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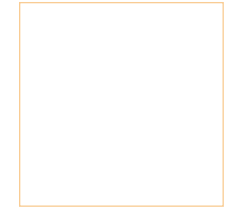
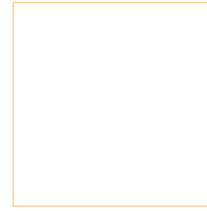
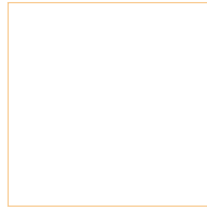
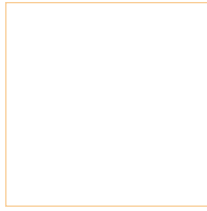
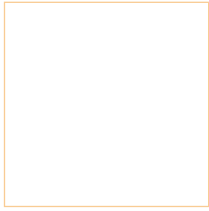
The Common Economic Space: what is the impact on migration to and from Belarus?

Abstract

On January 1, 2012, Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan signed an agreement which created the Common Economic Space (CES). An integral part of the CES is the Customs Union which goes beyond mere economic integration of free movement of capital and includes far-reaching social implications inherent in the free movement of labour. This includes visa-free travel, co-ordination in the spheres of labour migration as well as illegal migration. Even though members of the CES have taken several steps to co-ordinate their migration policies, gaps in data sharing and availability still exist. Moreover, the degree of cooperation is uneven among the CES members with Belarus having a tighter relationship with Russia rather than Kazakhstan. While the CES contributed greatly to the ability of the citizens of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia to move freely among these states, it is still challenging for Belarus to attract highly skilled migrants. Migration flows to Belarus were high in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union and then gradually decreased and stabilised in the 2000s.

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Migration Flows to and from Belarus within the Context of the Customs Union

A lack of reliable statistics does not allow a full evaluation of migration volumes in Belarus. Nevertheless, according to the data from Belstat¹ and Rosstat², between 1991 and 2011 Belarus registered a positive migration balance with the greatest peak of migrants arriving there in the early 1990s and stabilising from 1996 onwards. There are some discrepancies in the data from Belstat and Rosstat. According to Belarusian statistical bodies, around 710,000 people arrived from Russia in 1991-2011, and 470,000 people went in the opposite direction. Hence migration balance was +240,000 people. According to Rosstat, over that period 660,000 people went from Russia to Belarus - 50,000 less than according to Belstat - and 615,000 people went in the opposite direction -145,000 more than according to Belstat. According to Rosstat, the migration balance for Belarus was only 45,000 persons. This leads to doubts about the accuracy of the data. The main trends, however, of the positive migration balance registered by Belstat and Rosstat concur.

Migration exchange between Belarus and Kazakhstan is considerably smaller than with Russia. This is due to the fact that Russia itself is much larger than Kazakhstan in terms of both territory and population and also due to the rather significant distance between Kazakhstan and Belarus. Data from the national statistical offices of Belarus and Kazakhstan is consistent in demonstrating that migration flows to Belarus from Kazakhstan peaked in the 1990s and reduced while stabilising in the second half of the 2000s.

What impact does the Customs Union have on integration of migration policies among its members?

The establishment of the Customs Union as well as the Common Economic Space has contributed to several changes in the migration policies of Belarus, Russia, and Kazakhstan. Several legal acts (see Table 1) lay the foundation for the co-ordinated regional migration policy. Such co-ordination results in convergence of national legislations, enhanced co-operation and information exchange between government and non-governmental organisations working in the field of migration.

There are several practical implications for the citizens of these countries. Currently, because of the Customs Union, nationals of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan enjoy full freedom of movement. A rather long period of stay is allowed in the territory of the Customs Union's member states without having to register with a host country. Equal rights are ensured in education, property relations, including real estate, labour relations (employment, remuneration and terms of labour, working schedule and leisure time, work safety); social security, and medical care³.

Within the framework of the Customs Union, Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan have also adopted several measures to collaborate in countering illegal migration. In particular, the following measures contribute to such cooperation: sharing of normative legal acts among states (regarding migration and labour activities of foreign citizens); information exchange and collaboration in adopting counter-measures to stem illegal labour migration; exchange of experience and sharing of good practices through internships, workshops and training sessions; conclusion of readmission agreements.

1 National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus.

2 Federal Statistic Service of the Russian Federation.

3 Also see - http://www.carim-east.eu/media/exno/Explanatory%20Notes_2012-63.pdf



Table 1: The legal foundations of the present-day migration policy of the Customs Union

Agreements	Status
Treaty on Customs Union and Common Economic Space	Signed by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and the Russian Federation in Moscow on 26.02.1999 Entered into force: Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan – 23.12.1999; Kyrgyzstan – 10.04.2000; Russian Federation 26.09.1999 – 02.07.2001
Agreement on granting equal rights to enter educational institutions to citizens of States that are party to the Treaty on the Deepening of Integration in the Economic and Humanitarian Areas of 29 March 1996	Signed by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and the Russian Federation in Moscow on 24.11.1998 Entered into force – 15.09.1999 (for Tajikistan – 15.02.2000)
Decision of the Supreme Council of the Union of Belarus and Russia No. 4 “On equal rights of citizens to employment, labour remuneration and other social and labour guarantees”	Adopted on 22.06.1996 Entered into force – 22.06.1996
Agreement on legal status of migrant workers and their families	Signed by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russian Federation in St. Petersburg on 19.11.2010 Entered into force – 1.01.2012
Agreement between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation on ensuring equal rights of citizens of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation to freedom of movement, choice of place of stay and residence in the Union member states	Signed by Belarus and the Russian Federation in St. Petersburg on 24.01.2006 Entered into force – 29.06.2006
Decision of the Council of Heads of States of the Commonwealth of Independent States “On proposals regarding coordinated migration policy of the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States”	Signed by Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Ukraine in Dushanbe on 05.10.2007 Entered into force – 05.10.2007
Treaty between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation on equal rights of citizens	Signed in Moscow on 25.12.1998 Entered into force – 04.02.2009
Treaty between the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Kazakhstan on the legal status of citizens of the Republic of Belarus permanently residing in the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan and citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan permanently residing in the territory of the Republic of Belarus	Signed in Minsk on 17.01.1996 Entered into force – 08.06.1999

It is important to note, however, that the degree of co-operation has, so far, been greater between Belarus and Russia than between Belarus and Kazakhstan. Such co-operation is fostered within the framework of bilateral inter-agency treaties on co-operation.

For instance, Russia and Belarus enjoy wider sets of rights for their citizens in each other’s countries (for instance, migrants are able to acquire their work experience cumulatively from both countries).



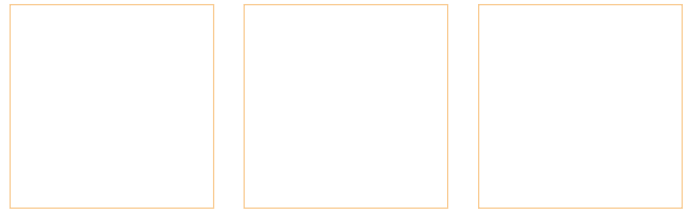
What are the future prospects for Belarus's migration policy within the framework of the Common Economic Space?

By and large, migration trends formed over the past decade are likely to persist. Overall, the average salary in Belarus is several times lower than in Kazakhstan and certainly than that in Russia, even though the unemployment rates vary insignificantly among these three countries. Therefore despite government's efforts to attract migrants (for instance, by offering a one-time payment of 500 USD), the Common Economic Space is not expected to serve as a source of migrant influx in Belarus.

Nevertheless, several factors may contribute to migrants arriving in Belarus. Members of the CES have indicated their interest in continuing with integration steps in the migration sphere. However, the degree of integration is highly dependent on migration policy pursued by Russia. With stricter immigration laws in Russia, more migrants may decide to move to Belarus instead. Considering that the share of immigrants travelling to Belarus constitutes only 5% of immigrants going to Russia, even a small diversion from Russia could be significant for Belarus.

Considering that Belarus is an important transit country for migrants travelling to the European Union, the growth of illegal migration is also possible. According to the Ministry of Interior of Belarus, in 2012 there were 14,500 foreigners who violated the rules of stay. Steps taken within the framework of the Customs Union, in particular the creation of a common database with information about illegal migrants - on persons whose entry was banned and who held invalid documents - may contribute to a more co-ordinated approach in the efforts to address irregular migration.

With more members potentially joining the CES, migration flows to Belarus are likely to be further



altered. Belarus may also be likely to attract migrants whose characteristics do not correspond to those that the country aims to attract by its migration policy (namely people who are older than 40 and without higher or secondary education). Thus, experts predict that the outflow of highly qualified well-educated workers will continue to be compensated by the influx of low-qualified personnel.

Concluding remarks: what are the areas that can benefit from further integration among the members of the CES?

Having taken several important steps in the area of migration co-ordination, members of the Customs Union still have much to improve in migration-related data gathering and harmonisation. With potentially greater interdependence in the common labour market, there is a need to further align national legislation with international treaties regulating labour rights. There is also an opportunity to improve a system of recruitment and attracting of labour migrants to the Customs Union member states as well as taking steps to co-ordinate efforts of stemming illegal migration and human trafficking. A co-ordinated approach in this policy area is particularly important within the context of new opportunities that this regional freedom of movement creates for organized criminal groups. Large-scale international studies focusing on the consequences of a co-ordinated approach to managing migration in this region is necessary to help policy officials reflect on how to regularise these processes further.



Further Sources:

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Migration Policy Centre

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