as speed up processes.

The need to have ways for assessing, validating and recognising formal, non-formal and informal skills is vital from a migrant's perspective. Destination countries need skills and competencies, but they must also consider consumer protection and guarantee that an individual is sufficiently skilled to carry out the relevant task. These provisions need to be consistent from country to country while technology should be utilised to underpin this. Creating networks and establishing similar criteria, processes and procedures across the Prague Process region is important, as is giving consistent guidance on the recognition process and requirements. While not being a panacea, digitalisation will make all these elements easier, quicker, cheaper and also more secure. In short, the current issues in the region surround a lack of harmonisation; language barriers (proficiency exams in the local language are common across the region); the need for licenses and certifications (some countries in the region require these and often additional requirements are demanded); limited cooperation and coordination among relevant stakeholders, such as government bodies, regulatory authorities, and professional associations. Technology and digital solutions can be employed to address these barriers and improve efficiencies. Yet they cannot solve all issues: governments and public bodies need to establish consistent policies, procedures and an overall framework of rules that can facilitate the development and adoption of digital platforms for skill recognition.

Beyond the access to the needed technologies, availability of skills and recognised qualifications, one shall not forget that **not all jobs can be carried out remotely**. Construction workers, cleaners, firefighters and surgeons - to name but a few - need to be physically present to carry out their work. There are also **questions regarding taxation** being raised around e-matching services, and where it is paid, as well as the **availability of social security** to workers who find employment via platforms. Rapid advancement of technology and automation resulting from digitalisation can lead to job displacement and skills gaps, requiring labour migrants to constantly adapt and acquire new digital skills to remain relevant in the changing job market.

Another challenge comes in the shape of the **application process for digital nomad visas which can often be complex**. Some digital nomad visa programmes have specific requirements and require significant documentation. Gathering this, and meeting eligibility criteria, can be time-consuming and require extensive preparation. Furthermore, while digital nomad visas allow individuals to work remotely, they often come with limitations on engaging in the local employment market or starting a business within the destination country. This can restrict the range of work opportunities available to digital nomads and limit their professional growth or income potential. Digital nomads are also still subject to tax and employment rules which can be difficult to understand and tough to navigate without professional help. Moreover, digital nomads may face challenges in accessing essential services and benefits, such as healthcare, social security, and insurance coverage. The availability and quality of such services vary between countries, and navigating what is available can be complex, for which reason a far greater number of people still favour tourist visas to any digital nomad ones.

Existing policy measures and recommendations for enabling labour migration to leverage digitalisation

Education and infrastructure development are vital along with the recognition of skills and roll out of new services.

When it comes to recommendations, the overall emphasis should be on acknowledging the digital revolution underway and trying to harness the potential for labour migration, rather than stifle it. This should take the form of driving initiatives in the fields of education and developing digital infrastructure, supporting digital matching services, and for public authorities to provide e-services. In addition, technology needs to be deployed to easily and efficiently recognise the skills, talents and qualifications that individuals possess as well as issue and process visas while balancing the need for control with facilitation.

Supporting education and infrastructure development

The open and widespread access to high-speed internet - at an affordable price - is vital to the uptake of digital services, particularly if they are being offered and intended to be used in origin countries. The provision of these services also needs to be linked with education on digital issues and skills training for migrants and would-be migrants. This translates into the need for dedicated digital skills training to be integrated into education programmes for all members of society. This can be offered through national agencies or through public-private partnerships whereby digital companies and platforms can help in defining and implementing the training that is required, both in terms of basic and advanced digital skills training.

In Europe, there is the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) which sets out a common vision of high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education and aims to support the adaptation of the education and training systems of Member States to the digital age. The twin pillars of this initiative are 1) Fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem, and 2) Enhancing digital skills and competencies for digital transformation.

Under these policy headings, several concrete actions have been initiated which will indirectly help labour migrants covering a European Digital Education Content Framework, Digital transformation plans for education and training institutions, Common guidelines for teachers and educators to foster digital literacy, and Digital Opportunity Traineeships. These actions will help migrants acquire the necessary digital competencies and adapt to the digital workplace, increasing their employability and integration opportunities. Access to online learning opportunities (remote learning, online courses, and e-learning platforms) will allow migrants to upskill themselves conveniently, irrespective of their geographical location. The Digital Education Action Plan also emphasizes the recognition and validation of digital skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning, which will help migrants, as will the development of digital tools and platforms for language learning provisions.

e-Matching services

Despite huge strides being made through the availability of digital recruitment and e-matching services, many governments, public authorities, employer organisations and trade unions are sceptical towards these new services, particularly those aimed at providing ride-hailing and food-delivery services.

Despite huge strides being made through the availability of digital recruitment and e-matching services, many governments, public authorities, employer organisations and trade unions are sceptical towards these new services, particularly those aimed at providing ride-hailing and food-delivery services. With this in mind, the EU Platform Economy Worker Rights Directive was proposed in December 2021 to improve the working conditions in platform work. The text is currently with the representatives of national governments who are aiming to reach a position before the end of June 2023. Once enacted the aim is for platform workers to have access to a minimum wage, paid holidays, unemployment, sickness and health care benefits to name but a few.

As a result of the proposed Platform Worker Rights Directive, it is estimated that between 1.7 million and 4.1 million people could be re-classified as workers. However, many of them are legitimately self-employed and do not wish to be full-time employees, since they value flexibility and choice over when, where and how they work. When similar legislation, with a clear presumption of employment, was introduced in Spain in 2021, the number of jobs available fell, along with the wages of platform workers.

Furthermore, new rules on administrative cooperation in the field of taxation came into force in the EU in January 2023, which cover platforms and digital work for the first time. This is a new European reporting obligation which mirrors OECD requirements and aims to identify where tax is paid and ensure monies enter national coffers, closing loopholes and clarifying rules.

With the policy being currently focused on control rather than facilitation, it limits opportunities for labour migrants while threatening the potential of the digitalisation of matching services. This is something which needs to be addressed. By focusing on traditional, nine-to-five definitions of employment, the ability to harness the potential of digital labour and matching platforms is being missed while also limiting labour migrants in finding work. Opening space for discussion with platform workers or the platforms themselves should be the first step to adopting forward-looking regulations in this area. Moreover, decision-makers should be pragmatic and harness digital platforms to create jobs and opportunities for migrants while providing them with a channel to earn money as well as enter the labour market in their destination country.

Provision of online services

IMF research highlights that there is a correlation between the accessibility of government information and services online and the volume of foreign direct investment a country receives. This is due to the fact that when a government provides accessible and transparent information online, it enhances investor confidence in the country's business environment. This is also linked to increased efficiency and ease of doing business, since online accessibility to government information and services streamlines administrative processes and reduces bureaucratic barriers. Accessibility of information also provides the basis for market analysis, shows a commitment to the Rule of Law and also an openness to collaboration and partnerships. This is in addition to helping with the attraction of talent and labour migrants. As such, countries that offer services electronically and focus on digitalisation can reap the benefits. The availability of digital services is therefore as important as electricity, roads and clean water in modern society.

Furthermore, online services are particularly effective in the pre-departure phase to help individuals take an informed decision about migration. Services can also help migrants learn the language and acquire skills that can speed up their integration after arrival, and connect them with the communities in destination countries. Support for Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) is vital in this regard and more of their services should be delivered by digital channels, allowing them to scale their activities and their impact accordingly.

Recognition of qualifications, skills and talents

The European Commission is developing the European Digital Credentials Infrastructure (EDCI) to support efficiency and security in how credentials such as qualifications, skills developed and other learning achievements can be recognised across Europe. This will support authentication services for any digital documents or official information on skills and qualifications. To this end, the European Decision on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) was adopted in 2018.

Online services are particularly effective in the pre-departure phase to help individuals take an informed decision about migration.

These digital credential files can include a wide range of information that can help with recognition and understanding by employers and other institutions, as well as reduce the impact of credential fraud. The European Commission is developing the tools, software and services that will form part of the EDCI. 18 countries are participating in piloting digital credentials to test these elements at the national level.

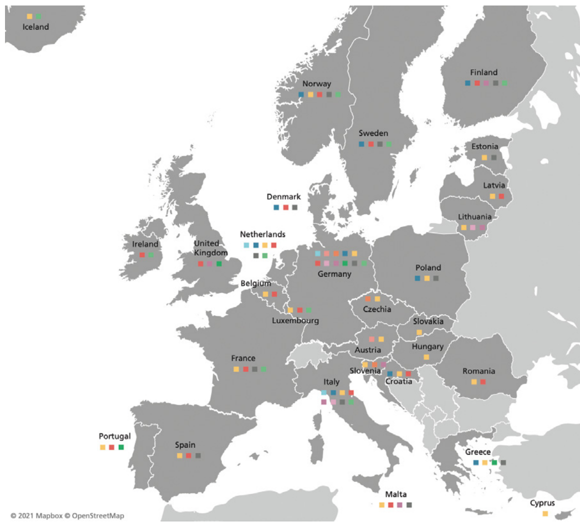
A good national example that could be replicated is the Swedish Qualifications Assessment Tool. This digital portal shows the user what their foreign qualification is comparable to in Sweden and helps in finding employment as well as planning studies. Currently, assessments can be made of 1,000 qualifications from 77 countries.

Yet, once again, this is an area where national rules are limiting recognition. By way of an example, the Federal Ministry for Labour and Economy (BMAW) in Austria needs to declare vocational training credentials obtained abroad to be equivalent to the related final apprenticeship examination taken under the Austrian system. Furthermore, practical examinations are required in some cases to achieve full equivalence with the final apprenticeship examination.

However, further positive developments have already been witnessed. A Europass Qualifications Dataset Register (QDR) has already been developed in addition to an Accreditation Database against which European Digital Credentials are verified. So far, more than 50,000 external quality assurance accreditations and evaluations have been given to over 3,000 higher education institutions.

EMREX - an electronic data exchange for students - has also been created to empower individuals to control their data and exchange it across borders for various purposes. Today this includes 1,674 connected institutions.

Map 2. International cooperation and networking of European countries on the topic of digital credentials in education



Source: Robert Rentzsch 'Digital Credentials in Education – The Situation in Germany and Europe in 2020

In June 2022, the EU also adopted a Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability. Micro-credentials - validated specific skills or knowledge gained in a focused area - certify the knowledge outcomes of short-term learning experiences and training courses. The Recommendation seeks to support the development, implementation and recognition of micro-credentials across institutions, businesses, sectors and borders.

Work on recognising qualifications and skills should be continued, and more institutions internationally should be covered since the current focus is still fairly Eurocentric.

Work on recognising qualifications and skills should be continued, and more institutions internationally should be covered since the current focus is still fairly Eurocentric. The use of qualified electronic seals is very positive and ensures the integrity of the qualifications covered. There are also digital credentials which are blockchain-verifiable - data or information that can be independently verified and validated while being protected against tampering - which is a constructive step forward and demonstrated in a prototype in collaboration with the European Blockchain Services Infrastructure (EBSI) project.

This use of digitalisation will increase trust in the system of recognising qualifications, as well as preventing fraud and increasing interoperability. Individuals should be able to store the certification of their skills, knowledge and qualifications in a secure digital wallet that they can share with public authorities and corporate entities alike.

The recognition of micro-credentials is also crucial since more specific knowledge is focused on short-term courses and training schemes, much of it web-based, and often very specific in its focus. Shorter forms of learning opportunities are growing in popularity at the expense of traditional qualifications and these skills must be recognised quickly and simply by digital means.

Furthermore, digital tools need to be created which allow for the recognition of the skills, qualifications and expertise of third-country nationals (TCNs) and these need to be recognised across the EU and Central Asia.

Online visa application services

The provision of online visa application services makes it easier for talent to fulfil the administrative side of labour migration while also allowing authorities to exert more control, use resources more efficiently and combat fraud. In April 2022, the European Commission adopted a proposal for a Regulation on the digitalisation of the EU visa procedure. This is based on the need for more security while making use of the significant technological developments which provide new opportunities to make the Schengen visa application process easier, quicker and smoother for both individuals and consulates. Visa applications can be signed electronically by law, yet many EU Member States still used paper-based procedures.

At present, the proposal is being debated by the European Parliament and Council. The development of the online Schengen visa system is expected to begin in 2024, while the platform is intended to be fully operational by 2026. Individual Schengen Member States will then have five years to transition from current visa application methods to the new unified systems. This means that all Schengen visa applications could be processed digitally by 2031.

Prague Process countries should look to standard practices related to e-visa applications and also e-visa processing times and standards for communicating immigration decisions. This would ensure a unified process and also limit visa shopping on the grounds of easier procedures.

Familiarity with the digital health passports that were rolled out during the pandemic has led to the EU's fondness for a general "digital identity" concept. The growing feeling is that digital instead of paper documents can make work and visa document submission and checking processes easier, faster and less exposed to fraud. This has also led to the rise in companies like Verified, TruID and Veriff offering e-authentication products and services.

Yet, while a great deal is happening with regard to the digitalisation of visa application and processing procedures, national differences undermine the region-wide endeavour. More specifically, Prague Process countries should look to standard practices related to e-visa applications and also e-visa processing times and standards for communicating immigration decisions. This would ensure a unified process and also limit visa shopping on the grounds of easier procedures. The Regulation on the digitalisation of the EU visa should be passed to simplify procedures and speed up processing times as well as the overall administrative burden. These digital provisions should be extended across the region to visas for people with special talents as well as "digital nomads": the national visas issued to qualifying TCNs and foreign entrepreneurs who are capable of performing their remote work services.

Balancing control with facilitation and striving for interoperability

It is also important that digitalisation balances facilitation with extra controls in Europe and Central Asia. Digital tools should facilitate matching jobs to workers and spreading reliable information as opposed to purely meeting security-related goals, such as fighting against fraud, crime, terrorism, or the secondary movement of migrants. Moreover, increased digitalisation should go hand in hand with increased online authentication and e-security programmes. The EU Digital Identity Wallet initiative is positive, but it should be implemented in such a way that data is not being used and shared illegally or abused to exert excessive control over citizens and the broader population.

Best practices should be shared across borders so that successful activities can be replicated across the Prague Process region. Related to this, more data needs to be shared across borders safely and securely. To this end, new and existing digital systems need to be interoperable in Europe and Central Asia, and ideally also at the international level.

Further reading

ICMPD Migration Outlook - Eastern Europe and Central Asia 2023
https://www.pragueprocess.eu/en/resources/repository/33-reports/373-icmpd-migration-outlook-eastern-europe-and-central-asia-2023

Migrant Resource Centres (2023) www.migrantresources.org

Using emotions in migration policy communication - Policy Brief (2022)
https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/59052/file/EUROMED_MIGRATION_USING_EMOTIONS_IN_MIGRATION_POLICY_COMMUNICATION.pdf

The role of information campaigns in addressing irregular migration - Policy Brief (2022) https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/57991/file Information%2520Campaigns%2520Brief%2520%2528v.5%2529.pdf

EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 (2021) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0758&qid=1632299185798

European Migration Network https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/about-emn_en

Digitalization and Employment: ILO review (2022) https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_854353.pdf

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European Commission (2022) "Entering the EU - online visa application process and digital visa" https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12758-Entering-the-EU-online-visa-application-process-and-digital-visa_en

European Commission (2021) "EU Action Plan against Migrant Smuggling" https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/renewed-eu-action-plan-against-migrant-smuggling-2021-2025-com-2021-591_en

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European Commission (2004) common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32018D0646&from=EN

The Place for Modern Technologies in the Integration of Migrants

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Executive summary

The integration experience among migrants is associated with their use of digital technology to navigate complex adaptation challenges and acquire essential information. Digital tools like smartphones, social media, and online platforms assist migrants in settling into a new country by providing information and services, including those for language learning, sociocultural integration, employment, and skills development. Concurrently, host governments and societies are harnessing technological solutions to enhance the provision of official services and information for migrant populations, complementing the strategic use of digital tools by the migrants themselves. However, practical benefits of digital technology are often hindered by limited connectivity, literacy gaps, and socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural barriers.

This Policy Brief explores how migrants engage with modern technologies throughout their integration trajectories in host countries, highlighting the reasons why they may encounter digital obstacles and the instances where governments have, intentionally or unintentionally, marginalised them. This brief also examines the opportunities and limitations of existing bottom-up and top-down approaches to digitalisation in migrant integration processes, particularly in Europe, as well as offers recommendations on how digital technologies can be better tailored to migrants' needs, thereby enabling more efficient investments in digital technologies within integration settings and generating increased opportunities for migrant agency.

Current context: Leveraging modern technology in migrant integration

The digital age is reshaping the landscape of migrant integration, redefining the approaches of the integration process. Global trends such as the rapid digital transformation have significantly impacted how societies perceive and experience the integration of migrant populations, with some arguing that digital tools and platforms have the potential to enhance integration efforts. Simultaneously, societies, whether they embrace it or not, are becoming increasingly diverse and multicultural. This shift necessitates a critical examination of how digital technologies intersect with traditional integration frameworks, and whether it redefines the understanding and support of migrant inclusion. The following sections explore these emergent dynamics, shedding light on the complex interplay between technology and migrant integration. This will involve examining both the bottom-up uses of digital media and technologies by migrant communities and top-down approaches to digitisation and digitalisation in formal migrant integration initiatives and policies.

Societies, whether they embrace it or not, are becoming increasingly diverse and multicultural. This shift necessitates a critical examination of how digital technologies intersect with traditional integration frameworks, and whether it redefines the understanding and support of migrant inclusion.

Bottom-Up Uses of Digital Media and Technologies for Integration

Digital technologies play a crucial role in helping migrants stay informed about current events, overcome adjustment challenges, and acquire information to improve their daily lives. Migrants benefit from their smartphones and social media applications **to obtain orientation on practical issues** of the host society, such as locations, transportation, shopping and market developments in their new city. They also utilise a variety of social media platforms and messaging apps, such as Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, X (former Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, WhatsApp, and Telegram, for **information-seeking and guidance** about job opportunities, training programs and the educational system. According to findings from a survey of migrants from EU and non-EU countries in Germany[I], social media are perceived as particularly helpful during their integration process for finding employment offers. Migrants in the Netherlands frequently cite the usefulness of Facebook groups and pages, such as the "Refugee Start Force" initiative, in navigating the Dutch labour market.

Social media platforms can provide migrants with valuable tools to support **language acquisition and cultural learning**, such as actively following YouTube tutorials, podcasts, e-books, and websites that offer instruction on the host country's language and insights into the new culture. In addition to educational and informational uses, migrants also leverage social media platforms for **recreational activities and vocational learning**. For instance, recent research on Ukrainians settling in Lithuania found that they use Instagram both to unwind and to access free courses for developing hobbies and talents[II].

The examination of digital technology adoption by migrants has primarily been framed around the concept of **migration networks that connect migrants to their kin and acquaintances**, who in turn can aid their adaptation through access to social, economic, cultural, affective, and legal resources emerging from these support networks. Studies have established that **social networks that migrants can access through digital devices and platforms** serve as a gateway to **understand and engage with the new society** they have joined. These personal connections offer culturally relevant perspectives and first-hand experience in navigating the complexities of a new place. For instance, Eritrean migrants in Europe have robust communities on Facebook and YouTube to share experiences about daily live, transportation, and immigration procedures[III]. Syrians in the Netherlands have established Facebook pages and groups, as well as YouTube channels, to assist peers in accessing information, including details on civic integration exams and the workings of the Dutch healthcare system. Similarly, Syrian and Iranian migrants in Türkiye have built networks on WhatsApp and Telegram to share daily information, including news about their status in Türkiye, updates from humanitarian agencies, news from their home countries, and community events[IV]. Ukrainian migrants use Telegram groups as a "virtual bulletin board"[V], providing vital support upon arrival in their host country.

The use of social media platforms also helps migrants in building **connections with host society members**. When opportunities for in-person interactions with the host society through employment or education remain constrained, social media can help facilitate connections between migrants and local residents. For example, in the Netherlands, Facebook pages enable migrants and Dutch citizens to organise activities fostering intercultural engagement[VI]. Alternatively, migrants may employ a blended approach, combining face-to-face interactions with social media apps to strengthen the relationship-building process and make new friends in the host country.

When opportunities for in-person interactions with the host society through employment or education remain constrained, social media can help facilitate connections between migrants and local residents.

Maintaining contact with family and friends is crucial for managing feelings of isolation and improving migrants' overall well-being. Social media enables migrants to sustain a sense of "connected presence" with loved ones, even when physically separated. Studies of transnational Italian families[VII] and Filipino migrants[VIII] residing in London show that media platforms and devices help maintain family bonds and uphold family traditions across geographic boundaries, including through livestreaming of culinary practices. The possibility of establishing transnational family connections can help migrants overcome difficulties and feel more in control of their lives during settlement.

At the same time, digital technologies have offered a **new social sphere** for migrants to **assert their rights to identity and cultural expression** in their host countries. Existing research on Basque diaspora digital networks demonstrates that social media platforms play a crucial role in forming and preserving community identity[IX]. This is evident in interactions between men, women, young, and old in Basque association Facebook groups. Studies of the Meskhetian Turkish diaspora reveal that digital platforms serve as a cultural unifier[X], enabling Meskhetian Turks to maintain their shared linguistic and national identities through these platforms, despite being spread across different countries and regions such as Central Asian states, Türkiye, Northern Cyprus, and the United States.

Aside from emphasising linguistic and national identities of diasporic groups, social media platforms **foster greater resilience and self-determination within migrant communities**. These communities transcend geographic boundaries, being engaging with the everyday affairs of their adopted countries while also reflecting the political context of their countries of origin. Russian-speaking migrants in the Netherlands use both public and private Facebook groups to express self-perceptions of their common identity and voice concerns about their perception within Dutch society[XI]. These online communities share content and events that ignite discussions about community identity and perspectives on their host society.

Ultimately, social media content produced by migrants challenges discriminatory narratives that portray them as threats to European welfare systems. Research shows that Latin American migrants in Spain use TikTok to highlight their economic value and contribution to their host country. Migrants also use digital devices to showcase their integration into the host society on their own terms[XII]. For instance, the recent *Translocal Lives* project conducted in the Netherlands demonstrated how migrants used smartphones to create short films that gave voice to the concerns of their communities following resettlement.

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Top-Down Digital Approaches to Migrant Integration

Across the European Union, governments are leveraging technology to enhance service delivery and outcomes, with many employing digital and online tools to bolster the integration of new arrivals[XIII]. The complexity of migration policies and legal frameworks in European countries increases the information needs of refugees and migrants as well as their reliance on technologies. At the national level, government agencies use digital tools, such as mobile apps, to provide migrants with general information about integration processes. Examples include Germany's Ankommen **and** mbeon **mobile apps, Belgium's** Welcome to Antwerp **and** Atlas **apps, and Finland's** Settling in Finland **app**, which offer guidance on immigration processes, as well as details on local laws, customs, along with topics like employment, language, health and housing. The *mbeon* app, for instance, includes a chat function allowing users to directly contact staff at the Migration Advice Service for Adult Migrants. Most of these tools are available in multiple languages.

Various online courses have been created to enhance migrants' skills and knowledge of the host country's language. For instance, Skills Norway, a directorate under the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, offers online mobile-friendly assessments to help newcomers evaluate their Norwegian reading skills and identify suitable language learning curriculum. Similarly, the Swedish Institute, a government agency, offers an online course Learning Swedish, designed for migrants with knowledge of English or other languages, covering basic spoken and written Swedish as well as insights into Swedish culture and society.

The European refugee and migration crisis of 2015-16 catalysed the development of digital innovations in the migration space , leading to the creation of numerous smartphone apps to help newcomers navigate their journey, settlement, and integration process.

At the EU level, mobile apps promote migrant integration across various domains, including sociocultural inclusion (DIGIMI app), healthcare (Mig Health app), access to services (RefAid), and training and employability (MiGreat). These digital initiatives been developed through the active engagement of governments, policymakers, international humanitarian agencies, private companies, and philanthropic investment firms. The European refugee and migration crisis of 2015-16 catalysed the development of digital innovations in the migration space[XIV], leading to the creation of numerous smartphone apps to help newcomers navigate their journey, settlement, and integration process.

European governments have established integration policies which, in some countries like Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Norway, require migrants to pass civic integration courses assessing their knowledge of the host country's language, culture and labour market. These policies have led to the development of **e-learning programs** to help migrants prepare for and pass orientation and civic integration exams. To illustrate, Belgian integration agencies incorporate interactive online games and practice quizzes in social orientation training programs. Germany and Norway offer guidance on education, training, and career opportunities for migrants through the government websites Make it in Germany and Utdannin.no, respectively.

Digital approaches to migrant integration have also explored the potential of more advanced technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) and **algorithms**. Partnerships between governments, private companies, and non-governmental organisations have developed and implemented these technologies to assist migrants in their economic integration. In Denmark, VR is used to provide an immersive introduction to unskilled labour opportunities for migrants and refugees, showcasing personal stories and experiences of newcomers working in sectors such as transportation, retail, hospitality, cleaning, and caregiving, and offering learners insights into the demands, expectations, and cultural norms of the Danish workforce within these industries. In some countries, like Estonia and Türkiye[XV], governments use **algorithmic matching tools**[1] to place migrants in locations that could offer employment opportunities, aiming to improve economic integration outcomes by matching migrants' characteristics with available settlement sites. The approach helps speed up decision-making, as delays in asylum decisions and labour market access can significantly impact refugee employment rates.

Identifying the gaps

While both migrants and host countries leverage technology for integration, digital migrant connections and approaches face various challenges. The subsequent section explores these integration challenges from both the bottom-up and top-down perspectives.

Challenges of Bottom-Up and Top-Down Approaches to Digitalisation in Migrant Integration

Despite the importance of digital connectivity, network resources, and practices for migrant integration, **significant barriers such as affordability, language proficiency, and literacy challenges** - especially for newly arrived migrants - can constrain the adoption of digital technology during resettlement[XVI]. These barriers limit access to education, employment, and sociocultural interactions. In Türkiye, the lack of widespread access and resources to utilise the internet and social media represent a significant barrier among certain migrant groups[XVII].

For migrants who are often among the most vulnerable, such as refugees and asylum seekers, the **shift by host governments and community organisations towards remote and technology-based solutions has reinforced their social and economic exclusion**, further hindering their ability to fully utilise digital government services. The challenges migrants face in accessing local services were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. An online survey[XVIII] conducted by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) with 33 municipalities across seven European countries found that while the transition to digitalisation allowed municipalities to continue providing services, **migrants experienced lack of access to ICT devices, language barriers, and difficulties in reaching out to beneficiaries** due to a shortage of specialised staff.

There have been notable challenges in providing appropriate digital services to support the settlement and integration of migrants. Typically, **services intended for refugees do not profoundly engage with their literacies**. Moreover, host societies and institutions do not meaningfully involve refugees in the design and implementation of such initiatives, often **failing to consider that many migrants are tech savvy**. According to a study by Katherine T. McCaffrey and Maisa C. Taha, caseworkers, schools, and health clinics working with Middle Eastern refugees in New Jersey used **outmoded communication channels that failed to match refugees' high levels of mobile usage**, leading to unnecessary integration obstacles. Similarly, an IOM Greece survey[XIX] on designing e-learning integration courses for newcomers revealed the need for smartphone compatibility, as most respondents owned smartphones and were familiar with mobile apps, while few could use laptops to follow the courses.

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Furthermore, government investments in mobile app technology to facilitate information processing and service provision for migrants **may not adequately capture the diverse experiences and needs within migrant populations**. In fact, digital forms of assistance, such as chatbots or messaging apps for legal inquiries, may be viewed as less respectful compared to in-person legal aid[XX]. This remote and impersonal approach can come across as more detached and disconnected from migrant community needs. Previous research has also shown that government websites and digital platforms **may fail to effectively engage culturally and linguistically diverse populations**. Specifically, Syrian migrants in the Netherlands reported difficulties finding detailed and adequate health information on official websites, owing to cultural barriers and language-related challenges[XXI].

In most European countries, the procedures, requirements, and the multiple actors involved in the settlement make the process very complicated for migrants. **Informa-**

1 One example is the GeoMatch algorithmic matching tool, developed by the Swiss Secretariat for Migration in collaboration with the Immigration Policy Lab (IPL), which aims to more effectively place asylum-seekers within Switzerland. For a more comprehensive examination of the use of matching tools within the EU, see Ozkul, D. (2023). Automating immigration and asylum: the uses of new technologies in migration and asylum governance in Europe.

tion is often presented in a fragmented, dense, and digitalised manner. Navigating bureaucratic systems has not necessarily become simpler or more accessible, even in the smartphone era. Accessing this information requires migrants to adequately use social support networks and be capable to navigate complex information landscapes online.

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As discussed in section 1.1, migrants often value the insights and guidance provided by members of their social networks and communities, as well as social media platforms, over government online channels, which are generally rated as less helpful[XXII]. This is especially true for migrants from countries where information is tightly controlled. On the other hand, migrants' reliance on social media platforms and networks can also **expose them to a continuous stream of rumours and disinformation**, as the internet frequently serves as a breeding ground for such content. This can negatively impact migrants' everyday lives and integration prospects. Similarly, the proliferation of new apps and websites designed to support migrant integration has also led to unintended consequences, such as **digital tools becoming obsolete with broken hyperlinks, expired employment or housing opportunities, and other outdated information** - a phenomenon known as **digital litter**[XXIII]. This misleading information can be particularly harmful to individuals who rely on it to understand visa rules and obtain information about their rights and access to services.

Finally, while algorithms increasingly shape migrants' everyday life experiences, **their potential to positively affect integration processes are inconclusive**. The insights from the *GeoMatch* algorithm suggest that prioritising integration criteria and considering migrants' preferences ultimately depend on the decisions made by state authorities. This use of algorithmic matching tools has also been criticised for failing to address structural barriers contributing to labour market inequalities, and not adequately considering migrants' families as a crucial factor in the integration process. The Match'In project in Germany has taken a more participatory and multifaceted approach, compared to other pilot tools. It engages diverse stakeholders, including migrants, in its development and implementation. The project aims to consider various integration criteria, such as migrants' family compositions, professional backgrounds, health conditions, and municipalities' capacities to provide socioeconomic opportunities.

Policy recommendations and conclusions

Digital technologies offer transformative potential in migrant integration, particularly through innovations in information and service delivery. To fully harness this potential, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Improving (digital) accessibility:** While digitisation and digitalisation of government services can extend their reach, services offered in a digital format remain inaccessible to individuals without technological literacy, internet access, or compatible devices like a smartphone. Programs should consider these disparities and strategically combine digital and in-person methods to guarantee equitable access. Government online channels providing settlement information should be intuitive, easy to navigate, accessible to migrants with varying digital literacy levels, as well as offer multilingual support and step-by-step guides to follow bureaucratic processes. The "Welcome to Germany" online platform, operated by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) in Germany, is a good example to follow, as it boasts a user-friendly layout with responsive design, intuitive navigation, and support for over 15 different languages.
- **Consolidating and streamlining official information:** Governments across Europe should centralise all relevant information on settlement procedures, requirements, and involved actors into user-friendly platforms. There within, information should be clear and concise, avoiding overly complex or fragmented content that could confuse or overwhelm users, especially newly arrived migrants. Crucially, governments must maintain robust digital administration, including strict oversight of any external organisations they fund or collaborate with, to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information provided. This involves meticulously dating all content, regularly reviewing materials and archiving obsolete information to help prevent the spread of outdated information, which may mislead individuals with limited knowledge of the relevant legal, educational, or immigration systems, or the language used.

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- **Leveraging existing social networks and online channels:** Top-down approaches to migrant integration should recognise migrants' own digital social support networks in providing guidance and insights in finding employment, understanding societal functions in areas like education and healthcare, and improving their language proficiency, while fostering socialisation and belonging. Stakeholders at the local level should collaborate with these networks and community-based organisations and utilise digital channels used by migrants, including social media, to disseminate accurate information and counteract misinformation effectively. Stakeholders can leverage migrants' use of smartphones and social media to send text messages warning against false information to communities. Local organisations can compile and disseminate directories of relevant groups in social media and messaging platforms (e.g.

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LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook) tailored to migrant backgrounds and needs (e.g. nationality, language, shared interests). Such directories or lists could also include freely accessible apps, podcasts and relevant websites that could assist migrants in their daily life, supporting informal learning in an efficient and cost-effective way, with positive implications for social inclusion. By collaborating with existing online migrant communities and groups, state and non-state institutions can amplify their outreach and support efforts, leveraging the trust and engagement these digital spaces have already established.

- **Collaborating with community partners:** Bridging the gap between migrants' use of digital media and top-down technology approaches in migrant integration requires meaningful and sustainable partnerships between government agencies, local community organisations, social service providers, and migrant advocacy groups. Such partnerships can develop more responsive and effective settlement support programs featuring various digital means by leveraging the expertise and established relationships of multiple actors with varying levels of understanding of the needs and challenges faced by migrant populations.
- **Maintaining transparency and trust:** While many digital apps and platforms supporting migrant integration rely on user data, organisations do not always transparently communicate what data is collected and for what purposes. Transparent communication about data practices, as required by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the EU, is directly linked to a trustworthiness, making it a critical consideration for stakeholders developing digital solutions for migrant populations. Avoiding malpractices and clearly communicating the platform's purpose, data privacy policies, and any limitations is crucial for maintaining sustainable relationships with migrant users. Moreover, ensuring that all information is sourced from reliable authorities, while also establishing clear channels for migrants to contact platform administrators or report issues, is essential for building trust and credibility.

By implementing these recommendations, digital tools can enhance the integration process for migrants, ensuring equitable access, accurate information, and robust support networks. At the same time, while digital technology holds transformative potential in the lives of migrants and their integration, it alone cannot address the multifaceted challenges of the integration process. Critical areas remain where technology's role in migrant integration is limited.

Digital technologies can offer insights into cultural norms and practices, but they fall short in fully replicating the nuanced, experiential learning that emerges from direct cross-cultural interactions and exchanges. Face-to-face interactions and immersive experiences remain essential for deeper **cultural understanding and social cohesion**, allowing for a more comprehensive appreciation of cultural subtleties and meaningful intercultural connections.

Although digital tools facilitate certain tasks and virtual connections, they do not automatically increase opportunities for in-person socialisation with local community members. Research has indicated that connections formed via mobile apps are perceived by migrants as hindering their chances to engage in meaningful face-to-face interactions with the host community[XXIV].

The potential for digital platforms and resources to raise awareness about **discrimination and xenophobia** is also debated. While online spaces could help address stereotypes surrounding migrants, they may equally reinforce negative narratives about them. From this perspective, personal, face-to-face interactions are crucial for overcoming deeply rooted prejudices, as they shape views, attitudes, and behaviours more effectively than digital interactions alone.

Similarly, in the context of **migrant health**, digital technologies can complement face-to-face interventions, given the affordability and widespread accessibility of smartphones, mental health apps and SMS for support and mental health services[XXV]. Yet, effective emotional and psychological support often requires personalised, in-person counselling and therapy. There is a clear need for accessible and culturally sensitive health services to address the unique challenges faced by migrant populations.

Integrating migrant youth into the **education system and their socialisation process** are complex challenges that digital tools alone cannot fully address. Inclusive and culturally responsive educational programs, along with community-based initiatives, are crucial for the holistic development of migrant youth's educational and integration trajectories.

Integrating migrant youth into the education system and their socialisation process are complex challenges that digital tools alone cannot fully address.

The debate surrounding the impact of digital technologies on migrant integration remains ongoing and inconclusive. The ways in which smartphones, social media and other advanced technologies are reshaping established patterns of migrant is not yet well-understood. Further research is needed to determine how these technologies are facilitating and hindering integration processes in various societal spheres.

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