# Between East and West: migration in the enlarging European Union

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## Introduction

The Copenhagen Council of the European Union (EU) sealed in December 2002 the 'reunification of Europe' by declaring the admission of ten new member states on 1 May 2004, right before the June elections of the European Parliament (CEU 2002, 8). It is a political act, with an extraordinary symbolic value, involving most of the countries belonging to the former Soviet bloc. The signature of the EU treaties in Athens in mid April 2003 finalised this long and complicated process, starting after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and speeding up after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

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The enlarged European Union will acquire a demographic, political and economic weight worthy of the only remaining superpower: the United States. Its borders will be extended eastwards entering into contact with ex-Soviet republics and also, although minimally, with Russia through Kaliningrad, the enclave on the Baltic Sea surrounded by Poland and Lithuania. These geographical changes will affect the relationships between Russia and the EU and the EU immigration and asylum policy. The candidate countries had to fully adopt the community *acquis* and to adjust their migratory policies, as well as the control of their borders, to the EU standards.

Purpose of this contribution is to shed light on the characteristics and typology of the migratory flows from Central and Eastern Europe and to give a short analytical picture on the interaction between migratory flows and policies in the new geopolitical space of the enlarging European Union.

## Migration in Central and Eastern Europe and the EU migration regime

For some years literature on migration has been carefully observing the ongoing transformations in the international system, following the implementation of the principles of multilateral co-operation in the management of migratory flows from member countries of the European Union (Koslowski, 1998). The extension of the community acquis to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, following the planned EU enlargement, implies a revision of the current European migration regime that must take into consideration the specificity of the flows, the migratory management and control systems of the candidate countries and their adjustment to the EU standards.

Essential introduction to the analysis of the migratory flows that cross the region of Central and Eastern Europe is a short historical excursus on the changes happened in the migration regime during the transition from the communist to the post-communist era.

The restrictive character of intra-bloc mobility dates back to the first phases of the process of Stalinist sovietisation in the 1940s and early 1950s. This character united a bloc of countries with centralised political systems and state controlled economies. The mobility restrictions began to erode in Poland and Hungary in

the 1980s, reflecting a general process of erosion of the corresponding intra-bloc migratory regime. The global erosion of mobility restrictions at the end of the 1980s and their definitive disappearance at the beginning of the 1990s coincided with the open and liberal character of the migratory policies of the western governments towards some categories of migrants from the region (particularly ethnic Germans, Hebrews and refugees) from the Cold War era until the beginning of the 1990s. The outflows from Poland to Germany accelerated especially in 1989 and in 1990, when restrictions in German migration policy were expected (Iglicka 2002, 5). The following elimination of exit controls carried out by the countries of the ex-Soviet bloc transferred the burden of the East-West migratory management to the countries of Western Europe. However, the sudden and tumultuous character of the ongoing historical events prevented western governments from fully comprehending their meaning in migratory terms, thus allowing many citizens of Central and Eastern Europe to move westwards (Stola, 2001).

In a second time, the adoption of new migratory policies, combined or in opposition to the alternate demands of economic development of the western countries, characterized the new East-West migratory tendencies of the 1990s. The (re) established national sovereignty and acquired freedom of movement urged the countries of the region to implement reform programs. The migratory regime of the Central and Eastern region changed accordingly, mirroring areas from increasingly dissimilar economic and political development.

In the last decade, the possibility of visa-free access has made the countries of Central and Eastern Europe desired destinations for citizens of the neighbouring countries and gradually transformed the region in a 'buffer zone' between East and West (Amato and Batt, 1999). At the same time, the typology of westward flows originating from the countries of Central and Eastern Europe has also radically changed after the sudden increases of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, strikingly declining in the duration of stay and assuming different characteristics. A new type of mass mobility has been developing, still directed towards western labour markets, but characterized by temporary and often irregular stay. Estimates record the annual move of around half a million Polish workers, of whom around 250–300 thousand find regular employment as seasonal workers in Germany (Stola 2001, 50). Changes in the typology of flows reflect the actual demand for foreign labour in west European hidden deregulated markets, made of flexible and cheap labour in lower segments of the labour market. At the same time, the abolition, in the early 1990s, of entry visa requirements in the European Union countries for short visits for Central Europeans and the signature of bilateral agreements for temporary jobs intensified the irregular typology of the described flows.

We can summarize the breaking factors of the exponential growth of the irregular flows from Eastern Europe in this way: the combination of evident demand and expansion of the illegal labour markets in Western Europe, the increasing restrictive policies towards labour immigration and contemporarily the possibility of visa-free entry granted by Western European governments (Stola 2001, 50). Finally, a substantial portion of these flows concerns, above all two countries: Poland as country of origin and Germany as country of destination. This particular migratory configuration is not only the result of geographical proximity, but it is the outcome of job opportunities and well founded migratory networks which also explain the geographical distribution of migrant communities in sending and receiving countries.

## The 'buffer zone' and the impact of the Schengen system

During the 1990s, Central Europe passed through some gradual but remarkable transformations concerning the direction and characteristics of migratory flows that cross the region. Historically, only the Czech lands imported labour, while Poland, Slovakia and Hungary were for definition sending countries. Disturbances and unbalances of the labour markets at the beginning of the 1990s have gradually transformed Central Europe from only sending region to region of reception of workers from the East. This transformation involves, at the beginning, petty traders coming from the ex Soviet republics, particularly from Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania, to sell various goods made in the

USSR, exploiting hidden subsidies and currency exchange rates.

Since the mid 1990s, alongside the evolution of price relations, these trading activities changed their character: many of these visitors bought goods not (or not only) for their individual consumption but for resale in their homelands or third countries. Subsequently, from petty traders they have gradually and slowly shifted to the guest labour market, responding to changes in wages, prices and exchange rates (Iglicka, 2001).

It is important to notice that, while the disparities in wages between Central and Western Europe, although remaining high, have decreased significantly in more than ten years of transition, the same cannot be said for the wage gap between countries of Central Europe and their eastern neighbours, that grew dramatically in that same period. Thus, the wage differences between Ukraine and its Central-Eastern neighbours in transition, the unemployment and widespread underemployment in the ex-Soviet republic created conditions for increasing migratory flows towards neighbouring countries. Shortly, Ukraine became the major sending country towards Central Europe (Stola 2001, 51).

Long queues at the western frontier of Ukraine and often arbitrary controls of passports and goods only partly hindered these movements, making possible the formation and close coexistence of areas from different economic and political development, separated only by a relative geographical distance and, at the same time, united by deep cultural and linguistic links. A network system that involved migrants' families, friends and acquaintances slowly developed between sending and receiving countries, as well as the proliferation of organizations which exploited this trafficking not always in regular way.

The absence of meaningful barriers of entry had to be added to the geographical and linguistics proximity. It is noteworthy that visitors from Eastern Europe have benefited from the possibility to travel visa-free in the region since the communist period, although until the late 1980s this condition had been practically limited by restrictions on exit. Being stopped from travelling easily further west because of the contemporary presence of the Schengen borders, Central Europe became the second best destination: more accessible than the West, although less attractive in terms of life conditions and wages. Paradoxically, the Schengen border became one of the factors that facilitated migratory flows in the region (Stola 2001, 51).

The peculiar nature of the emerging markets of Central Europe – of loose regulation and law enforcement, law capital requirements and ineffective taxation – made them particularly desirable for income-seeking visitors from the former Soviet Union, Romania and Bulgaria. The combination of easy conditions of entry in the region and facilitated access to its markets explains the circular nature of these migratory flows of petty traders, workers and service providers from Eastern Europe. With higher costs of accession, these types of movements – repeated, often pendular, short term and bringing modest earnings – would not have developed to such a scale.

The flows that cross Central Europe, however, are not limited to bordering countries and circular typology: the migratory chain starts far away, sometimes at the extremities of the European continent and involves an increasing number of illegal immigrants from the most diverse nationalities that cross the region for several reasons (IOM 2002, 37–40). This kind of transit migration results from the world's economic inequalities, the restrictive policies of the western countries and the demographic weight of different regions and areas of the world. Before 1990, the Soviet Union separated Europe and Asia with its transcontinental shape and its heavily guarded borders. In a few years, the collapse of the system, the absence of suitable laws and widespread corruption transformed the ex-empire in *trait d'union* between poles of global inequality (Stola 2001, 52).

The application of readmission agreements, with the purpose of preventing and stopping illegal flows and the investments in infrastructures for borders controls, encouraged and financed by countries of destination as Germany, were the western answer to the described events. As a consequence, transit migrations were made more difficult in comparison to the first 1990s and Central Europe was transformed into a 'buffer zone' to protect Western Europe from illegal migratory flows. The short-term stay of part of the transit-seekers became in this way permanent.

Finally, the 'buffer zone' also acts as a pole of attraction for Western migrants. By 1996, officially registered Western residents in Central and Eastern European countries had risen to 120,000. Half of them are *communist-era-émigrés* from the region, either permanently settling or shuttling back and forth between their home and their adopted country. The remaining are western expatriates (Amato and Batt, 1999). The great majority are college educated with professional skills, employed in multinational companies, international organisations or in the academia. They are called on to bring their expertise for the development of the region. Interestingly, a growing number of these migrants from Western Europe and the United States are undocumented as they simple disregard local employment regulations (Wallace and Stola 2001, 35).

## New visible and invisible borders of the enlarging European Union

The planned enlargement of the European Union will not only involve some changes in the migratory flows towards Western Europe, but will also involve changes in the typology and characteristics of flows that cross Central and Eastern Europe. Making forecasts is not at all easy, considering the complexity of migratory dynamics and the involved political, social and economic variables.

Past migration experiences from Southern European countries and Turkey to Western Europe cannot necessarily be used to assess migration potential from Central and Eastern Europe. In Southern Europe, emigrants came from peripheral and disadvantaged regions of relatively wealthy market economies and the distance between regions of destination and regions of origin were quite relevant (Laczko, Stacher and Klekowski von Koppenfels 2002, 61–62). All studies based on the analysis of actual wage differentials estimate an annual migration flow of 0.3 to 0.6 million people from Central and Eastern Europe to Western Europe, depending on the speed and success of economic transformation and the convergence process in the EU candidate countries. All simulation-based calculations prove that in the short run, EU enlargement without transitional arrangements restricting access to western labour markets would lead to higher East-West migration. In the long run, the instant freedom of movement for all citizens of new member states would imply a quicker reduction of existing migration potential (Laczko, Stacher and Klekowski von Koppenfels 2002, 63–64).

We can indeed recall that westward movements from the region will be gradual and subject to transitional periods in the access to some western labour markets, mainly in compliance with requests from Germany and Austria (Ruspini 2002, 267). The last decade has already been characterized as a period of transition with visa-free entries, selective admissions of Central-European workers and mass irregular flows: therefore, we can expect much continuity in this process. Migratory movements, following the enlargement will not start from zero: the enlargement will not spark these movements, but it will rather prompt their evolution. Until Central European workers benefit from full freedom of movement, present trends of the East-West migratory regime will not change drastically in their irregular component (Stola 2001, 52). In the medium to long term, because of the gradual levelling of the wage gap between East and West, costs and benefits of emigration might instead change, progressively persuading the citizens of the region not to move (Amato and Batt, 1999).

Unlike this slow and gradual evolution of the regime of westward out migrations, more sudden and meaningful changes are predictable in migratory flows from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Eastern and Southern neighbouring countries are either not candidates to the European Union (as Belarus and Ukraine) or less advanced on their path to membership (such as Bulgaria and Romania, whose access is scheduled in 2007). The new EU members will have to share their own external borders for several years (and in some cases indefinitely) with non-members registered in the list of countries whose citizens must satisfy some visa requirements to access the Union. One should note that Poland has delayed visa introduction as long as possible, because some dispositions already introduced in 1998 to limit the entries have raised strong protests in Belarus and Russia. Originally scheduled in 2001 for these two countries and in 2002 for Ukraine, visas have then been introduced for all the three countries on 1st October 2003 (Watson, 2003).

The accession is therefore expected to make the candidate countries of Central Europe the new Eastern and Southern borders of the European Union and, at the same time, gradually strengthening the growth of their economies, it will enlarge the gap between them and their eastern neighbours. New visible and invisible borders are appearing on the horizon. On one side, the 1.140 kilometre-long border that will separate Poland from Ukraine and Belarus, on the other, the 'invisible' borders erected by wage gaps following visa introduction and entry discriminations generated by the new borders of the European Union. Besides, the rigid application of the Schengen regime might threaten with interrupting links of geographical and human proximity, coexistence and economic development between border regions and to risk the already fragile political stability of those countries of Eastern Europe excluded by the European Union.

When Central Europe will no longer be more accessible than the rest of the European Union, the region will also loose its characteristic of second-best destination. The geographical and cultural dimension of proximity will still apply, but it is probable that those migrants from the East who succeed in getting the Schengen visa, will have more reasons to go further west rather than staying in the region (Stola 2001, 53). Similarly, Central Europe will loose its character of 'buffer zone' directed to limit illegal transit migration (IOM 2002, pp. 37–40). The 'buffer zone' should transfer further east, but it is arguable if and when Belarus or Ukraine will be able to efficiently assume this role.

## Kaliningrad: the Russian enclave between East and West

In this evolving geopolitical context, the enlarging European Union, comprising Poland and Lithuania, raised the important challenge of the relations with the Kaliningrad Province, which has no common border with the main territory of the Russian Federation. Thus, it will become a Russian enclave surrounded by territories belonging to the European Union. This has, first of all, raised the question of how to regulate movements of people and goods between the enclave and the main territory of Russia.

For people living in Kaliningrad one of the most important changes happened after the disintegration of the USSR involving the 'phenomenon of the opening'. Being totally isolated during the cold war period, when foreigners were off-limits, the province started opening up. In the early 1990s contact with immediate neighbouring countries began with Poland, and also Lithuania. Travel to those countries was facilitated by arrangements allowing for border crossings without the need for visas. In this way, even the relations with Germany or the Scandinavian countries started up. Paradoxically, the new political situation in Europe had led to the isolation of Kaliningrad from its mother country on one side, whilst it facilitated greater contact with the outside world on the other. The enclave became both a handicap and an opportunity for the region (Boratyñski and Morawska 2001, 5).

Data on migration behaviour show that the inhabitants of Kaliningrad and Russians from other parts of the Russian Federation perceived the new situation as an opportunity. During the past decade more people have moved to the enclave than have migrated away from it. Migration ratio in the Kaliningrad Province (over 9 migrants per 1000 persons of economically active population) is the highest in Russia. Net migration – both internal (from other territories of Russia) and international (from neighbouring Poland, Lithuania and some CIS states) has compensated the natural decline of population and has played a substitutive role for the local labour market (Iontsev and Ivakhniouk 2002, 7). Currently, the population accounts for about 950,000 people. The spontaneous positive migration balance runs contrary to the opinion, popular among the Moscow elite, that Kaliningrad is a region, which like other Russian regions would have limited opportunities for development. The economy of Kaliningrad, based on transportation and construction industries, is integrated with the industries of the neighbouring countries and is highly dependent from supplies from 'continental' Russia. Noteworthy is the strategic role of the Kaliningrad's harbour that still hosts the 70% of the Russian Baltic Fleet as it is the only Russian port on the Baltic that does not freeze in winter (Boratyñski and Morawska 2001, 6). Notwithstanding the military fleet, the full implementation of the EU

Schengen system might isolate the Province from both the continental directions.

On the European Union level, there is a widespread concern that Kaliningrad, widely seen as a haven for organised crime, could provide illegal immigrants with a back door towards the West (Lungescu, 2002). As a consequence, this small region has become the object of a strong dispute between Russian and EU decision-makers which marred for a while the otherwise warm relations between Russia and the European Union. Moscow has pressed the European Union to allow Russians to travel visa-free on special non-stop trains to and from Kaliningrad after Poland and Lithuania join the EU. The European Union has instead proposed creating a multiple-entry 'Kaliningrad Pass', an idea that Moscow dismissed as a surrogate visa (Isachenkov, 2002).

The dispute figured prominently on the agenda of the EU-Russia summit in Brussels on 11th November 2002. At the end, the summit reached an agreement on the transit of people and goods across Lithuania, between the Russian region and the rest of the Russian Federation. Under the deal, from 1st July 2003 Russians wishing to travel by land between Kaliningrad and the rest of the Federation are able to do so without obtaining the visas that Lithuania introduced from that date as part of its own EU accession preparations. Instead, they will need a Facilitated Transit Document, which will be valid for multiple entries and for all forms of land transit, or a Facilitated Rail Transit Document, which will be valid only for a single return journey by rail, without stops in Lithuania. Both will be made available at low cost or free (EC, 2002). The EU said after the meeting that the agreement paves the way for greater cooperation in a number of other areas, notably in the area of justice and home affairs, where the Russian Federation and the EU have agreed to launch negotiations on a bilateral admission agreement.

## Conclusion

Having the controversy on the Kaliningrad transit settled, the need to start a wide scope 'neighbourhood policy' between the European Union and the countries at the new eastern border, particularly Russia, still remains on the ground. The political drawing should be addressed not only to the diplomatic solution of more or less serious controversies – as the one on Kaliningrad – but endowed with preventive character and a global approach that allows the new European Union with the ability for crisis management on continental level. The final aim of this policy is to be the development of a new 'friendly neighbourhood' area, where measures facilitating the movement of people and trade within the EU are gradually implemented.

The transit agreement on Kaliningrad between the European Union and Russia might become an important example of 'best EU practice' in preventing restrictions of migration regulations in the region and avoiding geographical and economic isolation.

In March 2003, the European Commission released a Communication that seems to go further in this direction. The document sets out a vision for EU links with those countries that "do not currently have a perspective of membership but who will soon find themselves sharing a border with the Union", namely Russia, the western former Soviet states and the Southern Mediterranean (CEC 2003, 3–4).

Purpose of the new "Neighbourhood Policy" is to ensure for both parties (EU and partner countries) that the new external border will not become a barrier to trade, social and cultural interchange or regional cooperation. Workers should be able to respond freely to labour market's demand, although the complete free movement of people and labour remain a long-term objective.

## Abstract

The EU enlargement will involve a global revision of the European migration regime. Conceptual categories and typology of East-West migratory flows will change accordingly. However, the enlargement will not imply a sort of 'big-bang', but it will consolidate ongoing trends. Compared with the gradual evolution of the westward out migrations, more sudden and meaningful changes in migratory flows from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe are predictable. Furthermore, Central Europe will eventually stop from being a 'buffer zone' directed to limit illegal transit migration. The buffer zone will move further East, but without an adequate 'neighbourhood policy' between the EU on the one hand, Russia and the former Soviet republics on the other, one may

doubt if the latter will be able to carrying out this role effectively.

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