

**FULL GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE REPORT OF THE STANDING
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
“STRENGTHENING CANADIAN ENGAGEMENT IN EASTERN EUROPE AND
CENTRAL ASIA”¹**

INTRODUCTION

The Government of Canada has carefully reviewed the report of the Standing Committee on Foreign and International Development (hereafter referred to as the Committee) and thanks its members for the opportunity to participate in the hearings leading up to the tabling of this report. The Government appreciates that the Committee has devoted considerable attention to this important issue, and welcomes the continuing interest of the Committee in Canada’s engagement in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

The Government is pleased to note that many of the Committee’s recommendations are consistent with Canada’s current approaches.

There are important differences in the nature of Canada’s relationships with the countries referred to in the report, and in the nature of the countries themselves. As well, the Committee has usefully framed Canada’s relationship with Russia as one of the elements that needs to be considered in our broader engagement with the region.

Looking at Eastern Europe, important historical and people-to-people linkages underpin Canada’s relationships with this area and ensure their enduring vibrancy. Many countries in the Eastern Europe region are members of the EU, which is all the more one of Canada’s most important international partners following the signature and provisional application of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) and the companion Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA). Many of these countries also are NATO members, which is part of Canada’s international engagement for protecting regional and global peace and security. Our partnerships through both of these channels reflect a needed community of values in upholding a rules-based global order.

Although Canada’s presence in Central Asia is more modest than in Eastern Europe, it is nonetheless pinned on significant economic and thematic cooperation, particularly on nuclear issues and climate. Canada is the second largest investor in Kazakhstan and the top investor in the Kyrgyz Republic. Canada views continued independence and the democratic development of states in Central Asia as essential for regional stability. Canada will continue to work with states in the region, as well as other partners and allies on the ground, through both bilateral and multilateral channels.

Below is the Government’s response to the specific recommendations made by the Committee, including relevant measures that the Government of Canada will undertake to implement through its engagement with the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

¹ The full text of the Report may be found here: www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/FAAE/report-13

RECOMMENDATION 1

The Government of Canada should continue its sanctions against Russian and post-annexation Crimean officials, those responsible for the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine, as well as those involved in the abduction and illegal show trials of Ukrainian citizens in Russia and Crimean Tatars and others within Crimea. The Government of Canada should also engage with the Russian government on the need to respect international law and Ukraine's sovereignty.

RESPONSE

The Government of Canada agrees with this recommendation. In response to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and ongoing support to the insurgency in Eastern Ukraine, and in coordination with partners, Canada has imposed a broad range of economic sanctions in relation to Russia, including listing over 300 Russian and Ukrainian individuals and entities, in regulations adopted pursuant to the *Special Economic Measures Act*. Canada's economic sanctions regulations in relation to Russia remain in place until repealed, and their duration is clearly linked to Russia's complete implementation of its commitments under the Minsk agreements and respect for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Government of Canada stands ready to impose additional sanctions, as necessary, in order to maintain pressure on Russia. Canada's decisions on sanctions are made in close coordination with our international partners and allies, including the G7, NATO Allies, and the EU.

The new *Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act* and amendments to the *Special Economic Measures Act* (SEMA) enable Canada to take further action to respond to cases of human rights violations and acts of significant corruption anywhere in the world, bolstering Canada's broad suite of existing human rights and anti-corruption tools.

Our policy of non-recognition of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea is clear. We continue to monitor closely and with concern the deteriorating situation in Crimea, and will continue to address in various international forums the treatment of the Crimean Tatar population and political prisoners in Crimea and Russia.

Finally, Canada engages diplomatically with Russia, and has re-established channels of dialogue to advance Canadian interests and express Canadian values. Our engagement includes speaking clearly and directly to Russia about its actions that undermine the rules-based international order.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The Government of Canada should continue to support multilateral efforts, including through the OSCE, NATO, the UN and other international organizations, to bring about a resolution to Russia's military invasion and illegal annexation of Crimean territory and logistical and military support for the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine. In support of this objective, the Government of Canada should continue its commitment to Operation UNIFIER.

RESPONSE

The Government of Canada agrees with this recommendation. Canada supports ongoing diplomatic efforts, including within the framework of the 'Normandy Four' format, to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, and continues to support the efforts of the OSCE, including through its contribution of over \$15.8 million and the deployment of up to 50

monitors to the Organization for the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine. We are active within the OSCE, NATO, the UN, and other international organizations in addressing Russia's occupation and illegal annexation of Crimea and ongoing support to insurgents in Eastern Ukraine. Canada is proud to have co-sponsored the UN General Assembly resolution on the "Situation of human rights in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol", which chronicles and condemns a number of serious human rights abuses and violations committed against the residents of Crimea, and calls for the access to Crimea of international human rights monitors.

As part of Canada's bilateral support to help Ukraine remain sovereign, secure and stable, the Government of Canada extended its military training mission, Operation UNIFIER, until the end of March 2019. To date, through Operation UNIFIER, Canadian Armed Forces personnel have trained more than 5,000 Ukrainian soldiers.

RECOMMENDATION 3

The Government of Canada should continue to ensure that Canadian international assistance to Ukraine benefits the most vulnerable populations in the country, particularly the indigenous Crimean Tatars, and those who have been internally displaced by the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea.

RESPONSE

The Government of Canada agrees with this recommendation. In June 2017, Canada launched its Feminist International Assistance Policy, which recognizes that a feminist approach provides the most effective way to refocus Canada's development assistance to help the poorest and most vulnerable and build a more peaceful, inclusive and prosperous world.

As a trusted partner, Canada's support is still greatly needed. The active and protracted conflict in Eastern Ukraine is taxing the nation's finances, leaving less for drastically increasing social protection needs. This creates a situation of uncertainty, and has given rise to increased poverty and needs for hundreds of thousands of civilians. An estimated 4.4 million people continue to be affected by the conflict, with women and the elderly bearing the brunt of the impact. Economically, the conflict has disrupted Ukraine's industrial heartland, which was responsible for 60% of Ukraine's exports of metals, and significantly reduced the output of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the region. Socially, it has exacerbated the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) in Ukraine, especially among the conflict-affected populations, and there exists a lack of proper infrastructure and services to prevent and respond to GBV survivors.

Canada's current programming is making a difference in the lives of vulnerable Ukrainians. For example, through the "Strengthening Conflict-Affected Community Communication for Internally Displaced Persons" project, Canada is helping to ensure greater awareness through national and regional media of the plight faced by internally displaced persons, enabling stronger cohesion between communities. Canada also supported two Crimean Tatars, who were recently released after wrongful and politically motivated imprisonment in Crimea, in attending the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Ministerial Council. The visit provided a unique opportunity to highlight the current human rights situation for Crimean Tatars in occupied Crimea.

Canada will continue to monitor the humanitarian situation to ensure the critical needs of the most vulnerable women, girls, men, and boys are met, and will continue to provide gender-responsive humanitarian assistance to crisis-affected people as needed and appropriate.

RECOMMENDATION 4

The Government of Canada should work with its allies in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and elsewhere to improve collective defence mechanisms against cyberattacks, as well as proactively monitor disinformation campaigns and develop counter measures to minimize damage inflicted by information warfare. This should include continued financial and personnel support for the NATO Centres of Excellence for Co-operative Cyber Defence (Estonia) and for Strategic Communications (Latvia).

RESPONSE

The Government of Canada agrees with this recommendation. In collaboration with other important stakeholders including our Allies in NATO, the EU, and other partners, Canadian officials are monitoring nefarious cyber activities on an ongoing basis and measures are being taken to ensure Canada's cyber-infrastructure is robust. This effort includes, but is not limited to, better informing the Canadian public about the real threats of disinformation campaigns, encouraging critical thinking to identify disinformation attempts, and ensuring open and transparent communication about the Canadian government's foreign policy engagements, including in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Canada supports and contributes to the activities of both the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Estonia and the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Latvia. The Government of Canada has sent one military officer to the Centre in Latvia as a voluntary national contribution as part of Operation REASSURANCE.

Canada's security cooperation with Central Asian states occurs primarily through the NATO Partnership for Peace and cooperation on Afghanistan, such as in the context of the Istanbul Process-Heart of Asia forum. The application of "collective defence" on issues of cyber security is different in this context than with NATO Allies or partners with which Canada has more robust defence relations.

It is important to highlight in Central Asia the importance of building media literacy in the public, combined with a strong civil society, as a means to enhance the ability of the citizenry to recognize disinformation and give voice to those capable of calling attention to the issue. A smaller space for media in countries facing disinformation and cybersecurity-related challenges increases the vulnerability of citizens to disinformation campaigns.

RECOMMENDATION 5

The Government of Canada should continue to show leadership on security issues by ongoing deployments through Operation REASSURANCE, including air policing in Eastern Europe and the enhanced Forward Presence Battle Groups in the Baltics and Poland.

RESPONSE

The Government of Canada agrees with this recommendation. In response to a changed international security environment, Canada has bolstered its military presence in Europe and stiffened its deterrence posture. Canada is the Framework Nation for the multinational Battle Group in Latvia as part of NATO's enhanced Forward Presence. Through Operation REASSURANCE the Canadian Armed Forces conducts regular air policing missions, most recently in Romania and Iceland, and maintains a frigate, on a continuous rotational basis, as part of the Standing NATO Maritime Force.

RECOMMENDATION 6

The Government of Canada should work with the Canadian business community to engage with government officials, civil society and business leaders in all countries that were adversely affected by Soviet occupation and control on best practices to combat corruption in both the public and private sectors.

RESPONSE

The Government of Canada agrees with this recommendation, which fits well with a global approach of promoting responsible business practices as well as our multilateral efforts to strengthen global anti-corruption norms. We recognize that corruption facilitates inequality, and corrodes public trust in institutions and fairness.

Canada's network of diplomatic missions abroad actively promotes awareness and understanding of the importance of responsible business practices with companies, representatives of host governments, and civil society. The Government of Canada also places strict requirements on companies receiving help from the Trade Commissioner Service (TCS) in their pursuit of commercial opportunities abroad. Canadian firms seeking assistance from the TCS must declare they are not engaged in corruption. Furthermore, the TCS requires Canadian firms to declare in a document whether they or an affiliate are under charge or have been convicted under Canada's anti-corruption laws, including the Canadian *Corruption of Foreign Public Officials Act* (CFPOA), during the past five years. The rule now includes procurement for the government's own purchases and legislation mandating the disclosure of government payments by Canadian extractive firms. The Trade Commissioner Service waiver is in line with requirements at Export Development Canada (EDC) and the Canadian Commercial Corporation (CCC).

Canada's legislation to implement the OECD Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions, the *Corruption of Foreign Public Officials Act* (CFPOA), came into force on February 14, 1999. The Act makes it a criminal offence to bribe a foreign public official in the course of business. Under this law, individuals as well as corporations can be prosecuted for offenses committed inside and outside of Canada. The CFPOA reinforces Canada's leadership role in fighting corruption and promoting good business practices at an international level and, confirms the Government's commitment to the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention.

The TCS regularly provides market-specific briefings to Canadian companies doing business abroad, including in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, on the risks of engaging in bribery and corruption of foreign public officials, and how to best mitigate those risks in specific markets.

As part of Canada's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Strategy, Canadian diplomatic missions abroad and Global Affairs Canada Regional Offices in Canada have developed multiple initiatives in their respective regions and have participated in various anti-corruption activities organized by local and bilateral Chambers of Commerce, government organizations (local, national, international) and multilateral organizations such as Global Compact. To support these efforts, the Government of Canada offers specialized training to personnel on Canada's international obligations to prevent and combat corruption, promoting CSR, officials' responsibilities pursuant to the CFPOA, and corruption concerns in specific markets.

Of particular significance in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Canada is advancing responsible business conduct through its efforts to improve transparency and accountability in the extractive sector. Canada joined the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in February 2007, as a supporting country and donor. The EITI supports improved transparency in resource-rich developing countries through the full publication and verification of company payments and government receipts from oil, gas and mining operations. The *Extractive Sector Transparency Measures Act* (the Act) was brought into force on June 1, 2015. The Act delivers on Canada's international commitments to contribute to global efforts to increase transparency and deter corruption in the extractive sector by requiring extractive entities active in Canada to publicly disclose, on an annual basis, specific payments made to all governments in Canada and abroad.

Turning to other elements specific to the Eastern Europe region, CETA's government procurement chapter commits both Canada and EU Member States to conduct covered procurement in a transparent and impartial manner that avoids conflicts of interest and prevents corrupt practices. The Canada-Ukraine Free Trade Agreement contains provisions aimed at combatting corruption, which call for each party to take specific measures and to cooperate in regional and multilateral fora to combat bribery and corruption.

Canada continues to work with a number of partners in Eastern Europe and Central Asia to explore new methods to cooperate on issues related to corruption, trade and investment, often on a partner-initiated basis. Canada will continue to support governance-strengthening initiatives throughout the region, particularly because a number of countries in the region look to Canada as a model in governance.

RECOMMENDATION 7

The Government of Canada should build on existing multilateral and bilateral efforts that support the enhancement of democratic values, good governance, participatory democracy, the rule of law, and social inclusion of marginalized groups such as women, the LGBTI community, and indigenous populations, through ongoing discussions with government officials, parliamentarians and members of civil society in all countries that were adversely affected by Soviet occupation and control.

RESPONSE

At the center of Canada's international human rights work is the United Nations and its specialized bodies. Canada is a party to seven international human rights conventions, and regularly encourages other countries to join these. Canada plays a proactive and positive role in support of the multilateral human rights system at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC). For example, Canada regularly submits recommendations to the countries appearing at the HRC's

Universal Periodic Review (UPR). This participation serves to effect human rights improvements and to demonstrate Canada's commitment to the international human rights architecture. Canada has recently made public and easily accessible the recent UPR recommendations for the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region, including those prepared for the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland and Ukraine.

More broadly, Canada led a ground-breaking Joint Statement on Inclusion and Diversity at the March 2017 session of the HRC. The Statement highlights the benefits of inclusion and diversity and its inherent linkages to greater respect for human rights. It was supported by 83 states, including many in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (including Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Ukraine). Canada has also sought to shift the narrative at the UN General Assembly's Third Committee on Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Issues, by working with a broad cross-section of member states to bolster language on inclusion and respect for diversity in a number of key resolutions. Canada has been pleased to see partnership from countries of the region, and believes that the normative ground being established can help support further dialogue with others.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which includes the participation of all post-Soviet states, is an especially significant multilateral focal point for Canada's engagement on democracy, human rights, inclusion and respect for diversity in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Much OSCE work aligns with Canada's principled foreign policy efforts to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, inclusion, democracy, the rule of law, and inclusive governance, including online. Canada is especially active in these areas at the organization, discussing key issues, raising concerns and pushing for new political commitments. Canadian Members of Parliament and Senators are also actively engaged in the work of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. As one of the major supporters of the OSCE, its programs, and its fields operations, Canada seeks to ensure that the concepts of gender equality and social inclusion are incorporated into all aspects of the organization's work. For example, Canada has supported a project from the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia, which will, *inter alia*, promote the political participation and democratic governance of youth and persons with disabilities.

NATO is a further point of entry on these issues in the region. At the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit, Canada joined allies in unanimously endorsing the NATO Building Integrity Policy, stating that "corruption and poor governance are security challenges which undermine democracy, the rule of law and the economic development." The NATO Building Integrity Policy reaffirms that transparent and accountable institutions under democratic control are fundamental to stability in the Euro-Atlantic area and are essential for international security cooperation. This Policy fits within NATO's wider policy objectives to promote security and stability in close partnership with countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Europe, in particular with regards to defence institution building and defence capacity building.

Canada's active participation in other multilateral organizations also advances democracy, human rights, inclusion and respect for diversity in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region. Canada is a member of the Community of Democracies (CoD), a coalition of states working to promote democratic systems, norms and institutions. Canada has chaired the CoD's Working

Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society (WGEPCS), which engages in concrete diplomacy, advocacy and technical assistance initiatives to counter the adoption of laws that unduly restrict civil society. The WGEPCS has taken action to highlight problematic laws in some countries that were previously under Soviet occupation and control, which has led to documented improvements in those countries.

Canada is committed to the principle that the same human rights people have offline should be protected online and is, in this regard, a founding member of the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC). Founded in 2011, the FOC is a partnership of 30 governments that work to promote and protect human rights online, in particular free expression, association, assembly and privacy. Eastern European countries involved in the FOC include the Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, and Poland. Canada has also advocated for the inclusion of the digital dimensions of human rights into resolutions, including resolutions on women and protecting human rights defenders.

In 2016, Canada became co-chair of the Equal Rights Coalition (ERC) along with Chile for a two-year term. The ERC is the first intergovernmental coalition for the protection of the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people. In April of this year, Canada along with 23 other member countries of the ERC expressed concern following reports of the persecution of gay and bisexual men in Chechnya, and called on the Russian authorities to thoroughly investigate these reports and ensure the safety of all persons in Chechnya placed in situations of risk due to their sexual orientation. Canada's involvement with the ERC constitutes an additional component of its multifaceted efforts to promote LGBTI rights in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

In addition to its efforts in the multilateral arena, Canada also promotes democracy, human rights, inclusion and respect for diversity on a bilateral basis, including through Canada's network of diplomatic missions abroad and the efforts of Canada's Special Envoy for the EU and Europe. Through their performance management agreements, the heads of Canada's diplomatic missions abroad are accountable for promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms in their areas of accreditation. Canadian diplomats engage with governments and support the efforts of civil society to promote inclusion, respect for diversity, human rights and democracy in country-specific contexts.

Canada is making efficient use of projects and available programming resources. A digital toolkit has been developed to support our missions in engaging local partners using digital technologies. We also have certain programming tools that are available and utilized to promote rights-related objectives. Canada's new Feminist International Assistance Policy recommits to supporting inclusive governance, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, through programming and policy to foster sustainable development. Presently, Canada's international development assistance supports many projects to support democracy and human rights in Ukraine. For example, Canada is working closely with the government of Ukraine and Ukrainian civil society organizations to help in the progressive launch of a new legal aid system which, since 2012, has created over 540 points of service. It deploys over 5,000 lawyers and it has over 2,240 employees.

Canada's existing efforts for promoting democracy, human rights, inclusion, and respect for diversity in Eastern Europe and Central Asia are based upon solid foundations, and Canada remains committed to building upon them to better support universal values in the region.

RECOMMENDATION 8

The Government of Canada should work with the Canadian business community to support and promote commercial opportunities in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, particularly in areas that build on Canadian expertise in resource management and other sectors.

RESPONSE

The Government of Canada agrees with this recommendation. In resource management and other sectors, the Canadian Trade Commissioner Service (TCS) continues to work with the Canadian business community to provide on-the-ground intelligence and practical advice on foreign markets to help Canadian businesses make better, more timely and cost-effective decisions in order to achieve their business goals abroad. Trade Commissioners are helping uncover opportunities for Canadian companies through access to foreign governments, key business leaders and decision-makers through Canada's embassies and consulates throughout the region. Trade Commissioners assist Canadian businesses to successfully navigate the complexities of international markets, whether in pursuit of joint-venture or strategic alliances, or in participation in global value chains.

Specifically, the Trade Commissioner Service works with the Canadian business community to support and promote commercial opportunities in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, providing four key services:

- Preparation for International Markets
- Assessing Market Potential
- Finding Qualified Contacts
- Resolving Business Problems

Canada has pursued a number of agreements with countries of the region with the aim of enhancing Canadian commercial opportunities. The provisional application of CETA, which began on September 21, 2017, will increase two-way trade and strengthen economic relations between Canada and EU Member States – including those in Eastern Europe – as well as generating new commercial opportunities for Canadian business in the region. This is the largest and most progressive trade deal that Canada has ever concluded and it will enable decades of new growth and opportunities, including with EU Member States in Eastern Europe.

The Canada-Ukraine Free Trade Agreement (CUFTA) entered into force August 1, 2017. CUFTA will support the economic reform and development efforts of the Government of Ukraine, strengthen the Canada-Ukraine partnership for peace and prosperity, and help pave the way for long-term security, stability, and broad-based economic development in Ukraine. CUFTA also promotes free and progressive trade through provisions that help ensure the protection of the environment and the respect of workers' rights.

Additionally, Canada has negotiated Foreign Investment Protection Agreements with Armenia, Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine, while negotiations with Albania, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Macedonia and Moldova are in progress.

RECOMMENDATION 9

The Government of Canada should consider measures to improve the efficiency of the visa application process without compromising considerations related to Canadian security and national priorities.

RESPONSE

The Government of Canada agrees with this recommendation. Canada seeks to achieve a balance between facilitating legitimate travel of foreign nationals, while protecting the integrity of the immigration and asylum system and, in the longer term, protecting the health, safety and security of Canadians. All persons seeking to visit Canada must meet the requirements for temporary residence in Canada, as set out in the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA)* and Regulations. To improve the efficiency of the visa application process, the government eliminated the single entry/ multiple entry temporary resident visa (TRV) streams in 2014 and replaced them with a single fee, with a multiple entry visa as the default. Furthermore, the default validity for all visas issued is the maximum validity allowed, currently 10 years, or the validity of the traveler's passport.

Since the introduction of e-applications, applicants for TRVs can apply, pay their fees and check the status of their application online. For applicants who applied by paper, they can get detailed application status and correspondence online by linking their application to an online account. In addition, the Government of Canada has introduced the CAN+ program to facilitate travel for high volume and low-risk clients. Qualified visa applicants must have previously traveled to Canada at least once in the last ten years or possess a valid United States non-immigrant visa. All applicants who qualify for the CAN+ program benefit from a streamlined application process with fewer supporting documents required.

The Government of Canada remains committed to making improvements in client service for visitors, ensuring consistency in program delivery without hindering program integrity and continuing to meeting service standards. The Government of Canada's goal is to process applications submitted outside Canada for a new visitor visa within two weeks. The Government reviews the temporary resident application requirements on a regular basis to streamline the forms required and modernize the visa application process.

RECOMMENDATION 10

The Government of Canada should engage with Eastern European and Central Asian governments on youth-oriented partnership frameworks, including youth mobility agreements and educational exchanges that facilitate employment experience for young people.

RESPONSE

The Government of Canada supports, in principle, the Committee's recommendation for Canada to engage with Eastern European and Central Asian governments on youth-oriented partnership frameworks. Each year, Canada welcomes a number of international students from Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and engages in several reciprocal Youth Mobility Agreements and

Arrangements (YMAs) with Eastern European countries through International Experience Canada (IEC). However, Canadian youth interest in working and travelling in the region remains low through these YMAs. As a result, Canada is focused on addressing barriers to participation, raising awareness of IEC and the benefits of international experiences among Canadian youth and their influencers, and working with stakeholders to improve opportunities for Canadians abroad.

Canada continues to monitor and assess opportunities for potential YMAs with new partners. Prospective partners are assessed against criteria that places a strong emphasis on reciprocity of opportunity and benefits for Canadian youth. The assessment also includes a review of the safety and security of Canadians, attractiveness to Canadian youth, labour market conditions (e.g. youth unemployment rates, wages, and professional development opportunities), and the broader bilateral context.

While economic and labour market performance of Eastern European countries continues to improve, Central Asia continues to see high levels of unemployment and low wages. As noted in the Committee's report, opportunities for professional development for youth remain very limited. There are also significant concerns for the safety and security of Canadians and Canadian youth interest in the region remains low. Canada's priority is to focus on existing and potential new YMAs that provide genuine and meaningful opportunities for Canadian youth.

The report raises important considerations regarding the role of education and professional experience in the development of the next generation of leaders in the region. In addition to the existing YMAs, youth from Eastern Europe and Central Asia have the opportunity to take advantage of Canada's excellent education systems and seek professional development through international study and work experience in Canada, as most full-time international students can work on or off-campus while they study without the need for a separate work permit, when authorized.²

² In 2016, 830 study permits were issued to students from Eastern European countries, as well as 685 to students from Central Asian countries.