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To what extent are migration issues articulated in programs of political parties in the EU Eastern Partnership countries and in Russia?

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Abstract

This policy brief examines migration rhetoric in political party programs of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia. Migration issues remained vaguely elaborated, often barely mentioned, in the political party programs. Typically the focus on migration was problem-centred (e.g. on causes of migration, unemployment, etc.) rather than migration policy-centred (i.e. few policy proposals on migration). In Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus proposals from political parties to reform the migration policy were rare, and here most of legislative initiatives on migration came from the government. In Ukraine and Russia migration politics has been entangled with the ethno-politics -- with the debate on the protection of the rights and opportunities for migrants and minorities (on the liberal side) or on strengthening the titular nation and preserving its culture amidst "migrant invasion" (on the conservative side)

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BRIEF



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In post-Soviet states the impact of migration and induced social risks (brain-drain, aging, depopulation, etc) are now a reality. Yet, little is known about the extent to which migration rhetoric has evolved and penetrated into the political party programs of European Union's Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries-- Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine--, and in Russia.

The country experts of the CARIM-East project conducted a pilot examination of migration rhetoric in the programs of political parties of Russia and EaP countries in 2012 (Moldova in 2011). This policy brief is based on the comparative review of their research (see the bibliography below for detail).

In the late 1990s migration debate centred on dramatic emigration trends and brain-drain (Bobrova 2012, Chelidze 2012, Chobanyan 2012a, Mukomel 2012, Oprunenco 2012, Rumyansev 2012, Tolstokorova 2012). In the 2000s migration dynamics changed for some post-Soviet states. From emigration countries Ukraine, and recently also Georgia, became transit routes for migrants (Tolstokorova 2012, IOM 2008). In Azerbaijan the expansion of the energy and construction sectors attracted immigrants from Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, and post-Soviet Central Asian republics (IOM 2009). As migrants gradually established their residence in destination countries, migration debate refocused on the issues of integration and rights of migrants.

However, the programs of political parties of EU Eastern Partnership countries remained distant from realities of migration and provided little discussion of migration issues.

There are several patterns that emerge from comparative analysis:

1. Role of political parties limited, migration barely mentioned in party programs

In some countries, such as Azerbaijan and Belarus, the political impact of political parties is quite limited. In Azerbaijan, the New Azerbaijan Party has been the ruling party and has won the majority of seats in all parliamentary elections in the last 18 years since 1995 (Rumyansev 2012). In Belarus the number of political parties has decreased from 40 parties in 1990 (Bobrova 2012) to only 15 registered political parties in 2012 (Central Commission of the Republic of Belarus 2012). This trend is also evident in the parliament of Belarus.

The limited role of political parties in the political system largely shapes the extent of their impact and contribution to policy-making. In Azerbaijan migration issues have only barely been mentioned in the programs of political parties (Rumyansev 2012). The emphasis has been on the refugees and the internally displaced persons from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that have largely dominated the migration discourse in Azerbaijan (Rumyansev 2012). In Belarus, despite reference to human rights, ethnic non-discrimination, preservation of cultures of minorities, the revival of the culture of Belarussians, migration issues are barely mentioned (Bobrova 2012).

In these circumstances, it is the government that is the initiator of migration policies or the legislative reforms on migration. In Azerbaijan, for example, “[the] Members of the Parliament] ... do not introduce anything new to the debate on migration” and



“... laws [are] drafted by the government, the content of which as a rule is not seriously debated or criticized” (Rumyansev 2012:1).

2. Migration rhetoric typically problem-centred, not migration policy-centred

When migration issues are incorporated in the programs of political parties, then the emphasis is on trends and causes of migration rather than the migration policy itself. The migration debate remains heavily linked to domestic problems, such as socio-economic challenged (e.g. unemployment), demographic (e.g. low child-birth, depopulation) or is entangled with minority issues (integration, preservation of the titular nation and its culture, rights of ethnic groups or migrants). Here are a few examples:

In Armenia programs of political parties frequently used migration to accuse national authorities of Armenia for bad handling of country’s socio-political and economic development. The party programs frequently emphasized commitment to create new jobs and reduce emigration, halt depopulation by increasing the birth-rate, develop mechanisms to encourage return migration or repatriation of the diaspora (Chobanyan 2012a).

In Moldova, the Communist government (2001-2009 years) referred to migration as a “caprice” and failed to admit the high emigration of Moldovans and the poor economic conditions that caused this migration (Oprunenco 2012). Thus, such issues as the brain drain, risks and benefits of labour migration, rights of migrants were frequently included in the programs of opposition parties (Oprunenco 2012). And yet, as an apparent paradox, the Communist government of Moldova consolidated Mol-

dova’s migration system, established bilateral cooperation on labour migration and adopted various policy programs targeted at engaging Moldovan labour migrants for Moldova’s economic development (Oprunenco 2012).

Russia and Ukraine (and also Belarus) have been favourite migrant destinations among the former Soviet states. Thus, here the migration rhetoric of political parties has been linked with ethno-politics and integration issues. In Ukraine migration issues proposed to the parliament have usually been confined to ethno-politics, and have been entangled with language and minority policies (Tolstokorova 2012). In this context the policy objectives on migration have been framed as conditional on solution of larger social challenges, such as diasporas, rights of ethnic minorities, national identity, etc, and such issues as the rights of Ukrainian migrants abroad, immigration of foreigners, brain drain have become only selectively emphasized, politically manipulated and have avoided targeted policy response (Tolstokorova 2012).

In Russia the public has been divided between pro-immigration and anti-immigration attitudes, so have the political parties (Mukomel 2012). Due to the expansion of the public support for radical nationalist and xenophobic attitudes in the 2000s, to retain their electoral support, some political parties, such as Just Russia, have taken a more moderate position on migration, others, such as Yabloko or the Right Cause have refocused their migration rhetoric on advocacy for ethnic/migrant tolerance and anti-nationalism, whereas the United Russia has even been reluctant to articulate a position on migration in its party program to not alienate their electorate (Mukomel 2012).



3. However...

In some post-Soviet states more than in others political party programs have also debated the actual migration policy of the country, and have proposed legislation or a policy framework on migration. This has been rare in the South Caucasus and more prevalent in Russia and Ukraine where migration debate has largely been determined by the multi-ethnic structure of the society and has centred on the risks and benefits of inflow of migrants and the conditions of their integration in the society.

4. What next?

While the research of CARIM-East country experts focused on post-Soviet states with fragile democratic systems, migration is politicized also in West European consolidated democracies. But in emergent democracies where policy frameworks are new and still need to adopt to the country specificities to become effective, this political manipulation can lead to inaction in policy-making or result in frequent shifts of migration politics, allow xenophobic stereotypes to penetrate into policy decisions, can delay the economic development of the country and even make the country more receptive to external pressures on certain policies. For example, due to the highly politicized nature of migration, the political elites have often failed to adopt policies to potentially not be blamed for resulting migration trends, such as in Armenia, where the draft Law on Regulation of Overseas of Employment, drafted in 2001 and modified several times since then has to date not been adopted by the parliament of Armenia. In the opinion of the experts, “[t]he main reason for not adopting the Draft Law so far is mainly explained due to the cautious attitude of politicians towards migration issues, particularly, those, which are related to regulation of overseas migration, since the

perception of general public is that the Government actions only would encourage emigration from Armenia” (Chobanyan 2012b: 3).

“This only confirms that that there is substantial role that the civil society and international organizations can play to increase the awareness about migration issues and the migration policy among the political actors and the society in large. To increase the emphasis on migration issues in political party programs, the civil society organizations could conduct advocacy campaigns to push the migration issues into agendas of political parties. This should also increase the involvement of multiple actors in migration policy-making. Second, this should also have a counter-balancing affect on political parties that use migration as an election card: the civil society can monitor that political parties remain consistent in positions on migration they take on the paper (in the party programs) vs. during elections and when they achieve power, and can expose those political parties that do not have a (consistent) position on migration policies” (Makaryan 2013:12-13).



Further Reading:

The interested reader can also consult the comparative review by Makaryan (2013) or the detailed country-specific discussion for Armenia (Chobanyan 2012a), Azerbaijan (Rumyansev 2012), Belarus (Bobrova 2012), Georgia (Chelidze 2012), Moldova (Oprunenco 2012), Russia (Mukomel 2012), Ukraine (Tolstokorova 2012).

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