

COMMUNICATION OF VISA-FREE REGIME WITH THE EU: CURRENT TRENDS AND APPROACHES IN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES



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Effective communication of visa-free regime with the European Union (EU) is an integral part of the European agenda on migration issues. Visa liberalization is a pilot project of the EU in relations with third countries struggling for visa abolition in exchange for reforms. Therefore, the

basic communication principles of visa liberalization policies that were put in place by the Western Balkans countries and partly by their Eastern Partnership (EaP) successors are still in the process of formation and need to be adjusted, depending on the country and external factors influencing migration and security. The EU's policy on the visa abolition for third-country nationals is based on a unified approach, while at the same time making it possible to use of the accumulated response experience as well as to apply the measures reflecting local specifics.

The process of visa liberalization envisages the existence of two key temporary phases of active communication: prior to the visa abolition, during the preparation of the country for the visa-free travel introduction, and during the so-called "test" period of the visa-free regime. The preparatory stage of visa-free communication focuses on familiarizing citizens with the EU requirements necessary for the visa waiver, while the post-liberalization period focuses on the need to address the problems encountered during the visa-free regime implementation, as well as on maintaining the progress of reforms achieved by countries in the process of liberalization.

Communication strategies of the visa-free regime, as a rule, are in the hands of countries applying for the visa waiver, while the quality control of the information

campaigns implementation belongs to the EU. Since one of the main goals of the freedom of movement communication is managed and regulated migration, most of the success indicators of the information work carried out are reflected in the [migration criteria of the mechanism for suspending the visa-free regime](#). Liberalization of the visa regime was tied to the mechanism of its suspension, which, among other things, can be used in the event of a significant increase in the number of refusals to enter or detected illegal stay of citizens of visa-free countries in the EU, as well as an increase in the number of "fake" asylum seekers.

The quality control concerns all countries that have fulfilled the requirements of visa liberalization, in particular, the countries of the Western Balkans and the EaP. The [first](#) and [second](#) annual reports of the European Commission (EC), published in December 2017 and December 2018, presented a comprehensive analysis of the compliance of countries with migration security criteria. Three EaP countries are in the focus of special attention - Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, - as new visa-free countries that are undergoing a test period for the visa-free regime implementation. All three countries, both in the first and in the second report of the EC, received comments on certain migration indicators, while the general recommendation for all three countries was and remains the need to continue information work among citizens to minimize the abuse of the visa-free regime and fully meet the migration and security criteria.

The need for further information campaigns aimed at simplifying regular migration and preventing irregular one was also noted by experts of the Eastern Partnership Panel on Migration, Mobility and Integrated Border Management during [the meeting in Tbilisi](#) organized by Georgia with the support of the EC and the UN Migration



Agency (IOM) Mission in Ukraine in October 2018.

In essence, the countries should focus their attention on the areas of concern, the improvement of which largely depends on effective communication work. The annual reports of the EC, as well as the statistics of Frontex and Eurostat, provide an opportunity for governments to update their action plans on information campaigns, taking into account new trends and indicators.

Mobility statistics

Even now, analyzing the available statistics on the mobility of citizens of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, one can see certain weaknesses in each of the countries and apply preventive measures to solve them.

For example, in 2018, Ukraine continues to occupy the first place in terms of the number of refusals of entry into the EU countries and the number of irregular migrants who stayed in the EU. And at the same time, due to objective reasons, this growth cannot be called critical.

The majority of Ukrainian citizens with irregular status are detected in Poland, but this figure is rather low compared to the total number of Ukrainians who were staying in this country legally. At the end of the first half of 2018, Ukrainian citizens [received 1.87 million valid permits](#) to reside in Poland, so the number of irregular Ukrainian migrants in Poland does not exceed 1% of the total number of Ukrainian migrants.

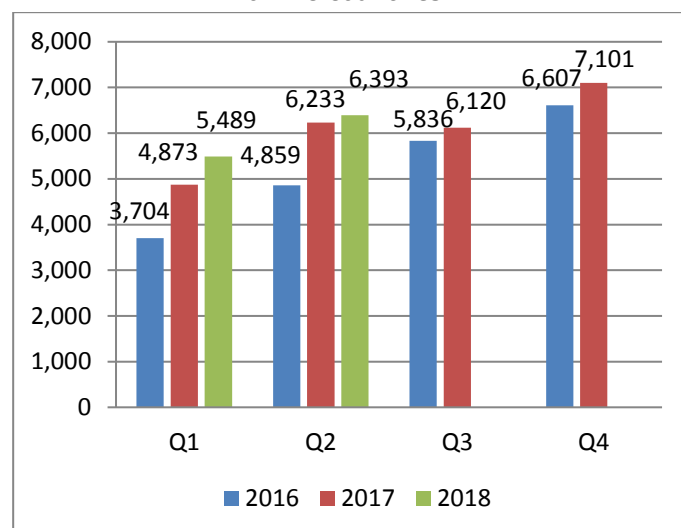
Migrants with irregular status ([illegal stay](#))

In the second half of 2018, Ukraine continued to occupy the first place in the number of irregular migrants who were returned back, but the absolute majority of them returned voluntarily - 89% in the first half of 2018.

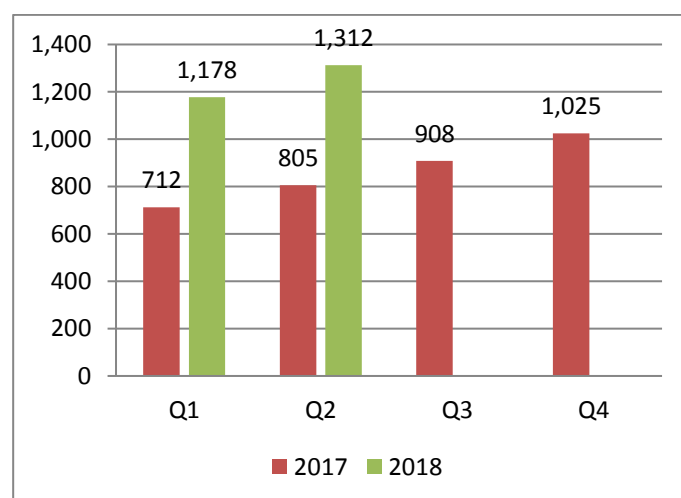
Georgia ranks fourth place in the number of irregular migrants who were returned back. For the first half of 2018, this figure almost doubled compared to the same period in 2017 (an increase of 164%). The number of voluntary and compulsory returns has also increased in proportion. But the total amount of voluntary returns is

still higher - 55% of Georgian migrants returned voluntarily during the first half of 2018.

Number of Ukrainian citizens who were returned from EU countriesⁱ



Number of Georgian citizens who were returned from EU countriesⁱⁱ



Unfounded asylum applications remain indicators of concern for Georgia. According to the second report of the EC, in the first half of 2018, the number of asylum applications doubled compared to the same period last year. Germany and France are the main destinations of unfounded asylum seekers. Despite the prompt response of the Government of Georgia to this problem, the EU recommends to continue and strengthen the information



campaign to reduce the risks of abuse of the visa-free regime.

Refusal of entry

In the first half of 2018, the number of refusals of entry for Ukrainian and Moldovan citizens continued to increase. But if in the 2nd quarter of 2018, Ukrainians were refused 75% more often than during the same period of 2017, for Moldovans this figure increased only by 8%.

Refusals of entryⁱⁱⁱ

Number of refusals of entry	Ukraine	Moldova
2016, Q1	6 185	744
2016, Q2	6 733	1 000
2016, Q3	7 940	932
2016, Q4	6 952	1 193
2017, Q1	8 488	1 250
2017, Q2	9 030	1 285
2017, Q3	9 662	1 596
2017, Q4	9 947	1 800
2018 Q1	14 476	1 573
2018 Q2	15 769	1 388

More than half of all refusals that citizens of Moldova and Ukraine received was due to the lack of documents confirming the purpose and conditions of stay, while another part of refusals related to the lack of sufficient financial means to stay in the EU countries and return back.

Information campaigns in the Eastern Partnership countries

Having obtained the visa-free regime with the EU, all three EaP countries faced common challenges: a potential increase in migration risks on their part and the need to counter them by informing citizens about the rules of the visa-free regime.

In all three countries, centralized information campaigns were carried out with the participation of various actors of the government sector, such as foreign ministries,

migration management authorities, and authorities responsible for European integration. At the same time, the media and non-governmental/international organizations also took part in awareness-raising. In Ukraine, NGOs actually conducted an alternative campaign, while not duplicating activities of the main one, and successfully interacting with it in many issues (for example, [materials](#) developed by NGOs were used in the main campaign). In Moldova, [according to experts](#), NGOs were less involved in the process. It is worth noting that this situation is not unique - non-governmental and international organizations were actively involved in campaigning in the Balkan countries. For example, in 2017-2018 in Albania, a campaign to inform and prevent irregular migration to the EU countries was implemented by IOM.

In **Moldova**, right before and after the start of the visa-free regime in 2014, various types of information materials on the rules for visa-free travel were developed and widely distributed. The need for awareness raising was revamped after the first report of the EC on the fulfillment of the criteria for the mechanism of suspension of visa-free regimes in December 2017. In March 2018, the Government Commission for European Integration of Moldova [approved](#) a calendar of actions aimed at implementing the recommendations of the report.

In **Georgia**, as of 2018, the third wave of information campaign is taking place. [The first stage](#) started back in 2015, two years before the visa-free regime launch. The second one took place in 2017, and the third one began in March 2018. All three waves were based on the principles of informing about the benefits of regular migration routes and the dangers of irregular ones, but the last wave has a special focus on the issues of abuse of asylum system and international protection, which is [the most pressing problem today for Georgia in the context of the visa-free regime](#).

In **Ukraine**, communication also took place with the active participation of relevant government authorities, but here, unlike Georgia and Moldova, the EU directly



joined the campaign by contracting consulting company Gopa Com, which recruited Ukrainian PR agency [Change Communications](#). Officially, the campaign started in May 2017, a month before the start of the visa-free regime with Ukraine, however, the preparatory stage (the study of the audience, development of messages) [began a few months earlier](#).

Tools and channels

In **Moldova**, various booklets with information on visa-free travel rules and a series of promotional videos were developed as part of the campaign. [Information on visa-free travel regulations](#) was placed at the border checkpoints, at the offices of the Bureau for Migration and Asylum, on the websites of relevant institutions, and distributed in the media, including through speeches of Border Guard Service representatives on TV. Independently of the main campaign, the [Europe for All](#) campaign was held in 2014, during which residents of several cities were consulted on the streets, including on the visa-free travel rules.

In **Georgia**, information was disseminated through mass media, social networks, and face-to-face meetings. Thus, work with the national and local media was envisaged for the [first](#) campaign, as well as dissemination of information via Internet. Citizens who received passports were provided with leaflets containing visa-free regime rules within the frameworks of the [second](#) campaign, and the [third](#) one was announced as a series of personal outreach meetings in the regions, which was supposed to cover more than 50 localities. Also in Georgia, a [mobile application](#) was developed that counted the number of days spent on the territory of the "Schengen +" zone.

The capacity of administrative resources was also widely used in **Ukraine**. Booklets and posters were placed in the offices of the migration service, at the sites of Ukrainian railway, at the border checkpoints, administrative service centers, universities, and hospitals. In addition, information was disseminated through non-governmental

channels: the main mobile operators, media, and Internet. During the alternative campaign conducted by the NGO "Europe without barriers", information was provided through personal communication (street games, seminars at universities in six cities of Western Ukraine), information dissemination via media and Internet ([translation](#) of excerpts of the Schengen Borders Code, an [interactive map](#) with financial requirements towards travelers to the EU countries). Links to the products developed as part of the second campaign were posted on the website of the first campaign, which increased the overall effectiveness of both.

In all three countries, campaign implementers took into account the need to deliver messages to different social and ethnic groups. For example, during the first campaign in Georgia, videos about visa-free regime were announced in [six languages](#) - besides Georgian, also in Abkhaz, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Ossetian, and Russian. Separate [videos](#) were accompanied by sign translation. In Moldova, materials were published in Moldovan (Romanian) and Russian languages. In Ukraine - in Ukrainian and Russian.

Effectiveness

Evaluating the effectiveness of an information campaign, especially such a large-scale one, is always a challenge, which was also noted at the EaP [Panel on Migration, Mobility and IBM meeting on information campaigns](#). Certain opportunities for evaluation are provided by the Internet, where you can evaluate quoting and the number (but not quality) of views of certain products. It is interesting to note here the success in Ukraine of a map indicating the amount of money you need for traveling to the EU countries (1.3 million views, quoting in over 100 media), the popularity of which can be explained by an understandable and measurable criterion for crossing the border, in contrast to, for example, information on a vague list of documents required to confirm the purpose of the trip.

Conclusion

In general, there are many similar features in the



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information campaigns implemented in three EaP countries. First of all, it is a very wide target audience (virtually all citizens), parallel use of channels with wide coverage (nationwide distribution) and narrowly targeted ones (by region, language, social group). In all cases, government agencies played a central role in the dissemination of information, although the participation of non-governmental/international organizations and structures should not be underestimated.

This was particularly manifested in the case of Ukraine, where the EU took the campaign under its own control, which is probably due to both previous experience in Moldova and Georgia (for example, during the launch of the campaign in Ukraine, the EU representative [justified](#) its necessity by so that “it should be not like in Moldova”), and the specifics of Ukraine, which has more than 1,300 km of land border with the EU and a population of about six times more than the total population of Moldova and Georgia, and accordingly, demands more attention.

In all three countries, the media, Internet, social networks, posters/leaflets distributed through government agencies, face-to-face meetings, and possibly, to a lesser extent, central TV, were actively exploited to raise awareness. As a result, in all three countries, a visa-free travel information infrastructure was created, which is available to the citizens. First of all, it is accessible information on specialized websites ([Moldova](#), [Georgia](#), [Ukraine](#)). Secondly, thanks to the experience and special training, employees of relevant government bodies are able to provide necessary information (for example, in Ukraine it is the State Migration Service and the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs). In addition, in Ukraine advice to citizens is provided by the NGO “Europe without barriers”, and there is a [hotline](#) on combating trafficking in persons and counseling migrants supported by IOM, which can be partially a source of information on legal visa-free travel. Information in Moldova and Georgia can be obtained through the MFA hotlines. Thus, a citizen of Ukraine, Georgia or Moldova is able to find quickly on the Internet or get information about the rules of the visa-free regime upon request. However, this does not solve the problem with citizens who do not seek information, or with individual cases that cannot be interpreted within the general framework of the rules.

The migration trends of 2017-2018 demonstrate that, although the absolute majority of travelers from all three countries abide the EU law and requirements, quite significant groups are still violators.

In this situation, governments and other interested actors should focus on preserving and developing the existing communication infrastructure, making information on visa-free travels as accessible as possible to those who seek it. It is also necessary to improve the approach to solving individual cases, for example, by creating an online counselling mechanism or a permanent telephone hotline. Thirdly, it is worth conducting additional research among those relatively small groups that form negative migration trends and continue targeted communication on its basis. For Ukraine, these are citizens who receive a refusal of entry and who exceed the terms of their stay in the EU, while for Moldova – those who receive a refusal of entry, and for Georgia – abusers of the asylum system.

ⁱ FRAN Quarterly. Quarter 2, April–June 2018, p.38 https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Fran/2018/Fran_Q2_2018.pdf,
FRAN Quarterly. Quarter 2, April–June 2017, p.30 https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Fran_Q2_2017.pdf

ⁱⁱ FRAN Quarterly. Quarter 2, April–June 2018, p.38 https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Fran/2018/Fran_Q2_2018.pdf,
FRAN Quarterly. Quarter 2, April–June 2017, p.26 https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Fran_Q2_2017.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ FRAN Quarterly. Quarter 2, April–June 2018, p.38 https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Fran/2018/Fran_Q2_2018.pdf,
FRAN Quarterly. Quarter 2, April–June 2017, p.26 https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Fran_Q2_2017.pdf

This publication is produced by the support project to the EaP Panel on Migration, Mobility and Integrated Border Management, implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Mission in Ukraine. This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The content of this publication can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union. The news and views contained in these media monitoring dispatches, which are provided for information purposes only, do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IOM or its Member States, nor does IOM represent or endorse the accuracy or reliability of any advice, opinion, statement or other information provided herein.



The Project is funded
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The Project is implemented by the
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