

The World;

As Soviet Borders Open, the West Braces for an Economic Exodus

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Body

THE withering of the **Soviet** empire and the **economic** strains that accompany it may produce the largest migration since **World** War II, demographers say, and that will present **Western** governments that have long pressed Moscow to **open** its frontiers with the uncomfortable problem of what to do about a flood of would-be immigrants.

Most are in search of work, food, a better life, sometimes safety. They include **Soviet** Jews heading for Israel, Germany and the United States, Armenians going to France, German-speaking Poles and Hungarians entering unified Germany, Albanians scrambling into Greece.

The **exodus** has been manageable so far, but barely. From a maximum of 100,000 a year in the 1970's and middle 1980's, immigration from the Warsaw Pact countries to the **West** jumped to 1.3 million in 1989, the last year for which figures are available, and it was probably higher in 1990.

But now **Western** countries fear an even larger **exodus** as the **Soviet** Union starts lifting travel restrictions just when **economic** hardship and ethnic tensions are on the rise.

Specters of Famine and War <>

Last month Vladimir Scherbakov, chairman of the **Soviet** state Committee on Labor and Social Services, told **West** European governments that 1.5 million to 2 million **Soviet** citizens are likely to move **west** in search of work in the next few years. This is well below the more extreme estimates of 25 million to 30 million immigrants that some experts in the United Nations High Commission for Refugees have warned could head **west** if famine combines with civil war.

Those who believe the migration from the East can be absorbed say most of those leaving come from finite ethnic groups -- the roughly 2 million Germans in the **Soviet** Union and Eastern Europe, the 2 million or so **Soviet** Jews, the million Armenians living outside Armenia, an estimated 3 million displaced Hungarians and some 3 million gypsies. The great mass of the **Soviet** people, according to this theory, have no tradition of migration and remain attached to the soil. But some 25 million ethnic Russians already live in other **Soviet** republics -- including 9 million

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in predominantly Moslem Central Asia and Azerbaijan, where they are often considered unwelcome foreigners -- and they might decide to flee.

Other experts warn of a steady stream of Easterners taking advantage of their new freedom to travel and study abroad, overstaying their visas and joining the underground economy.

Bimal Ghosh, an expert with the Geneva-based International Organization for Migration, warns that the switch to a market economy could put 14 million people out of work in Eastern Europe and 30 million to 40 million people in the Soviet Union by 1994.

The prospect of rising migration creates a dilemma for Western European governments and for the United States, Canada and Australia, the countries that have absorbed most recent migrations. With the cold war over, immigrants are unlikely to qualify for political asylum as refugees facing "well-founded fear of persecution." But it is equally difficult for Western governments to keep them out after telling the Soviet bloc for decades to open its frontiers.

More Western countries, however, are closing the door to potential migrants from the East, requiring visas, return tickets and a minimum amount of cash. And Austria, a traditional haven for refugees in cold war days, has sent 4,000 soldiers to seal its borders.

Many argue the real answer is for the West to do more to help the east make a success of capitalism quickly so its people stay home.

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