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Analytical Report

Migration in the context of climate and environmental changes in non-EU Prague Process States: Exploring Vulnerabilities, Policy Gaps and Available Protection Frameworks

About the author

Dr Chiara Scissa is a Research Fellow in EU Law at University of Bologna - Alma Mater Studiorum in the framework of the European Research Council (ERC) Starting Grant (StG) project "Gatekeepers to International Refugee Law? – The Role of Courts in Shaping Access to Asylum" (ACCESS). She is also a Researcher in the Energy, Climate and Resources Program at Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome. Dr. Scissa has consulted and produced reports on climate change and migration in different world regions for EuroMed Rights, IOM and ICMPD. She earned her PhD in Law cum laude from Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, where she also worked as a Research Collaborator on Climate Change and Migration.

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Prague Process Secretariat
International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)
Rothschildplatz 4
A-1020 Vienna
Austria

www.pragueprocess.eu
www.icmpd.org
www.linkedin.com/company/prague-process
www.facebook.com/PragueProcess

Executive summary

This analytical report examines the political challenges and responses to migration driven by climate and environmental changes (MECC) across the non-EU Prague Process states (non-EU PPS). It offers evidence of cases substantiating the climate change-migration nexus and elaborates on the impact that climate change can have on migration movements. It investigates the role of the EU in supporting climate adaptation in non-EU PPS, while reflecting on the impact that latent and ongoing conflicts, often interrelated with water scarcity and mismanagement of (already scant) natural resources, may have in exacerbating climate vulnerability and migration movements. The report illustrates relevant national protection practices covering a wide range of people, both nationals and non-nationals, affected by climate and environmental factors. It also analyses the protection frameworks available to MECC at the national and international level.

Non-EU PPS are recommended to engage more at the supranational level to develop comprehensive and uniform policy responses addressing specific climate and environmental challenges forcing people out of their homes, as well as related protection needs. States should improve climate adaptation and mitigation actions in their internal and external policy dimensions and enhance regional cooperation on climate and environmental matters. Finally, they should consider developing or reinforcing concerted actions, regional cooperation, and transboundary water agreements to properly and fairly manage shared water resources, their use and distribution. This in turn would deepen regional integration, while avoiding the escalation of tensions or conflicts over natural resources.

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INTRODUCTION

Climate change and environmental degradation are emerging as critical drivers of human mobility. Global warming is exacerbating the impact, frequency, and intensity of disasters and extreme weather events. As a result, individuals and communities around the world are increasingly forced to move in search of safety, stability, and better livelihoods. This phenomenon – often referred to as migration in the context of climate and environmental changes (MECC) – presents profound challenges for policymakers, particularly in regions where environmental vulnerabilities intersect with political instability, economic fragility, armed conflicts, and limited governance capacity.

Non-EU Prague Process States (non-EU PPS) – a diverse group of countries spanning Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus[I] – are also affected by these dynamics.[1] Climate change in their cases acts as a threat-multiplier by interacting with other political and socio-economic factors, exacerbating vulnerability, reducing resilience and triggering migratory movements within and from these countries.

The nexus between climate change and migration as well as the impact of conflicts and resource scarcity on climate vulnerability and migration movements represent important features of this region and are at the core of this report, which provides a patchwork analysis of the complex interplay between these features along with the ongoing efforts in addressing them.

Chapter 1 begins by offering a regional profile of non-EU PPS, focusing on the climate vulnerabilities and resulting migration dynamics. It also examines the interplay between conflict and natural resources, which intensifies migration pressures, and explores how EU policies on climate adaptation contribute to reducing these pressures by strengthening resilience to environmental changes in non-EU PPS.

Chapter 2 delves into the protection frameworks and assistance provided to people fleeing climate and environmental changes, comparing national practices across the region, and identifying relevant shortcomings.

The report concludes by offering policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the protection of individuals displaced by climate and environmental factors and improving related (sub)regional cooperation. It represents a step towards understanding the scope of the challenges confronted, allowing policymakers across the Prague Process region to navigate this landscape.

[I] Non-EU Prague Process States covered by this report are: Western Balkans countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia); Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan); Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine); Schengen countries (Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland), and Türkiye. *This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

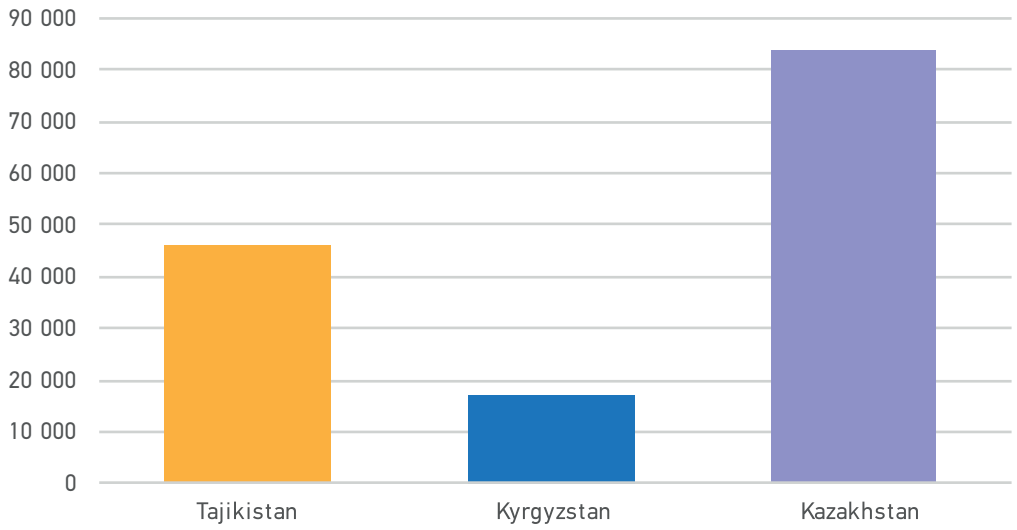
CHAPTER 1. REGIONAL PROFILE OF NON-EU PRAGUE PROCESS STATES

1.1. Climate vulnerabilities and resulting migration dynamics

Within the Prague Process region, **Central Asia** emerges as one of the most climate-vulnerable areas, facing significant risks from aridity and extreme weather events. The projected rise in intensity and frequency of sudden-onset disasters, such as floods, and droughts, is poised to exacerbate land degradation and desertification, undermining economies dependent on climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture, energy, and cotton production. The region's increasing water scarcity and soaring temperatures are projected to inflict substantial economic damage, potentially leading to employment losses.[2] By 2030, Central Asia could lose around 32,300 full-time jobs due to heat stress, with Tajikistan expected to suffer the most, losing approximately 4,900 full-time jobs.[3]

Central Asia's reliance on fossil fuels, such as oil and gas in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and hydropower plants in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, alters their resilience to climate change.[4] Evidence suggests that climate and environmental factors are increasingly shaping human mobility patterns in Central Asia, including internal displacement, rural-to-urban migration, cross-border labour migration, and planned relocation.[5] In Kyrgyzstan, climate change has already induced many individuals working in climate-sensitive sectors to migrate abroad in search of better economic opportunities. The country recently recognised that the lack of clean water and land, crop failures and disasters are among the most common factors triggering forced migration, displacement and relocation.[6] Similarly, in Tajikistan, entire communities have been relocated from disaster-prone areas, while thousands of people in Kazakhstan have been displaced due to floods and wildfires.[7]

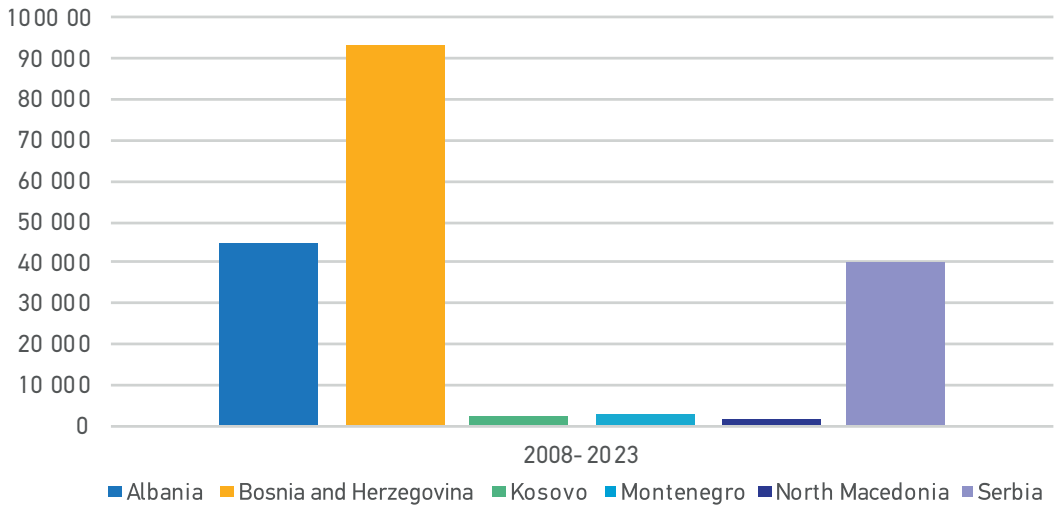
Chart 1. Internal disaster displacement in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (2008-2023)



Source: IDMC Data collection of internal disaster displacement movements in the selected countries

The **Western Balkans** mirror Central Asia's vulnerabilities, with climate change, disasters, and environmental degradation significantly impacting the region. Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the Western Balkans, with over 80% of its municipalities at risk from floods and landslides.[8] Not only is there evidence that environmental degradation has already contributed to emigration, but the nexus between migration, climate and environmental factors is emerging as a driver of immigration and transit flows. IOM study found that 5% of surveyed migrants and asylum seekers traveling through the Western Balkans cite environmental and climate changes as the main reason for leaving their countries of origin.[9]

Chart 2. Internal disaster displacement in the Western Balkans (2008-2023)



Source: IDMC Data collection of internal disaster displacement movements in the selected countries

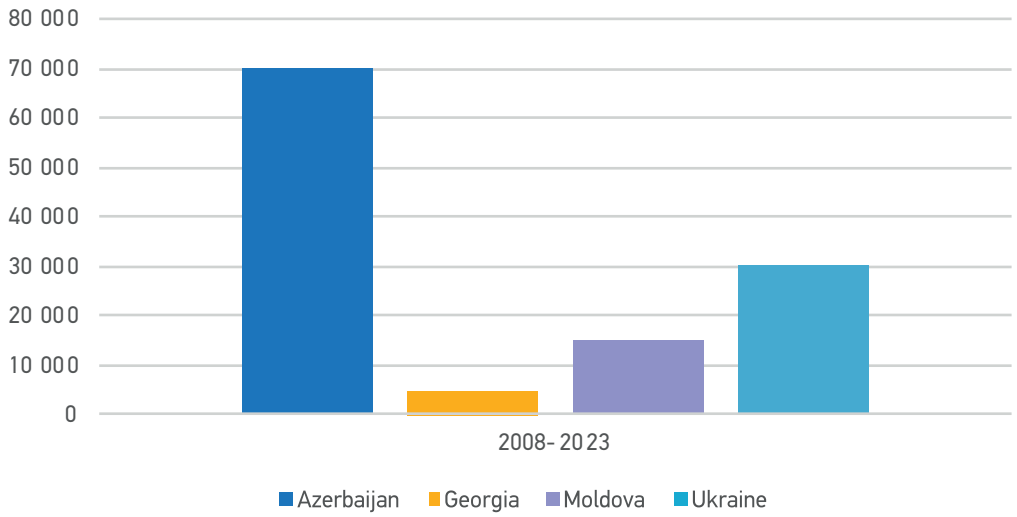
Türkiye is similarly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change, having experienced 4.5 million internal disaster displacements between 2008 and 2023, primarily due to earthquakes. Without urgent action, increasing droughts and heatwaves along with rising sea level, coastal erosion, and sudden-onset events could cost Türkiye up to 2.26% of its GDP by 2050.[10] Global warming is also reducing the availability of water for food production and agriculture, worsening social and regional disparities and rural-urban migration. The construction of major dams since the 1970s, aimed at mitigating water scarcity, has instead degraded the environment and harmed agricultural activities of Turkish farmers, while also resulting in forced relocation and internal migration of farmers and seasonal workers from rural to urban areas.[11] Dam projects, such as the Guneydogu Anadolu Projesi[12] and the Atatürk Dam[13], have displaced hundreds of thousands, often forcing families to relocate under adverse conditions. The relocation process failed to adequately compensate people for the land they had lost, nor did it consider their needs and socio-economic vulnerabilities. The 2000 national census revealed a significant growth in urban populations due to the intensive use of arable land, which led to migration from rural to urban areas, particularly from the country's east to west.[14] Years later, the government recognised that the loss or improper use of natural resources resulted in poverty, which in turn caused "mass migration from rural to urban areas" in search of better employment opportunities.[15]

The 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye further highlight the intricate links between disasters and migration. In February 2023, 11 Turkish provinces were hit by devastating earthquakes, significantly affecting migrant communities, particularly Syrians. This led to temporary and internal movements from urban to safer rural areas, compelled relocations to undamaged neighbouring provinces, and

voluntary returns to safer areas in their countries of origin, including Syria.[16] The Turkish government temporarily suspended the travel permit requirement in affected provinces and provided support to relocated migrants, including food aid, rent and bill assistance, but many migrants faced untreated psychological issues and struggled to meet basic needs, particularly housing.[17]

Within the **Eastern Partnership**, the South Caucasus countries are progressively becoming drier and warmer, facing landslides and floods. Food insecurity, biodiversity loss, and water scarcity are severe concerns for these countries. In this context, **Georgia** expects a rise in "ecological migrants" and is developing protection programmes for children and their families forced to relocate due to "natural disasters or crisis induced by climate change.[18] **Azerbaijan** has recognised that most of its current environmental problems stem from unsustainable industrial and agricultural policies, aggravated by mass displacements due to pressure on arable land, water, and waste management systems.[19] Similar problems exist outside the Caucasus. **Moldova**, with its reliance on agriculture and energy imports, is particularly vulnerable to rising temperature, aridity, and disasters like floods, storms, and droughts.[20] **Moldova** has acknowledged that climate crisis can lead to forced migration movements and that climate factors have contributed to accelerating emigration from the country, which has resulted in land abandonment and lack of workforce in agriculture.[21] **Ukraine**, too, faces heightened risks from climate change, with increasing likelihood of droughts and floods threatening agricultural production.[22] Disasters caused by the ongoing war in Ukraine further compound these challenges, likely influencing future migration patterns.

Chart 3. Internal disaster displacement in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (2008-2023)

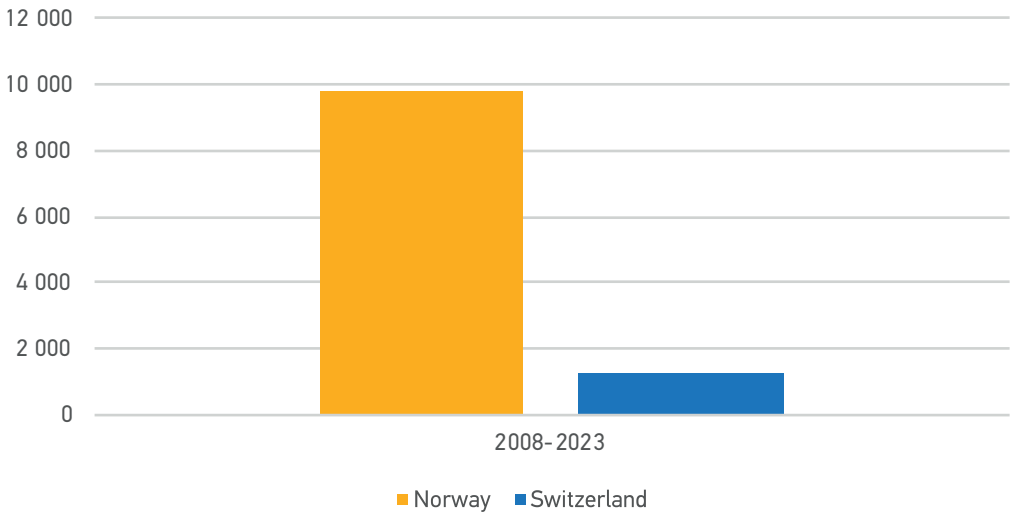


Source: IDMC Data collection of internal disaster displacement movements in the selected countries

Within the **Schengen Area**, countries are not immune to the effects of climate change either. **Liechtenstein**, for instance, anticipates prolonged heat waves and reduced precipitation, which could heighten water stress in agriculture and reduce crop yields. An increased frequency of extreme events, such as forest fires, storms, and avalanches, may also affect forests. In **Norway**, rising temperatures are expected to accelerate snowmelt and reduce the volume of glaciers, leading to higher sea levels and more frequent extreme weather events. Norwegian coastal areas, already vulnerable to storm surges, are expected to face more frequent inundations. In 2023 alone, storms led to 5,800 internal displacements, highlighting the ongoing impact of these extreme weather events.[23] In **Switzerland**, a potential 1.5°C global warming could translate to a 3°C increase locally, accelerating the retreat and the melting of Alpine glaciers and impacting the availability of water

for agriculture and energy. In 2023, dry and wet mass movements together with wildfires displaced hundreds of people in Switzerland.[24]

Chart 4. Internal disaster displacement in Norway and Switzerland (2008-2023)



Source: IDMC Data collection of internal disaster displacement movements in the selected countries

Research on the impact of climate change on irregular migration toward the EU and Schengen countries[25] suggests that weather events, such as higher rainfall in countries of origin, may influence migration toward Europe. As these patterns emerge across different regions, the interconnectedness of climate change, environmental degradation, and migration becomes increasingly clear, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive, adaptive responses.

1.2. Conflict, natural resources and climate change

Karabakh

Conflicts over natural resources, particularly water, further complicate the climate change-migration nexus in the region. In Southern Caucasus, the Kura and Araks river serve as vital water sources, flowing through several countries before emptying into the Caspian Sea. Water distribution in the region is uneven, with Georgia being the most water-rich and Azerbaijan the most water-scarce. Water resources have been a significant factor in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, particularly regarding the Sarsang dam and hydro-electric plant in Karabakh, which generates most of the region's electricity. In 2015, Azerbaijan raised concerns with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe about the dam's misfunctioning, citing the lack of regular maintenance and related risks to the whole region and deliberate water deprivation for Azerbaijani inhabitants in bordering areas.[26] The Assembly's 2016 resolution considered this as "environmental aggression".[27]

Armenia's and Azerbaijan's mutual accusations of ecocide and environmental damage have hindered efforts to reach a peaceful and successful agreement on water management. In January 2023, Azerbaijan suited Armenia under the 1979 Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, binding for both countries, for allegedly destroying its environment by causing deforestation, pollution and biodiversity loss during the Karabakh conflict. Concurrently,

Karabakh populations accused Azerbaijan of obstructing power line repairs, leading to electricity shortages. The same year, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called on states to refrain from exploiting the environment as a warfare tactic and urged the prosecution of ecocide while establishing protections for "environmental refugees" fleeing an armed conflict.[28]

The conflict over water resources in Karabakh persisted until September 2023, when Azerbaijan regained control over the region, effectively ending the self-proclaimed "Republic of Artsakh". The EU intervened to support normalisation efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and aid Armenia in accommodating over 100,000 persons who left Karabakh for Armenia. In April 2024, Armenia and Azerbaijan had reached a preliminary agreement on border delimitation and territorial integrity, while the EU announced a €270 million Resilience and Growth Plan to support Armenia over the next four years.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia

The frozen conflicts in the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have isolated these territories from international environmental protection and cooperation, limiting their ability to effectively mitigate the adverse effects of climate change and cope with disasters, especially earthquakes and landslides. Despite the Liakhvi and Enguri rivers crossing the territories of Georgia proper, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia and its two breakaway regions do not share water distribution and management systems. The lack of communication and cooperation among these territories has contributed to a reduction of the river flow and has undermined the rivers' ability to sustain the natural ecosystem.[29] Moreover, the Enguri dam and hydropower plants, located on the Georgia proper and Abkhazian territory, remain critical for energy security, serving as the main source of electricity for both Georgia and the breakaway Abkhazia. The conflicting parties have agreed to maintain its constant operation, but disagreements over energy distribution persist.

Ukraine

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has inflicted severe environmental damage alongside its humanitarian and economic toll. Attacks on chemical plants, oil depots and water facilities have triggered air, water, and soil pollution in Ukraine, damaging ecosystems and biodiversity. According to Ukraine's Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources, by July 2023, there were 2,450 reports of Russian military actions with direct environmental impact and 257 instances of environmental crimes. The destruction of Ukraine's largest dam, Kakhovka, in June 2023, led to disastrous flooding, mass displacement, and human casualties, with long-term environmental and health consequences. The EU condemned the attack, qualifying it as ecocide and the worst environmental disaster in Europe since Chernobyl.[30]

The conflict has heightened Ukraine's vulnerability to climate change, forcing the country to divert funds away from climate initiatives to address war-related consequences. Moreover, national efforts to achieve climate neutrality have been obstructed by Russia's weaponization of energy supplies, and widespread damage to Ukraine's renewable energy systems. The war will likely worsen the climate crisis and delay the global transition to renewable energy.[31] Moreover, it is conceivable that war-related contamination and pollution will likely become an additional factor of migration from Ukraine.[II] For instance, the destruction of oil industries can lead to an ecological disaster, including oil spills and discharge of toxic materials, prompting people to flee from irreparable harm.

[II] The correlation between migration and pollution, although not caused by conflicts, was already observed in 2006-2011 by comparing the rate of waste, hazardous substances and polluted water in the Western regions of Ukraine with the rate of migration from these regions during this period. Andel, I. (2013). 'Ecological migration of population in the regions of Ukraine' in Socio-economic Problems of the Modern Period of Ukraine 3(101):451–457.

Additionally, Ukraine is currently one of the most landmine-contaminated areas in the world. It faces dire environmental and humanitarian challenges, with mines and unexploded devices restricting freedom of movement, access to basic services, and livelihoods. These issues are increasingly considered in protection assessment.

Central Asia

In Central Asia, tensions frequently arise over border disputes and control of shared natural resources, particularly water, triggering displacement, insecurity, and political instability.[32] The Syr Darya and the Amu Darya basins – the main rivers in Central Asia, which cross Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and terminate in the Aral Sea – are central to these conflicts. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asian countries signed the 1992 Almaty Agreement, declaring equal rights to water use and responsibility to ensure rational use and protection of shared water. However, cooperation has faltered due to unequal water distribution and competing economic and political interests.[33] Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, rich in water but poor in energy, need water for energy production, while downstream countries like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, rich in energy but poor in water, require water for agriculture. This disparity has made water scarcity and poor management significant threats to regional stability and security, and, in the absence of successful cooperation, a source of conflict. The fact that countries in Central Asia are projected to soon become water-stressed countries further deepen security concerns.[34] Clashes also concern water distribution in undetermined lands, especially in and around the Fergana valley between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Here, disputes over water resources by neighbouring villages often escalate into international armed conflicts and provoke loss of life and displacement.

Map 1. Main Rivers in Central Asia

Source: Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia, http://www.icwc-aral.uz/activity.htm

Disputes over dam construction along the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers further exacerbate tensions, as upstream countries would benefit from hydropower at the expense of downstream countries, providing the dam-builder countries greater power over water resources. The shrinking of the Aral Sea, driven by dam construction and climate change, stands as a "prominent example of environmental change and human mobility in Central Asia".[35] Local communities in regions of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan surrounding the lake have been forced to leave due to loss of livelihood and means of subsistence. Around 80% of migration movements from Qozoqdaryo in Uzbekistan and from Kzyl-Orda in Kazakhstan were found to be directly or indirectly caused by ecological degradation and related socio-economic collapse.[36]

Central Asian countries have stressed the dire consequences of uneven water distribution in different fora. Uzbekistan, responding to a 2022 call by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change, declared that a third of its population lives in areas prone to disasters and environmental degradation, facing escalating risks from climate change. These problems result in serious socio-economic impact, internal migration, and reduced water availability for agriculture, leading to 90% of Uzbekistan's farmland requiring artificial irrigation.[37] Tajikistan's 2022 National Communication argued that poor water management and the lack of water rights, rather than water scarcity, drives poverty and water-related tensions. A 2023 report by the Eurasian Development Bank on water conservation in Central Asia emphasized the need for new cooperation mechanisms in transboundary river basins, rooted in deeper economic integration among Central Asian countries.[38]

Tension over water resources may also arise between Central Asian countries and Afghanistan, where water management suffers from poor governance and inefficient management. The Taliban's return to power in 2022 halted 32 environmental protection projects worth USD 805 million of international funding.[39] Afghanistan's large-scale irrigation programmes, including the construction of the Qosh-Tepa Canal, launched in 2022, threaten to significantly reduce water availability for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, risking up to 15% loss of Amu Darya's upstream water and threatening their agricultural sectors.[40] The construction of the Qosh-Tepa Canal may therefore lead to further political instability and diplomatic tensions in and around Central Asia. Despite some bilateral arrangements, such as the bilateral colloquium between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan and the two Memorandum of Understanding between Tajikistan and Afghanistan on hydrological and environmental data sharing, there are no binding arrangements between Central Asian countries and Afghanistan on sharing water resources in the Amu Darya basin. At the same time, Afghanistan has so far refrained from established cooperation mechanisms, such as the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea or the Interstate Commission for Water Cooperation.[41]

1.3. The influence of EU policies on climate adaptation

The cooperation between the EU and non-EU PPS is crucial for promoting climate resilience, especially in light of the EU Green Deal's ambitious targets for climate adaptation and climate neutrality in line with the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. The EU has been a leader in the green transition, leveraging its experience to support neighbouring countries in adopting green commitments and climate mitigation measures through dialogue, cooperation, and alignment with EU climate norms.

Through the European Economic Area Agreement, the EU has extended large parts of its climate legislation, including the EU Emission Trading System and the EU rules on land use and forestry, to

Norway and Liechtenstein. In April 2023, the EU formed a Green Alliance with Norway to enhance cooperation on climate action, clean energy, industrial transformation and environmental protection.

In line with the European Climate Law, the EU's commitment to climate neutrality is reflected in its bilateral ties and accession negotiations with EU candidate countries, requiring alignment with EU climate and environmental policies. The **Western Balkan countries**, five of which are EU candidates, must adhere to the Paris Agreement and meet the EU's targets for energy efficiency, GHG emissions, and renewable energy.[42] Similar to EU Member States, they are expected to deliver their National Energy and Climate Plans, which will set the region on track towards energy transition and climate neutrality. The 2020 Green Agenda for the Western Balkans aims to assist these countries in transitioning towards climate neutrality through decarbonisation, circular economy, biodiversity, depollution, and sustainability. Moreover, via climate proofing of investments, the EU aims to assist the Western Balkans in the preparation and implementation of long-term climate adaptation strategies to increase resilience. Most Western Balkan countries are developing climate frameworks in line with the EU Climate Law, although progress is uneven.[III]

Building on the "20 deliverables for 2020" reform agenda, the European Commission and **Eastern Partnership countries** have established five long-term objectives, known as the "post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities". These priorities include environmental and climate resilience, which will be pursued through governance and investment plans aimed at reducing air pollution, ensuring universal access to clean water and sanitation, and enhancing public awareness and engagement on climate change across all levels of governance.[43] The ambitious targets of the EU Green Deal are echoed in the countries of Eastern Partnership, which are required to, inter alia, strengthen their climate policies and green investment in line with the Green Deal. This includes transitioning towards sustainable food systems in line with the EU's Farm to Fork strategy. Moreover, the EU will help partner countries to implement their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to achieve climate neutrality and scale up adaptation to climate change. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, as EU candidates, are also supported through the Energy Community Treaty, with key objectives focused on monitoring and reducing GHG emissions and decreasing reliance on fossil fuels.[IV]

The alignment with the EU Green Deal has also been manifested by **Türkiye**, which published its Green Deal Action Plan in 2021, setting targets and actions across nine clusters, including carbon border adjustments, green and circular economy, green finance, and awareness-raising related to the EU Green Deal.

In **Central Asia**, the EU is supporting climate resilience and adaptation through projects like the Team Europe initiative on water, energy and climate change, launched in November 2022. This project aims to enhance water and energy resources management, while tackling climate change.[44] Under the Global Gateway, the EU is financing technical assistance to support Central Asian countries tackle water scarcity and improve adaptation policies. The EU has also acknowledged climate change and environmental degradation as potential threat multipliers in Central Asia. The EU's 2019 Strategy on Central Asia, for example, aims to integrate "the link between the environment, climate and security in its policy dialogue, conflict prevention, development and humanitarian actions and disaster risk reduction strategies across Central Asia", thus indirectly addressing the climate

[III] Fragmentation refers to, among others, climate adaptation strategies that have been adopted by all Western Balkans except North Macedonia and Serbia, and the Law on Climate Change, which has been already adopted in Albania and Serbia, while Kosovo*, Montenegro and North Macedonia are in a drafting phase and Bosnia and Herzegovina has not yet started working on it. See, Regional Cooperation Council (2023). Green Agenda for the Western Balkans Action Plan - Implementation Report 2022. RCC: Bosnia and Herzegovina.

[IV] The Treaty establishing the Energy Community was originally signed in October 2005 between the EU and nine non-EU States. These are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia (which joined in 2017), Kosovo*, North Macedonia, Moldova (which joined in 2010), Montenegro, Serbia, and Ukraine (which joined in 2011). Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia were also contracting parties until becoming full members of the EU.

change-migration nexus.[45] A significant step forward was the endorsement of a Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia during the 19th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting in October 2023. The roadmap outlines cooperation in energy, climate-neutral economy and adaptation, reflecting the growing priority of climate adaptation across the region.

The emphasis on adaptation is evident in the evolving legal frameworks of Central Asian countries. While **Kazakhstan** established adaptation priorities towards climate change in its new Environmental Code,[46] **Kyrgyzstan** recognised the need for climate change adaptation strategies to improve resilience in its National Strategy for Sustainable Development 2018 – 2040.[47] **Tajikistan's** 2021 updated NDC emphasises the strategic importance of adaptation measures in energy, industry, and agriculture, while noting the relevance of social and gender issues of water access.[v] This also reflects the EU-Tajikistan bilateral programmes on Water and Energy, launched in 2021 and 2022, which aim to foster transboundary water governance. **Uzbekistan** has adopted a low-carbon energy strategy and is developing an adaptation plan centred on irrigation, agricultural chains and green energy.[48] Meanwhile, **Turkmenistan's** 2019 National Strategy on Climate Change, outlines key sectors for adaptation to climate change and promotes research to assess the health impact of high temperatures to develop solutions for adapting the human body to adverse climatic conditions. The Strategy also highlights the importance of raising awareness of climate change issues among the youth and enhancing resilience for children.[49]

Despite these advancements, significant challenges remain. **Central Asian countries** vary in their ability to meet climate commitments, necessitating structural reforms and enhanced regional integration to tackle economic threats posed by climate.[50] The EU is working to support these efforts through the 2019 EU Strategy for Central Asia and bilateral Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, aiming to foster a closely interconnected economic and political space.[51] **Türkiye's** progress on climate change adaptation policies and regulations has been slower, as reflected in the findings of the European Commission's 2023 report, with Türkiye still facing significant mitigation and adaptation challenges. There are also discrepancies between Türkiye's targets and objectives and those set by the EU. Türkiye plans to attain net-zero emissions by 2053, three years later than the Green Deal's 2050 target, and its first updated NDC calls for a 41% reduction in GHG emissions by 2030, falling short of the Green Deal's 55% reduction goal. Additionally, Türkiye requires a long-term decarbonisation strategy to support its net-zero-emission goal and has yet to address several key aspects of the Green Deal.[52]

Successful implementation of adaptation policies in **Eastern Partnership and Central Asian countries** also hinges on adequate funding. These countries have highlighted the need for a balanced allocation of international finance, with equal emphasis on both adaptation and mitigation projects, as mitigation – particularly in the energy sector – currently receives more funding.[53] To address these financial needs, the Climate Finance Access and Mobilization Strategy for Central Asia and the South Caucasus 2023–2030 focuses on building institutional capacity at the national and regional levels, improving access to existing climate finance resources, and mobilising climate finance.[54]

[v] The issue of gender and the specific involvement of women workers in climate-sensitive economic sector, especially agriculture, was particularly addressed in Tajikistan's National Strategy for Enhancing the Role of Women in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2011-2020, where the strategy proposed to improve women's access to land resources, simplify women's access to loans, and improve their education by improving, among others, their skills in agricultural production. Tajikistan's Medium-Term Development Program for 2021-2025 not only deals with environmental protection, climate change and disasters, but also acknowledges the relevance of the development of gender-sensitive indicators for climate change as adaptive measures. In its updated NDC of 2021, Tajikistan re-affirms its commitment to investigate the relationship between gender and climate change. Tajikistan recognizes that gender inequality is present in the country and is the product of traditions and gender stereotypes on the role of women in family and society, on the one hand, and of a large number of female-headed households due to large-scale male labour migration, on the other hand. To counteract gender inequality in the context of climate change, the government commits to a number of actions, including raising awareness, improving understanding of the connection between gender and climate change in the development context, and strengthening the capacity of and providing opportunities for women's active participation in sustainable development.

CHAPTER 2. PROTECTION FRAMEWORKS AND ASSISTANCE TO PEOPLE FLEEING CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES

Across non-EU PPS, national practices concerning protection in case of MECC vary widely. Some countries have started to incorporate climate considerations into their migration and asylum policies, while others lag behind, offering fragmented and inconsistent protection.

Over the years, **Türkiye** has introduced migration considerations into its comprehensive disaster management strategy to address security, protection and assistance for citizens and migrants. Among others, the National Disaster and Emergency Management Authority's Strategic Plan 2013-2017 mentioned internal migration or displacement due to climate change or nuclear accidents. The Strategic Planning Guide of the Disaster Risk Reduction Plan 2019-2023 highlighted the risk of significant migration movements from neighbouring countries due to disasters.[55] The Disaster Risk Reduction Plan 2022-2030 recognises disasters as causes of physical and socio-economic losses, including unemployment, production declines, and migration movements. The 2024-2030 Climate Change Mitigation Strategy and Action Plan and the 2024-2030 Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and Action Plan aim to counteract the adverse effects of climate change, with initiatives to enhance circular economy and support economic income-increasing activities to prevent rural migration. Türkiye's Law on Foreigners and International Protection allows to issue a residence permit on humanitarian grounds for up to one year in specific cases, such as when removal is not feasible due to emergencies or extraordinary circumstances.[56] However, it is unclear whether this provision accounts for climate and environmental factors.

Within Central Asia, **Tajikistan** offers the highest level of protection to migrants and migrant workers affected by climate and environmental factors, recognising a strong connection between climate change and migration at the political level. The National Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change until 2030, adopted in 2019, identifies migration as one of seven key cross-cutting areas. It stresses that "climate change is likely to be an important driver of future migration", whilst environmental degradation has an increasing impact on migration patterns, including temporary international or internal labour migration, rural-to-urban migration, or permanent migration abroad. The Strategy defines *environmental migrants* as "people who are living in environmentally dangerous areas that are subject to planned relocation to prevent loss of life from natural disasters", whereas the reasons for relocation include living in areas susceptible to landslides, avalanches, mudslides and other natural disasters that pose a threat to lives.[57]

Akin to the Strategy, Tajikistan's Decree on Ecological Migration and its 1999 Law on Migration, updated in 2018, view environmental migration as the planned *relocation* of citizens forcibly displaced by "natural disasters" to safer areas,[58] excluding cross-border migration and internal voluntary movements as an adaptation response to climate and environmental factors. At the same time, Tajikistan issues or extends visas to migrant workers in case of disasters, as set in the Law on Migration,[59] and can issue visas in force majeure situations, defined as "unforeseen and unpreventable events occurring as a result of emergency situations (natural disasters, military operations and other similar cases)", in line with the 2017 Order on Rules for the Issuance of Visas and Electronic Visas to Foreigners and Stateless Persons.[60]

In the Western Balkans, **Albania** has implemented several solutions to address cross-border migration in the context of disasters. Its Law on Aliens allows issuing a visa at the border in exceptional cases for up to 15 days because of, *inter alia*, emergency cases resulting from natural disasters, floods or accidents.[61] The revised 2021 Law on Aliens introduced additional protection provisions for migrants affected by disasters, including temporary residence permit on humanitarian grounds for aliens "fleeing from natural disasters/events striking their country",[62] and exemptions from employment authorisation for migrant workers engaged in disaster recovery efforts and staying up to one month within a year.[63]

In the Eastern Partnership, **Georgia**, **Ukraine**, and **Azerbaijan** provide distinct approaches to MECC. **Georgia** takes a proactive stance in addressing the impact of climate and environmental factors on migration both within its borders and beyond. It defines *ecological migrants* as its citizens evacuated, relocated or displaced by natural hazards and man-made disasters.[VI] In its 2021 Nationally Determined Contribution, Georgia highlighted the urgent need for adaptation measures, particularly for vulnerable groups such as children, women, the elderly, persons with disabilities, those with chronic diseases, and eco-migrants displaced or at risk of displacement due to disasters caused by climate change.[64] Recognising that disasters can also drive cross-border migration, Georgia extends humanitarian protection to non-citizens and persons without permanent residency , if they "entered Georgia from a neighbouring country of origin as a result of a natural disaster".[65]

Azerbaijan shares a narrower view of the climate change-migration nexus, placing a greater focus on internal movements. It defines *ecological migrants* as those forced to move internally due to specific natural disasters such as the change of level of the Caspian Sea, earth landslides, mudflows, and salinization of soils to find employment in other parts of the country, including large cities like Baku.[VII] Azerbaijan's Law on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugee Status also allow applying the IDP status to persons forced to leave their permanent residence within the national territory due to natural or manmade disasters.[66] Beyond internal migration and displacement, climate and environmental factors are also recognised as a valid cause for extending the visa of foreigners and stateless persons who, during their transit in the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan, are affected by a natural disaster that obstructs traffic, resulting in their stay exceeding the period specified in their visas.[67]

Ukraine's approach to MECC has been significantly influenced by past nuclear and military crises. The Chernobyl nuclear disaster spurred a rich legislation in Ukraine concerning the evacuation, resettlement, and the "independent migration of citizens" to safer areas.[VIII] In October 2014, Ukraine adopted a new law on IDPs, who are defined as citizens and legally residing foreigners and stateless persons "forced to leave their domicile as a result of, or with the aim of avoiding, the negative consequences of [...] environmental or industrial emergencies", thereby extending protection also to migrants residing in Ukraine and affected by disasters.[68] Additionally, Ukraine has broadened its

[VI] For instance, in Georgia's Third NC to the UNFCCC, the term has been used to describe the rooted characteristic of the Ajara region, permanently affected by landslide and mudflow processes. See, Republic of Georgia (2015). Third National Communication to the UNFCCC, 145, 167.

[VII] Republic of Azerbaijan, Resolution of July 13, 2004 No. 94. The concept of the Azerbaijan Republic on policy of management of migration. The complete definition of "ecological migrants" is "people forced to replace the places of residence in view of change of level of the Caspian Sea, earth landslides, mudflows and other natural disasters, and also salinization of soils due to the lack of necessary means and the equipment for implementation of meliorative works and also the social and economic migrants connected with the flow of able-bodied population which went from rural districts to the large cities, in particular to Baku and to Absheron on which it is located in job searches".

[VIII] These include the Law of the Ukrainian SSR On the Status and Social Protection of the Victims of the Chernobyl disaster adopted on 28 February 1991; the Strategy for Living on the Territories of the Ukrainian SSR with an Elevated Level of Radioactive Contamination due to the Chernobyl Disaster adopted on 27 February 1991; the Law of Ukraine On the Status and Social Protection of the Victims of the Chernobyl Disaster and the related Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine On the Procedure for the Resettlement and Self-Resettlement of Citizens from the Territories that Received Radioactive Contamination as a Result of the Chernobyl Disaster adopted in 1992.

definition of temporary protection to cover influxes of migrants seeking protection due to natural or industrial disasters.[IX]

Although **Switzerland and Norway** lack specific legal provisions for protecting migrants fleeing due to climate and environmental factors, both countries have contributed to the global understanding of this phenomenon. In 2012, the governments of Switzerland and Norway led and funded the Nansen Initiative – a state-led, bottom-up consultative process supported by 109 States globally (currently substituted by the Platform on Disaster Displacement), which sought to build consensus on protecting people displaced across borders by natural disasters and the effects of climate change.[69] The two countries have since engaged in dialogue to explore the unique dynamics of MECC and related protection needs. Swiss law provides temporary protection on a case-by-case basis to people already in Switzerland if their return would threaten their life or physical integrity, for instance, due to war, civil conflicts, generalized violence or in case of need for medical assistance.[70] In light of this provision, Switzerland has argued that its domestic law is able to protect people who would be seriously and concretely threatened due to climate change in case of return in their country of origin, in particular when linked to matters of physical integrity and health.

Recent years have seen growing interest in extending the application of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the cornerstone of international refugee law, and its 1967 New York Protocol to address MECC. On a case-by-case basis, refugee status may apply in situations where disasters, climate change, or environmental degradation contribute to a well-founded fear of persecution, demonstrating the State's lack of protection.[71] Non-EU PPS have welcomed the opportunity to explore the complex interplay between the 1951 Refugee Convention and MECC. Notably, **Uzbekistan**, the only Prague Process state that has refrained from adhering to the Convention, has engaged in the discussion and supports using the term "climate refugees" to define those forced to flee "due to the well-established risks of becoming victims of natural disasters that pose a real threat to human life" and extending the scope of the Convention to such individuals.[72]

Despite some progressive interpretations of refugee norms, the broader application of refugee status to climate and environmental factors is hindered by inconsistent state practices that fall short of international standards. Asylum systems face ongoing challenges, including difficulties in fully aligning with international refugee and human rights obligations. There have been concerns regarding the treatment of asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants, including instances of restrictive practices such as expulsions, pushbacks, and detentions. In several cases, states have imposed restrictions on the movement of their nationals, limiting their right to leave the country. In certain contexts, political and security considerations may take precedence over refugee protection and human rights law obligations, leading to exclusions or restrictions in asylum processes and occasionally resulting in limited access to protection for specific nationality groups. There are also widespread concerns about the denial of essential rights to asylum-seekers and the lack of thorough assessment of their claims, particularly when national security considerations are cited. Even in places with robust legal frameworks, violations of core refugee law tenets, such as the principle of *non-refoulement*, have been documented, highlighting the global challenges in aligning domestic practices with international refugee and human rights standards.[73]

[IX] Article 1 of Ukraine's Law On Refugees and Persons in Need of Subsidiary Protection or Asylum adopted in 2011 includes the concepts of "persons in need of temporary protection" and defines them as "foreigners or Stateless persons who are forced in large numbers to seek protection in Ukraine due to external aggression, foreign occupation, civil war, ethnic confrontations, natural or industrial disasters, and other incidents disturbing civil order in some parts or on the whole territory of the country of origin".

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

All non-EU Prague Process states are vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change and exhibit unique migration patterns. Despite shared climate risks and clear evidence that climate and environmental changes influence migration movements at the national and regional levels, the respective impact in the region remains underresearched. Moreover, the lack of sufficiently strong supranational coordination undermines truly common and comprehensive responses to migration driven by climate and environmental changes. In such context, the role of the EU in harmonising responses towards climate resilience and adaptation in the Prague Process region is of particular relevance, especially for non-EU Schengen countries and EU candidate countries, whose alignment with EU climate and environmental policies is required.

Non-EU PPS are encouraged to foster cooperation and partnership with the EU to achieve the climate goals agreed upon under the Paris Agreement and to enhance regional cooperation on climate and environmental matters.

Similar to other parts of the globe, the countries covered by this report represent an example of the compounded effect that worsening climate conditions and political instability can have on migration movements. The political and security situation in the region remains volatile. Water scarcity will be likely exacerbated by climate change and, without coordinated efforts, clashes over shared water resources may become more intense. At the same time, war-related environmental damage undermines climate resilience and may have an impact on migration flows.

- Concerted actions, regional cooperation, and transboundary water agreements are urgently needed to properly and fairly manage shared water resources, their use and distribution in these states. This in turn would deepen regional integration, while avoiding the escalation of tensions or conflicts over natural resources between states.
- Non-EU PPS are urged to develop or consolidate a regional cooperation framework to enhance environmental protection in the context of armed conflicts. In doing so, States should take into account key principles stemming from environmental and human rights law in order to preserve the environment, while ensuring the respect for the human rights of affected communities.

Strong refugee and human rights frameworks would support non-EU PPS in managing MECC, while ensuring the full respect for the fundamental rights of migrants and refugees. The inconsistent application and interpretation of the 1951 Refugee Convention coupled with the absence of regional refugee and human rights treaties in most of the Prague Process' sub-regions represent key political challenges to the recognition and protection of people compelled to flee their countries due to climate and environmental factors. Considering the EU's influence on harmonising migration and asylum policies in the region, the Union can play an important role in fostering refugee and human rights. In this regard, any future reforms to the CEAS to include climate-related consideration might lead to corresponding efforts in non-EU states.

- Non-EU PPS are encouraged to strengthen regional cooperation on asylum and human rights matters as to provide common responses to migrants seeking protection in their territories.
- Pursuant to their international obligations under international refugee law, the states are required to implement and interpret the 1951 Refugee Convention in a principled way and to fully respect the human rights of migrants and asylum-seekers, including the principle of *non-refoulement*. This implies taking climate and environmental conditions in the country of origin into consideration when evaluating their protection claims.

Despite the lack of consolidated refugee and human rights frameworks suitable to provide protection to migrants fleeing climate and environmental threats, non-EU PPS have engaged with MECC from multiple perspectives, including through prevention measures in countries vulnerable to climate change, climate change adaptation and disaster risk management.[74] Most importantly, national provisions in several of them cover different categories of people affected by climate and environmental changes, these including citizens forced to relocate to environmentally safer areas, people internally displaced, migrants seeking protection abroad due to climate change, and migrant workers affected by disasters. Although relevant, efforts to recognize, assist, and protect people fleeing climate and environmental factors remain volatile and not harmonized across the Prague Process region. They differ in scope, aim, and beneficiaries as well as in the terminology used to define similar targets. This means that protection remains highly fragmented, and uncertain.

A comprehensive policy response is needed at the supranational level so to 1) efficaciously and uniformly respond to the specific climate and environmental challenges that are driving people out of their homes in each sub-region; and to 2) provide adequate measures to protect and assist people affected by climate and environmental factors by leveraging migration and asylum law as well as the rights of national citizens. States providing direct or indirect protection instruments in such fields - such as Tajikistan, Georgia, and Albania among others - can offer useful models to inform policy developments at the regional and sub-regional levels.

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Author: Dr Chiara Scissa
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