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# The Eastern Partnership Countries and the Influx of Russian Citizens Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Steps to be Taken by the EU

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*The Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries have become host not only to large numbers of Ukrainians fleeing the war, but also to many Russian citizens escaping the extreme repression of the Russian regime. A precise look is needed at the economic and political impacts of this mass flow of people into the EaP countries. A pan-European commitment is required to avoid acute migration crisis situations, prevent a slide of EaP countries towards Russia's influence, engage all democratic forces in the region, including targeted pro-democratic Russian émigré groups, and strengthen common European goals and European unity.*

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) – which was launched in 2009 as an initiative of the then Swedish and Polish foreign ministers, Carl Bildt and Radosław Sikorski – is facing its biggest challenge at the end of 2022. On taking over the presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2023, Sweden will also be retaking the baton for developing a comprehensive and strategic pan-European analysis that considers all the changes in the region over almost 14 years and lays the groundwork for its strengthening for the future. In its role as moderator, Sweden can proactively generate ideas on how to ensure a more secure and resilient east of the European Union.

The Eastern Partnership, as a political and economic model aimed at bringing six Eastern European countries closer to the European Union, has lived through periods of development and stagnation. Is the Eastern Partnership still of central importance to the EU after February 24, 2022, when Russia began a large-scale military invasion of Ukraine? The acute, huge, and radically new challenges caused by the war for the EaP countries urgently require a radically modified form for the EaP, with new ideas and their fast implementation. The aim of consolidating European unity should persist, as the EaP countries are often the first in Europe to face Russia's malicious impact and should therefore remain a primary focus of the EU.

Russia is no longer just a potential threat to peace, security and stability in the region. It is waging a war of aggression against Ukraine. The very foundations of Eastern European security, which have been shaken by Russia since its attack against Georgia in 2008, underwent drastic change in February 2022. As long as Ukraine, a country of the Eastern Partnership, is defending the very basis of European security on the battlefield, the aim of “Europe at peace” acquires an existential instead of abstract meaning. By granting Ukraine EU candidate status amid the ongoing war in June 2022, along with Moldova, the EU has strengthened the idea of European unity and shown its solidarity with its partners under attack or threat of attack. Further and rapid steps of solidarity towards other European Partnership countries must follow.

Russia is as an aggressor state and the main threat not only to Ukraine, but also to other Eastern European partners. At the same time, Russia has become even more harshly repressive towards its own citizens who do not share the official state view on the war, severely violating basic human rights and freedoms persecuting every dissent expression of political opinion. The autocratic Russian regime has in 2022 caused a huge flow of migration from Russia to many destinations in the EU and to non-EU countries such as Turkey, Georgia and Armenia, and others. Official statistics are not yet available but early overall estimates of Russian emigration since the end of February put the number at more than 1 million.

Between 20,000 and 25,000 Russians entered Georgia in the first week after the start of Putin's war against Ukraine alone, according to Georgian Economy Minister Levan Davitashvili.<sup>1</sup> Georgia is often a transit country for many Russian migrants but more than 100,000 have remained in the country to date.<sup>2</sup> In Armenia, the number of arrivals from Russia is similarly high. About 50,000 Russians arrived in Armenia between February and April 2022 only, according to Minister of the Economy Vahan Kerobyan.<sup>3</sup> In a population of about 3 million, 50,000–100,000 is a significant proportion.

Political reactions in the EaP countries to the mass influx of Russian citizens and its implications deserve closer attention and should be reflected in future EU policy.

In October 2022 the Central Bank of Armenia updated its forecast for gross domestic product (GDP) growth in 2022 from 1.6% to 13%.<sup>4</sup> Georgia is also likely to see a considerable improvement in its economic forecast due to the human resources arriving from Russia since February 2022. Armenian economists assume that Russian emigration will make a significant difference to the country's economy. Most migrants from Russia are highly educated. Early assessments are that their average age is 32, and over half work in the IT sector. There is an early identifiable trend for the EaP countries to base their economic prosperity on the “high human capital” of Russian migrants. The European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has also revised its economic growth forecast for Armenia from 4.5% to 8% based on the de facto growth of the GDP to 13.1% in the first six months of 2022.<sup>5</sup>

The EU should raise its awareness of these positive economic forecasts and the possible consequences. The Kremlin could exploit the fact that the EaP countries rely vastly on Russian migrants for their economic development as a lever to bring these countries more under its own influence. The crossroads at which the EaP countries might find themselves between joining the European democratic path within the EU or slipping under Russian influence or even occupation is most clearly illustrated by the example of Belarus, an Eastern partner until the Lukashenko regime denounced the partnership in 2021.

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1 <https://zona.media/news/2022/03/07/sakartvelo>; <https://ru.netgazeti.ge/43251/>

2 <https://theins.ru/news/256942>

3 <https://newsarmenia.am/news/armenia/v-armeniyu-relotsirovalos-poryadka-50-tysyach-chelovek/>

4 <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2022/10/29/klondaik-v-vide-rossiian>

5 <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/10/02/russian-migration-shakes-up-armenian-economy-society-a78935>

The EU should act to prevent a possible economic and political sliding of the EaP region into Russia's influence. The established trustful communication with the EaP countries could be fruitfully used for this purpose. A hesitancy or reluctance to offer more of a European perspective faster to Eastern partners and assist them in crisis situations – especially those yet to be granted candidate status – and inaction in the face of continuing mass migration would open the way for Russia to undermine the European Union. On the contrary, decisive and strategic measures by the EU would only promote European goals in the region.

## Policy Recommendations

- **Improved EaP-EU communication for better estimation of the scope of migration flows.** The number of migrants arriving and settling is still uncertain or even unknown. If urgent humanitarian aid is to be provided, better targeted communication between the EU and the interior ministries and border control bodies of the EaP countries must be initiated. Data on the number of Russian citizens arriving should be accessible to the EU, as accurate as possible and, because of the fast-changing situation, updated at regular intervals of two weeks to one month.
- **Humanitarian crises on the borders should be countered with humanitarian measures.** Urgent reporting to the EU of the main challenges and emerging crisis situations from the host EaP countries should help to avoid possible similar crises at the border to the one on the Georgian Upper Lars border crossing in the days following the mobilization announcement at the end of September-beginning of October 2022. Urgent EU aid to host countries through EU refugee assistance agencies could be invoked in such acute situations.
- **Russian emigrants and Ukrainian refugees in the EaP countries.** EU support should be offered to countries in the region with providing shelter, longer term housing, medical care and education opportunities for migrants from Russia to avoid overloading the local authorities. Given the fact that a large number of Ukrainian war refugees arrived in the same countries, the migration flows present a huge economic burden for the EaP countries. The EU temporary protection regime, which has been activated for Ukrainian refugees, supports host EaP countries. But no such mechanism exists for acceptance of Russian citizens. This is having increasing economic implications for the EaP countries. Arrival numbers and the scope of need among local authorities to accommodate such large numbers, and increased demands on border controls inter alia should be presented to the EU for further action, including financial assistance to cope with this unprecedented migration flow. This would also counteract heightened social tensions and populist anti-democratic (or pro-Russia) forces that might be caused by migration in these countries.
- **Extension of best practices on democratic engagement to include the EU, the EaP countries and Russian pro-democracy civil society representatives.** The political aspects of the Russian migration flow to Europe must not be underestimated. Host countries should work together with the European Union and its agencies on policies that serve common European goals, such as democratic engagement with émigré Russian citizens. An initiative by the German Foreign Ministry,<sup>6</sup> is an example of good practice that should be scaled-up by other EU member states.

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6 <https://oepr.diplo.de/zuwoep/variableContent/showAbout.html>

## Conclusions

A blanket view that Russian citizens who have fled Russia are a security threat should be avoided in common EU policies. With no support from EU mechanisms, these people often need urgent help on arrival, which the EaP countries should not be left to provide alone. Most migrants flee Russia to survive the threats of the Russian regime, are in opposition to it and strongly oppose the war. An awareness of these mass migration flows, resolution of the acute challenges on-site and a strategic view of their consequences should be a common European issue and not one left solely to destination countries.

Georgia and Armenia, Azerbaijan and Moldova (the latter one to a much lesser extent than the first two) became host countries also to many independent Russian journalists and human rights activists. Some of them run smaller or larger news outlets from there and bring the truth about the war to the remotest Russian regions, thereby countering the Kremlin's propaganda. These shoots of civic action based in Georgia or Armenia ultimately help to stand against Russian imperial aggression and serve European goals. To recognize these groups of Russian emigrants in the countries of the EaP as partners of Europe would be of strategic value to the EU.

Strengthening right now the countries of the Eastern partnership facing a mass influx from Russia and engaging with all the democratic forces located there, would be strong steps for European unity. Such a solidarity is especially needed at the very moment when Ukraine defends on the battlefield nothing less than the future of Europe.



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