

# EU-Armenia Relations in the Framework of Visa Facilitation and Liberalization

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## Executive Summary

Obtaining a visa-free regime with the EU is one of the main goals set both in the EU's Eastern Partnership and in the 2019 Programme of the Government of Armenia. The final stage for reaching the visa-liberalization agreement, namely the Visa-Dialogue between the EU and Armenia, has not been launched yet. Armenia and the EU face a high risk of irregular migration from Armenia. The EU also expects a strong political commitment from the Armenian government to carry out democratic reforms, and improve migration management, readmission, document security, human rights and the fight against corruption.

This paper highlights the Armenian authorities' key achievements, such as the EU-Armenian cooperation in sectors of mobility and border management and the ratification of the 2014 Visa-Facilitation and Readmission Agreements. It details the rights and benefits that the Visa-Facilitation Agreement has provided to the citizens of Armenia. The paper highlights the main issues related to the full transition to biometrical passports, data protection, and readmission. The paper is based on statistical data about Schengen visa issuance and refusal rates over time, as well as the number of asylum-seeking applications from Armenian citizens. The paper concludes with series of recommendations that would assist the Armenian government in reaching a visa-free regime with the EU.

## Introduction

The 2014 EU-Armenia Visa Facilitation Agreement is one of the main frameworks of cooperation between the European Union (EU) and Armenia. The process towards greater mobility was launched as part of the 2009 Eastern Partnership programme. Armenia and the EU signed a Mobility Partnership in 2011 and the EU-Armenia Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements in 2012 and 2013. If and when Armenia and the EU launch a visa dialogue on visa liberalization, it will pave the way to a visa-free regime with the EU for Armenian citizens. Visa liberalization is highlighted in the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which has been provisionally applied since June 2018, and its importance has been repeatedly highlighted by the Armenian government. At the same time, there are certain issues, especially the risk of an increase in irregular migration from Armenia if the visa barrier is lifted, which slow down the process. Additionally, visa liberalization with the EU requires numerous improvements in the areas of border control, migration management, readmission, document security, human rights' protections and the fight against corruption and organised crime. In order to achieve visa liberalization, Armenia will have to demonstrate strong political will for the necessary reforms and further improve cooperation in the framework of the EU-Armenia Readmission Agreement.

This paper highlights the main developments related to people-to-people cooperation between the EU and Armenia. It consists of four parts. The first part is about the main developments in the areas of visa facilitation and the Mobility Partnership and about the steps undertaken for the final visa liberalization stage. The second section provides a statistical analysis of requested and issued Schengen visas for Armenian nationals. It also reflects on the lessons learned from Georgia—a country that has benefited from a visa-free regime since March 2017. Section three is about the implementation of the Visa Facilitation Agreement by Armenia. Section four includes information about Armenia and EU cooperation under the Readmission Agreement. The paper concludes with recommendations. The recommendations are presented thematically for the Armenian government, civil society organizations and the EU.

# Trends in EU-Armenia Relations in the Framework of Visa Facilitation

## The EU- Armenia Mobility Partnership and Visa Facilitation

The key step towards enhanced cooperation in the area of mobility was the Joint Declaration on a Mobility Partnership, signed between the European Union and Armenia in Luxembourg on 27 October 2011.<sup>1</sup> In this document, the parties confirmed their commitment to facilitate the movement of persons between Armenia and the European Union, while working to ensure better management of migration flows, including preventing and reducing irregular immigration.

Various projects have been undertaken to improve border management in Armenia. From 2012-2016, the EU has implemented a three-million-euro project called “Strengthening Armenia’s Migration Management Capacities, with Special Focus on Reintegration Activities in the Framework of the EU-Armenia Mobility Partnership.” The aim of the project was to increase the capacities of the competent authorities and civil society organizations in Armenia to actively support return and reintegration as well as address the challenges posed by irregular migration.<sup>2</sup> In 2017 the “iMigrantArmenia.EU” project was launched to assist Armenians working abroad who are interested in investing and establishing businesses in Armenia.<sup>3</sup>

Following the Mobility Partnership Declaration, talks on Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements with the EU were launched in Yerevan in February 2012. The Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas entered into force on 1 January 2014. Visa liberalization as a long-term goal was mentioned for the first time in the 2009 Eastern Partnership programme. This programme also envisaged Association Agreements (AA) together with the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA) between the EU and the six Eastern Partner countries. These two bilateral agreements were intended to serve as the main legal basis of cooperation. The Association Agreements were to structure and advance political dialogue in the spheres of foreign and security affairs, justice and domestic affairs, as well as economic and sectoral cooperation, while the DCFTAs offered deeper economic cooperation and harmonization of legislation with the EU’s *acquis communautaire*.

However, despite long and active negotiations with the EU and extensive effort, Armenia discontinued the Association Agreement talks with the EU and started the process of accession to the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). On 3 September 2013, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan made an official visit to Moscow and announced the decision of Armenia to join the Russia-led Customs Union. Such a sudden refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU was a clear indicator of pressure from the Russian side and

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<sup>1</sup> Council of the European Union. 2011. *Joint Declaration on a Mobility Partnership between the European Union and Armenia*. [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/jha/125698.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/jha/125698.pdf) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>2</sup> EEAS Homepage. 2016. *Strengthening Armenia’s Migration Management Capacities, with Special Focus on Reintegration Activities in the Framework of the EU-Armenia Mobility Partnership*. [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/11239/strengthening-armenias-migration-management-capacities-with-special-focus-on-reintegration-activities-in-the-framework-of-the-eu-armenia-mobility-partnership\\_sr](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/11239/strengthening-armenias-migration-management-capacities-with-special-focus-on-reintegration-activities-in-the-framework-of-the-eu-armenia-mobility-partnership_sr) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>3</sup> EEAS Homepage. 2016. *Strengthening Current and Future Employment and Self-Employment Programmes Through Sustainable Value Chain*. [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/armenia/39534/imigrantarmeniaeu-strengthening-current-and-future-employment-and-self-employment-programmes\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/armenia/39534/imigrantarmeniaeu-strengthening-current-and-future-employment-and-self-employment-programmes_en) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

showed Armenia's dependence on Russia. On 2 January 2015, Armenia joined the Eurasian Economic Union and became a full member of the EEU next to Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia.<sup>4</sup>

But although Armenia refused to sign the AA in 2013, later a new Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was drafted with the EU and it was signed on 21 March 2017. This time the Armenian government remained committed to the new agreement. On 11 April 2018 the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia unanimously ratified the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the European Union.<sup>5</sup> The agreement has been provisionally applied since 1 June 2018. CEPA includes a strong commitment to democratic reforms, such as developing effectiveness of democratic institutions, respect for human rights, independent judiciary, and fighting corruption.

Alongside a strong commitment to cooperation in the political sector, CEPA also gives importance to mobility and the visa liberalization process. Cooperation in this sector is discussed under Title 3 – Justice, Freedom and Security. Article 15 of the Agreement is devoted to the “Movement of persons and readmission” and includes the commitment to promote the mobility of citizens through the Visa Facilitation Agreement and to fight irregular migration by implementing the Readmission Agreement. It also considers holding a visa liberalization dialogue with Armenia in the future, provided that well-managed mobility is in place beforehand.<sup>6</sup> The document also envisages cooperation in the field of fighting against organized crime and terrorism.

## **Stalemate of Launching a Visa Liberalization Dialogue with Armenia**

In February 2019, the Armenian government approved the new government programme, which states entering into a visa-free regime with the EU as an important goal.<sup>7</sup>

On 30 April 2019, the Standing Committee on European Integration of the Parliament of Armenia hosted Carel Hofstra, the Team Leader of Yerevan Office of the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMDP). During the meeting. The representatives of the ICMDP noted that Armenia had made significant progress in issuing biometric passports, improving border control and modernising the northern border crossing checkpoints of the country between Armenia and Georgia.<sup>8</sup> The northern border between Armenia and Georgia includes three checkpoints- Bagratashen, Bavra and Gogavan, and was modernised thanks to support from the EU. From 2012-2016, in the framework of the project “Modernisation of Bagratashen, Bavra, and Gogavan Border Crossing Points,” the EU supported Armenia by improving border management and control, as well as enhancing inter-agency cooperation efficiency and technical capacity for information exchange.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Eurasian Economic Commission. 2015. *Armenia acceded to the Eurasian Economic Union*. <http://www.eurasiancommission.org/en/nae/news/Pages/02-01-2015-1.aspx> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>5</sup> MFA of RA. 2018. National Assembly of Armenia Ratified Armenia-EU New Framework Agreement. <https://www.mfa.am/hy/press-releases/2018/04/11/dfm-na-cepa/8126> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Council of the European Union. 2017. *EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement*. [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu-armenia\\_comprehensive\\_and\\_enhanced\\_partnership\\_agreement\\_cepa.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu-armenia_comprehensive_and_enhanced_partnership_agreement_cepa.pdf) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Government of Armenia. 2019. *Government Programme of RA*. <https://www.gov.am/files/docs/3133.pdf> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Parliament of Armenia. 2019. *Visa-Liberalisation for Citizens of Armenia with EU Discussed*. [http://www.parliament.am/news.php?cat\\_id=2&NewsID=11489&year=2019&month=04&day=30&lang=eng](http://www.parliament.am/news.php?cat_id=2&NewsID=11489&year=2019&month=04&day=30&lang=eng) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>9</sup> EEAS Homepage. 2016. *Modernisation of Bagratashen, Bavra, and Gogavan Border Crossing Points*. [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/armenia\\_en/11233/Modernisation%20of%20Bagratashen,%20Bavra,%20and%20Gogavan%20Border%20Crossing%20Points%20\(MBBG\)](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/armenia_en/11233/Modernisation%20of%20Bagratashen,%20Bavra,%20and%20Gogavan%20Border%20Crossing%20Points%20(MBBG)) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

The project included both assistance for effective performance of border checks, and upgrading of the three checkpoints between Armenia and Georgia, the roads and associated infrastructure.<sup>10</sup>

Visa-liberalization as a priority was also mentioned in an interview on 15 May 2019 by Minister of Foreign Affairs Zohrab Mnatsakanyan during a visit to Brussels. At the same time, after stating that the EU had mentioned the risk of an abuse of a liberalized travel regime, Mnatsakanyan stressed that Armenia's relevant departments on migration are in contact with relevant European experts to evaluate the level of development of Armenia's capabilities. He noted that Armenia already meets the conditions for visa liberalization and can counter potential risks of visa-free travel, which means the country is ready to start the visa liberalization dialogue.<sup>11</sup>

However, despite the reiteration of the importance of a visa-liberalization process, it seems that the EU expects stronger action and commitment from Armenia, which would include addressing the issue of irregular migration from Armenia. As a result of these and other reforms, Armenia should prove its ability to modernize the country and to create a solid foundation based on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, approximating governance to the standards of the European Union.

The Partnership Implementation Report issued on 20 May 2019 by the European Commission mentions several positive steps taken by Armenia in the field of mobility, as well as the areas that require improvement.<sup>12</sup> The Implementation Report acknowledged the largely satisfactory implementation of the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements, as well as Armenia's desire to launch the EU-Armenia visa liberalization process. At the same time, the European Commission mentioned the need to improve the low rate of returns of 27.2% in 2017 (this is the rate of actual returns in relation to return orders issued by EU member states). The Commission also noted the increase in the issuance of multiple entry visas. As the Commission wrote, the visa refusal rate decreased slightly from 12.8% in 2017 to 11.8% in 2018. It explained that the most common reasons for refusal were insufficient documentation about the reasons for travel by the applicants and difficulties proving intention to return after the trip.<sup>13</sup>

Along with the need to enhance cooperation in the framework of the Readmission Agreement, Armenia also needs to adopt an anti-discrimination law and ratify and implement the Istanbul Convention against violence against women. Both are requirements for improving democratic trends in Armenia and for gaining a visa-free travel regime with the EU. However, the parliamentary hearing for the Istanbul Convention have been postponed from September 2019 to the year of 2020. The need for the anti-discrimination law has not been discussed by the Armenian government.

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<sup>10</sup> European Commission. 2012. *Modernisation of Bagratashen, Bavra, and Gogavan Border Crossing Points*. [https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/blending/modernisation-bagratashen-bavra-and-gogavan-border-crossing-points-mbbg\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/blending/modernisation-bagratashen-bavra-and-gogavan-border-crossing-points-mbbg_en) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>11</sup> News.am. 2019. "Armenia's Mnatsakanyan: Visa Liberalization with EU is Very Fundamental Matter to Us." May 15, 2019. <https://news.am/eng/news/512683.html> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>12</sup> European Commission. 2019. Partnership Implementation Report on Armenia. [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/partnership\\_implementation\\_report\\_armenia.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/partnership_implementation_report_armenia.pdf) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid



# Schengen Visa Applications in Armenia: Explaining Migration Flows

## The EU-Armenia Visa Facilitation Agreement

The EU-Armenia Visa Facilitation Agreement of 2013 has provided important benefits for Armenian citizens in relation to the visa application process and the visa fee as well as the required documentation. According to Article 6 of the Agreement, all Armenian citizens benefit from a lower visa fee of 35 Euro instead of 60 Euro, and, as stated in Article 7, the decision to issue a visa is taken within 10 days (in certain cases, it can be prolonged to 30 days). Furthermore, a significant number of people, including from official delegations, academics, civil society representatives, students, participants in sport activities, pensioners and many others are exempted of paying the visa fee (Article 6). Additionally, many categories of people, from businesspeople, journalists and civil society representatives to relatives of Armenians living in the EU, benefit from standardized and less demanding document requirements (see Article 4.)<sup>14</sup>

The Visa Facilitation Agreement has also provided significant advantages in terms of visa duration. According to the Article 5, paragraph 2, multiple-entry visas shall be issued with a one-year validity to persons participating in scientific and cultural events, students, journalists, civil society representatives, persons who need to visit Europe regularly for medical reasons, businesspeople and participants in international sports events, provided that during the previous year they had obtained at least one visa and had not violated its terms. Visa applicants can also be issued multiple-entry visas with a validity between two and five years if they had used a one-year multiple-entry visa during the previous two years in accordance with the laws on entry and stay of the visited state.<sup>15</sup> In justified cases of urgency, the consulate may allow applicants to lodge their applications either without appointment, or an appointment shall be given immediately.

Concerning the application of the Agreement on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas, countries can be divided into four categories:

1. EU member states that are full participants in the Schengen agreements. They are legally obliged to fully implement the agreement. This is Austria, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Greece, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Finland, and France.
2. Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland are full participants in Schengen, but they are neither EU Member States nor parties to the Visa Facilitation Agreement. These countries need to sign separate visa facilitation agreements with Armenia with conditions similar to those of the EU-Armenia agreement. Armenia and Norway signed such agreement in 2015.<sup>16</sup> A Separate Visa Facilitation Agreement between Armenia and

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<sup>14</sup> Official Journal of the EU. 2013. *Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas*. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22013A1031\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22013A1031(01)&from=EN) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>15</sup> EUR-Lex. 2013. *Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas*. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22013A1031\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22013A1031(01)&from=EN) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>16</sup> ArmenPress. 2015. "Armenia and Norway to Sign Agreement on facilitation of Visa Issuing Procedure". November 26, 2015. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/827357/armenia-and-norway-to-sign-agreement-on-facilitation-of-visa-issuing-procedure.html> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

Switzerland came into force in 2016.<sup>17</sup> The governments of Iceland and Lichtenstein and of Armenia still need to conclude such bilateral agreements.

3. EU MS that are not full Schengen members and with which bilateral agreements need to be concluded (the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark). On 14 March 2018, Foreign Affairs Ministers of Armenia and Denmark signed a visa facilitation agreement in Copenhagen.<sup>18</sup>
4. EU member states that are on the way to become full members of the Schengen agreements. They may issue only national visas, but the visas for the Schengen area are valid in their territories (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, and Romania).

Citizens of Armenia can apply for a Schengen visa at consulates accredited in Armenia. Embassies can also delegate the right to accept citizens' visa applications to visa centres. There are currently three unified visa application centres in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, accepting visa applications for the Schengen countries. As of May 2015, a visa centre run by the company VFS Global opened in Yerevan and accepts visa applications for Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Spain, Denmark, Hungary, and Greece.<sup>19,20</sup> In October 2015, the Italian Embassy in Armenia also started to cooperate with a visa centre, namely the company TLS Contact in Yerevan, which also receives applications for Malta and Finland, as Italy issues visas on behalf of these two countries. Since April 2018, applications for a Schengen visa for Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Austria, and Sweden have been accepted by a separate service-provider company called VisaMetric, which cooperates with the German Embassy.<sup>21</sup>

Visa centres were created in order to facilitate the visa issuance process to accommodate a larger numbers of applications than the consulates have the capacity to process. At the same time, it should be noted that the visa centres operate only in the capital of Armenia, in Yerevan. But it is quite difficult to reach Yerevan from other major cities such as Gyumri (northern Armenia), Vanadzor (north-east Armenia) or Kapan (southern Armenia). Additionally, applicants often complain about the low quality of the service provided by the visa Centres, such as limited technical capacity and poor communication skills. Visa centres charge an additional fee per application for services provided, on average around 20-22 euro.

However, citizens of Armenia often lack information about of the provisions of the visa code and their rights defined by the Visa Facilitation Agreement. Thus, many Armenian citizens do not know about the visa fee waiver. Unfortunately, there are cases when consulates and visa centres charge a visa fee even though the applicant is eligible for the visa fee waiver.

## Updates on Border Management from the EU Side

In November 2017, the EU adopted a regulation establishing a new Entry-Exit System (EES), which will register electronically the time and place of entry/exit of third-country nationals. The system is

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<sup>17</sup> Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA. 2018. *Bilateral Relations Switzerland-Armenia*. <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/home/representations-and-travel-advice/armenia/switzerland-armenia.html> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>18</sup> ArmenPress. 2019. "Foreign Affairs Ministers of Armenia and Denmark sign the Agreement on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas". 14 March 2018.

<https://armenpress.am/arm/news/926119/hh-ev-daniayi-ag-nakhararnery-storagrel-en-vizaneri-tramadrummy.html> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Webpage of the VFS Global. <http://www.vfsglobal.com/lithuania/armenia/> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>20</sup> Visa applications can be submitted for Latvia, Estonia, Spain, Denmark, Hungary, as the Embassy of Lithuania issuance visa on behalf of these countries in Armenia.

<sup>21</sup> Webpage of the VisaMetric: <https://www.visametric.com/iran/Germany/en/p/about-visametric> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).



planned to be operational from 2020.<sup>22</sup> There will be no more manual stamps in passports. Rather, each traveller will be electronically registered using biometric data. The self-service systems and e-gates will be introduced, and third country national travellers will have their data verified, their picture or fingerprint taken and a set of questions asked. Visa-required travellers would also be able to see the maximum length of their authorised stay. By the time the traveller is guided towards a border control lane, all this information would have reached the border guard, who may ask additional questions before granting the passenger access to the Schengen area.<sup>23</sup> The automation of the preparatory steps is expected to reduce the workload of border guards and reduce the long queues.

The EU has three centralized information systems: the Schengen Information System (SIS), the Visa Information System (VIS) and Eurodac. The VIS is a unified and centralized biometric database of persons who have applied for a visa at least once and is used to exchange information on visa applications and decisions. Eurodac is a database in which EU member states are required to enter the fingerprint data of irregular migrants and asylum-seekers to record where they entered the EU, and thus determine the member states responsible for examining their asylum application if they apply for protection. All consulates of the Schengen states in Armenia joined the Visa Information System (VIS) on 23 June 2015. The biometric data and the information provided for the Schengen visa application is registered in the centralized VIS database.<sup>24</sup>

## Schengen Visa Applications in Armenia: Statistical Data and Analysis

Globally, Schengen consulates received a total of over 16 million visa applications in 2018.<sup>25</sup> The number of Schengen visa applications by Armenian citizens has steadily increased since 2012.

Figure 1 presents the number of applications at Schengen consulates in Armenia during 2012-2018.<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that most consulates in Armenia also issue visas on behalf of other Schengen countries:

- The German embassy in Yerevan issues visas also on behalf of Austria, Belgium, Luxemburg, Netherlands and Sweden.
- Poland issues visas on behalf of Slovenia, Slovakia and Switzerland.
- The consulate of Lithuania in Armenia issues visas also for Latvia, Estonia, Denmark, Spain and Hungary.
- The Italian Embassy in Armenia issues visas on behalf of Italy, Malta and Finland.
- France issues visa on behalf of Norway.

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<sup>22</sup> EUR-Lex. 2017. *Regulation (EU) 2017/2226 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 November 2017 establishing an Entry/Exit System (EES)*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32017R2226> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

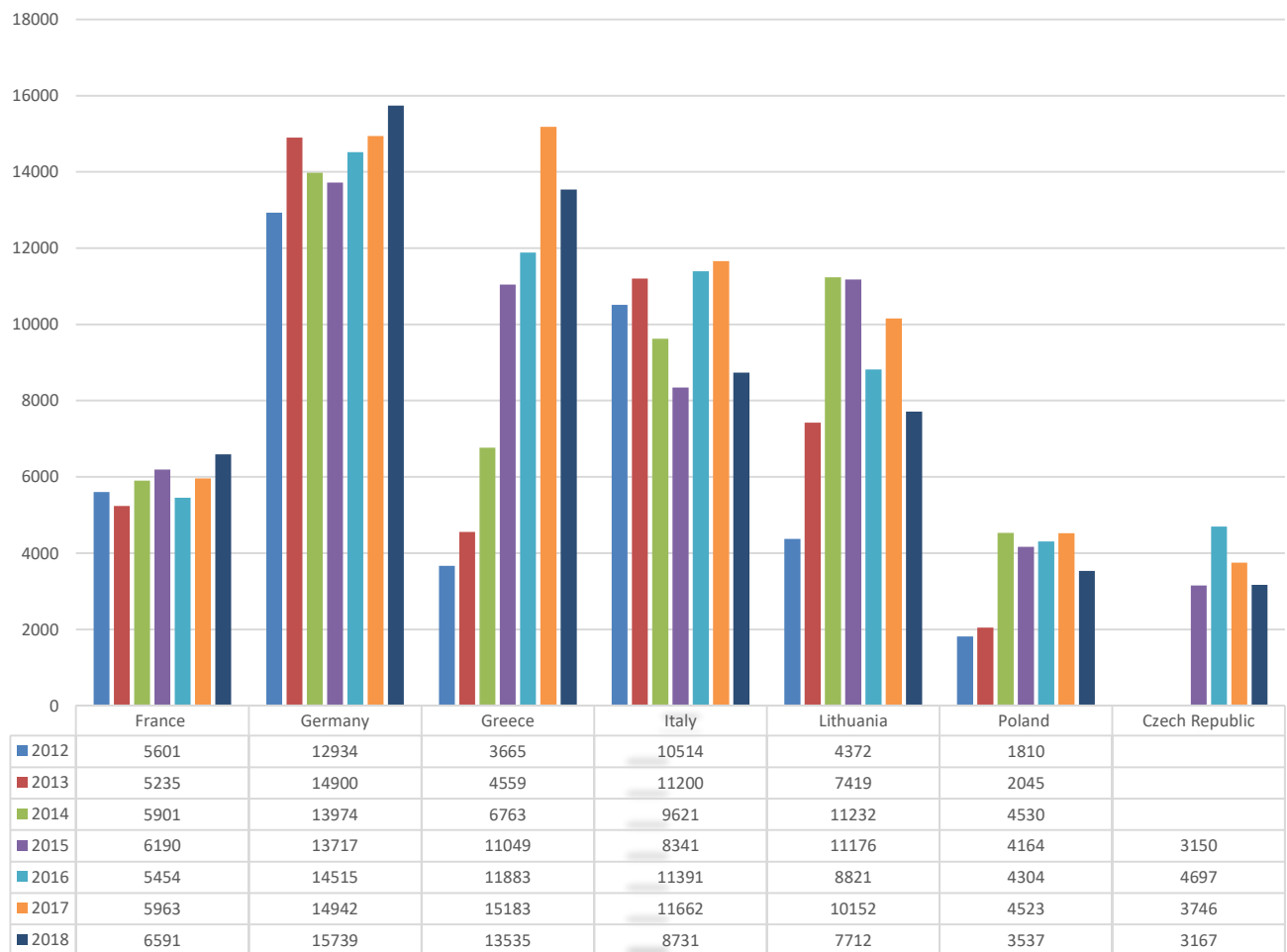
<sup>23</sup> European Parliament. 2018. *Smart Borders: EU Entry/Exit System*. [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/586614/EPRS\\_BRI\(2016\)586614\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/586614/EPRS_BRI(2016)586614_EN.pdf) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>24</sup> EU Newsletter. 2015. *Fingerprints and digital photo for a Schengen visa*. <http://eunewsletter.am/fingerprints-and-digital-photos-for-schengen-visas-2/> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>25</sup> Schengen Visa Info. 2019. *Statistics Reveal Schengen Consulates Received Over 16 Million Applications in 2018*. <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/statistics-reveal-schengen-consulates-received-over-16-million-applications-in-2018/> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Czech Republic introduced consular service in Armenia starting from 2015, thus in Figure 1, under the Czech Republic no numbers are indicated for the years preceding that year.

**Figure 1: Uniform visas applied for at Schengen Consulates in Armenia 2012-2018<sup>27</sup>**



The only EU and Schengen countries with a consular representation in Armenia are France, Italy, Lithuania, Greece, Poland, Czech Republic and Germany.<sup>28</sup> Figure 1 shows that the number of applications has continued to grow significantly in virtually all the consulates. The largest increases were recorded by the Greek Consulate in Armenia (from 3,665 to 12,535), the Polish Consulate (from 1,810 to 3,537) and the Lithuanian Consulate (from 4,372 to 7,712).<sup>29</sup>

Figure 2 illustrates the number of applications for Schengen C visas in Armenia, as well as the number of refusals (C category stands for a short-term visa which allows the holder to reside in a Schengen country for a certain period of time and can be obtained in a form of single-entry visa, double-entry visa or multiple-entry visa. C category multiple-entry visa holders can stay in the Schengen area for 90 days within a 180-day period). The total number of visa applications grew every year from 2012 on (increasing from 38,896 in 2012 to 59,012 in 2018). The number of times Armenian citizens visited the Schengen area grew considerably. The green line in the Figure 2 shows the rate of refusal of visas, which fluctuated between 10% and 12.8% in the time period of 2012-2018.

<sup>27</sup> The numbers are collected from the EU's official statistical data. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/visa-policy\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/visa-policy_en) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>28</sup> Bulgaria and Romania have their consulates accredited to Armenia, but are not full members of the Schengen agreements yet, and issue only their national visas.

<sup>29</sup> The Czech Consulate started operating in Armenia in 2015; hence, all the figures contain only data for 2015-2018.

**Figure 2.** The number of visas applied for and refusal rates in Armenia<sup>30</sup>



There has been a slight increase in refusal rates during the last three years. According to off-the-record meetings with EU MS diplomats accredited in Armenia, the reasons for visa refusals are mostly missing documents in the visa applications, as well as the lack of reliable proof of purpose of travel. Often the applicants also do not provide documentation regarding accommodations, as well as bank statements indicating that they have a sufficient amount of money in their account to allow them to finance their trip and return back home. As it was mentioned, many visas are also refused because applicants struggle to prove that they will return to Armenia before the visa expiry date.

### EaP Countries Benefiting Visa-Free Travel: Lessons Learned from Georgia

Among the six Eastern Partnership countries, three countries have already achieved visa-free travel with the EU. Moldova was the first post-Soviet republic to receive a visa-free travel regime in April 2014, followed by Georgia in March 2017 and Ukraine in June 2017.<sup>31</sup> During the first 14 months after the visa requirement for Georgians was lifted on 28 March 2017, 255,400 citizens of Georgia travelled to Schengen zone countries.<sup>32</sup> As of December 2018, two million Ukrainian nationals had travelled visa-free to the EU until December 2018.<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that the visa-free regime with these countries is subject to certain restrictions and requirements: citizens must have a biometric

<sup>30</sup> The numbers are collected from the EU's official statistical data. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/visa-policy\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/visa-policy_en) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>31</sup> European Commission. N.d. *Visa Liberalization with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia*. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/international-affairs/eastern-partnership/visa-liberalisation-moldova-ukraine-and-georgia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/international-affairs/eastern-partnership/visa-liberalisation-moldova-ukraine-and-georgia_en) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

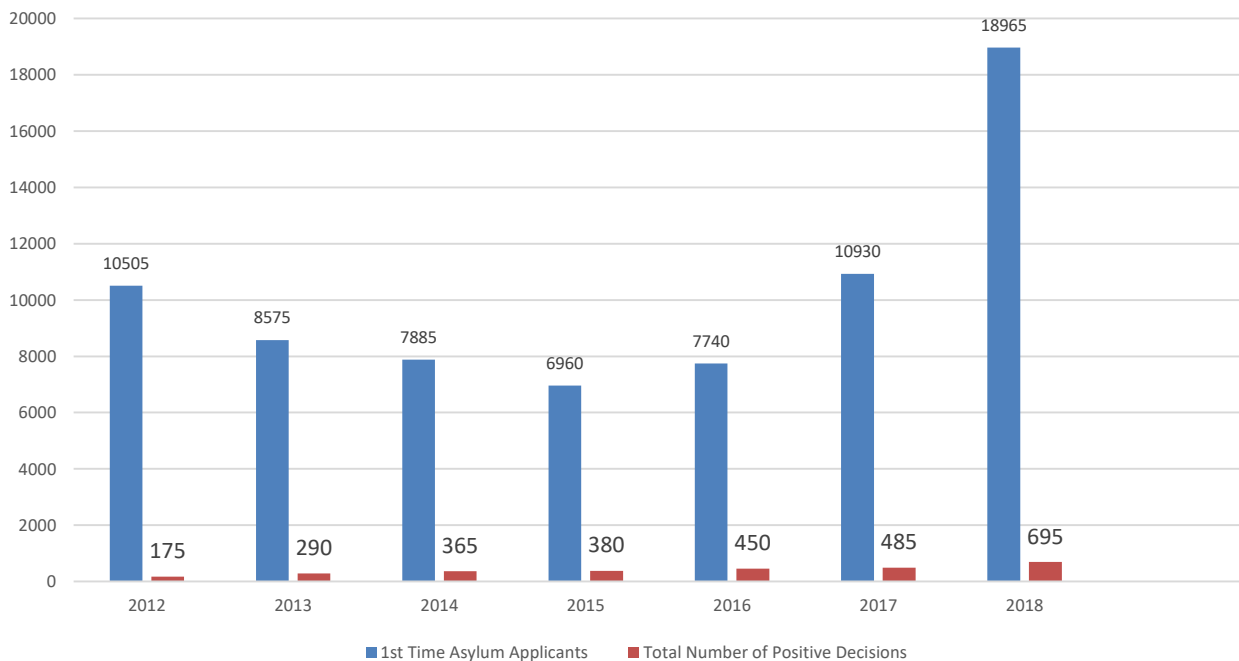
<sup>32</sup> News.am. 2018. "Georgian Citizens Traveled to Europe Without a Visa About 358,000 Times". June 29, 2018. <https://news.am/arm/news/464103.html> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>33</sup> Government of Ukraine. 2019. *Two Million Ukrainians Benefitted From Visa-Free Travel to the EU Countries*. <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/2-miljoni-ukrayinciv-skoristalis-ya-bezvizom-pryamuyuchi-do-krayin-yes>. (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

passport, prove the existence of a return ticket and accommodation as well as sufficient funds for the trip and return.

In parallel to the benefits of the visa-free regime, such as freedom of movement, there is also a risk of irregular migration (continued stay after the authorized period). In response to concerns over the abuse of the visa-free regime, in 2013 the EU Council adopted a suspension mechanism (Regulation No 1289/2013) which outlines a procedure under which EU member states can raise problems and demand the suspension of the regime. The regulations were further amended in 2018. Suspensions are possible in cases of a sudden and substantial increase in unfounded asylum claims, in the number of irregularly residing persons, in entry refusals, or if there is a lack of cooperation on readmission or an increased risk or imminent threat to the public policy or internal security of member states, in particular a substantial increase in serious criminal offences (see Regulation No 2018/1806, provision 22).<sup>34</sup> The European Commission can first suspend the visa-free regime for nine months and extend the suspension if a qualified majority of member states agree. During the suspension, the Commission and the concerned country should seek a solution to the situation.

**Figure 3.** Number of first-time asylum claims by citizens of Georgia and number of total positive decisions in EU MS and in Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and Liechtenstein<sup>35</sup>



As indicated in the Figure 3, in the case of Georgia there has been an increase in asylum applications since the visa-free regime was introduced. The number grew from 7,740 in 2016 to 10,930 in 2017 when visa-free travel began in March. In 2018 this number almost doubled compared to 2017, reaching 18,965 asylum applications. Most of the claims are rejected as the claimants have no reason to fear for their lives and freedoms in Georgia.

<sup>34</sup> EUR-Lex. 2018. Regulation No 2018/1806 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018R1806&from=EN> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>35</sup> The data are collected from the Eurostat statistical office of the European Union. [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_asyappctza&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctza&lang=en) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

There is a risk of an increase in unfounded asylum claims by Armenians or in continued, irregular stays after the expiry of the permitted three-month period as well if a visa-free regime is granted to the country. The review and analysis of data on countries granted a visa-free regime, such as Georgia, as well as their experience and the measures they took to counter such negative effects is important for Armenia. In fact, Armenia could already start to address the issue of unfounded asylum claims and irregular migration by Armenian citizens to show its commitment to achieving visa liberalisation and minimising potential risks.

## **Implementing Visa Facilitation Agreement Requirements: Introduction of Biometric Passports**

As part of the visa facilitation process, Armenia introduced two new identity documents in July 2012. One is an ID card with electronic signature, which can be used within the country, and the other a biometric passport with an electronic chip to be used for traveling abroad. The biometric passport includes biometric data, i.e. the passport holder's image and fingerprints, and thus it is much easier to identify the person at border checkpoints. The biometric passport costs 25,000 AMD (about 50 euro), and the passport and ID card together cost 28,000 AMD (53 euro). Both documents are in line with the standards of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO).

At the same time, it should be noted that the government of Armenia has frequently postponed the process of transitioning to only biometric passports. According to a decision of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia, in January 2014 citizens who receive a new passport were given biometric documents. However, this later changed, and currently both the traditional and biometric types of passports are functional and Armenian citizens can choose which type to get. Armenians can continue travelling with their old passports.

In August, 2016 Mnatzakan Bichakhchyan, the head of the Passports and Visas Department of the Police, said in an interview that both types (traditional and biometric passports) were legal in Armenia. Armenia did not demand the replacement of the old passports since some people refused to provide fingerprints for biometric passports based on religious beliefs. So Armenia allowed its citizens to use the old passports (designated by Decree 821 dated 25 December 1998) until 1 January 2019.<sup>36</sup> As this date came closer, a similar discussion started in August 2018 when the Ministry of Justice announced a public discussion of amendments in the Law on Identification Cards and the Law on the Passport of the Citizen of the Republic of Armenia. On 7 September 2018, the Parliament of Armenia amended the law to allow the issuing of traditional passports until 1 January 2021. The postponement of ending the validity of the old passports has been explained with the need to organise a new tender to choose the company that will produce the biometric passports and identification cards.<sup>37</sup>

There are no provisions in the visa facilitation agreement with the EU concerning biometric passports, thus holding a biometric passport is not mandatory to be able to benefit from visa facilitation. Nevertheless, for visa liberalization the issuance of biometric passports will be mandatory since only holders of biometric passports will be able to travel without a visa.

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<sup>36</sup> Zakaryan, A. 2016. "Biometric Passports are no Longer Required, Old-Type Passport Will be Issued to Citizens". August 3, 2016. <https://www.armtimes.com/hy/article/90836> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>37</sup> IravabanNet. 2018. "Old-specimen Passports will be Issued up to 1 January 2021". August 24, 2018. <https://iravaban.net/199667.html> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

In addition to the introduction of biometric passports, the issue of data protection is also important as EU-standard data protection will be a requirement for visa liberalisation. However, the 2015 Law of the Republic of Armenia on Protection of Personal Data requires amendments, as it is too generous concerning the transfer of personal data to third parties and access to data without the consent of the person concerned (Article 26). Personal data can be transferred without the subject's consent if it is prescribed by law or an interstate agreement. The Border Control Department of the Russian Federal Security Service has access to the data of the Border Control Service of Armenia regarding the travel of persons to and from Armenia. This means that the Russian Federation can see who crosses the Armenian border, the direction of the travel, means of transportation and the travel company, as well as the personal IDs of the travellers.<sup>38</sup> As already mentioned, data protection is one of the important requirements by the EU that Armenia needs to ensure in order to reach the goal of visa liberalization.

Furthermore, the agency dealing with the protection of personal data is not independent. The institution, Agency for Protection of Personal Data of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Armenia, is a state institution. According to the statute of the agency, one of its main aims is the implementation of the Law of the Republic of Armenia on Protection of Personal Data.<sup>39</sup> However, as mentioned above, the law allows third countries to access personal data. Additionally, the fact that the agency is a state institution also underscores the problems with data protection in Armenia.

## Implementing the EU-Armenia Readmission Agreement: Return and Reintegration

### Asylum-Seeking Applications from Armenia

The launch of the visa liberalisation dialogue with Armenia will, among other key issues, depend largely on Armenia's readiness to facilitate the return of Armenian citizens who reside in the EU MS with irregular status. In this context, readmission agreements are an effective tool as they enable the identification of persons who do not meet or no longer meet the conditions of entry into or stay/residence in the territory of the inquiring state.<sup>40</sup> Under the EU-Armenia readmission agreement, Armenia undertakes to readmit its own citizens, as well as third-country citizens and stateless persons who have reached an EU member state by transiting Armenia. Prior to the 2013 EU-Armenia Readmission Agreement, Armenia signed readmission agreements with the EU individual states. Readmission agreements exist with Latvia, Denmark, Lithuania, Germany, Bulgaria, Sweden, Czech Republic, Denmark, as well as with Switzerland, Norway. In June 2018, a readmission agreement was also signed with the Benelux countries.

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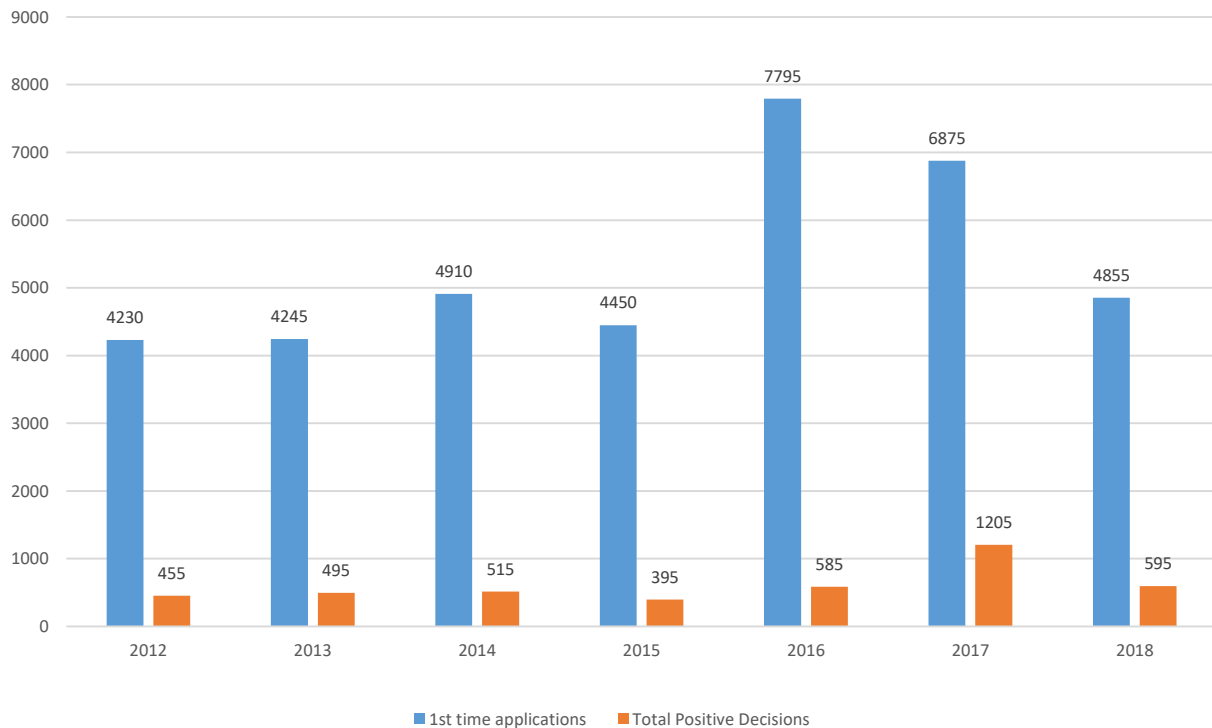
<sup>38</sup> Open Society Foundations, Armenia. n.d. *Personal Data Protection Issues in Armenia and Georgia*. [http://www.osf.am/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Article-5-RT-Personal-data\\_eng.pdf](http://www.osf.am/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Article-5-RT-Personal-data_eng.pdf) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>39</sup> Ministry of Justice of RA. *Statute of Agency for Protection of Personal Data of the Ministry of Justice*. <http://www.justice.am/en/structures/view/structure/32> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>40</sup> EUR-Lex. 2013. *Agreement on the Readmission of Persons Residing without Authorization between the EU and Armenia*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A22013A1031%2802%29> (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).



**Figure 4.** Number of first time asylum applicants and the number of total positive decision from Armenia in the EU MS and in Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and Liechtenstein <sup>41</sup>



In view of the fact that Armenian citizens wishing to reside, work, receive medical services, or otherwise settle in the EU often use or abuse the EU's asylum system, it can be concluded that the return/readmission trend will not decline. Figure 4 shows the number of first-time asylum applicants by the Armenian citizens in the EU MS and in Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and Liechtenstein. It also shows the total number of positive decisions. The numbers of first-time asylum applications between 2012 and 2015 fluctuated from 4000 to 5000. The number of asylum applicants was especially high in 2016 (7795). It slightly decreased to 6875 in 2017 and reached to 4855 in 2018.

Rejected asylum seekers have the right to appeal a negative first-instance decision in court. If they don't, or if the court confirms the negative decision, they receive a return order under which they have to leave the EU, usually within four weeks (depending on the member state and the circumstances of their claim). If they leave voluntarily, they receive financial support. Otherwise they risk being deported against their will.

The graph shows a relatively low rate of positive decisions, illustrating that a large number of Armenians abuse the EU asylum system by benefiting from the services that asylum seekers are entitled to (accommodation, medical care, school for children, food, cash benefits). But very few Armenians receive asylum status. It should be noted that such a high number of asylum applications is connected with the difficult economic and political conditions in Armenia. The number of applicants increased in the years of 2016 and 2017, a period when freedoms in the country gradually decreased. Journalists, civil society members and peaceful protestors were often attacked during demonstrations against economic and political issues in the country. In 2018 the number of first-

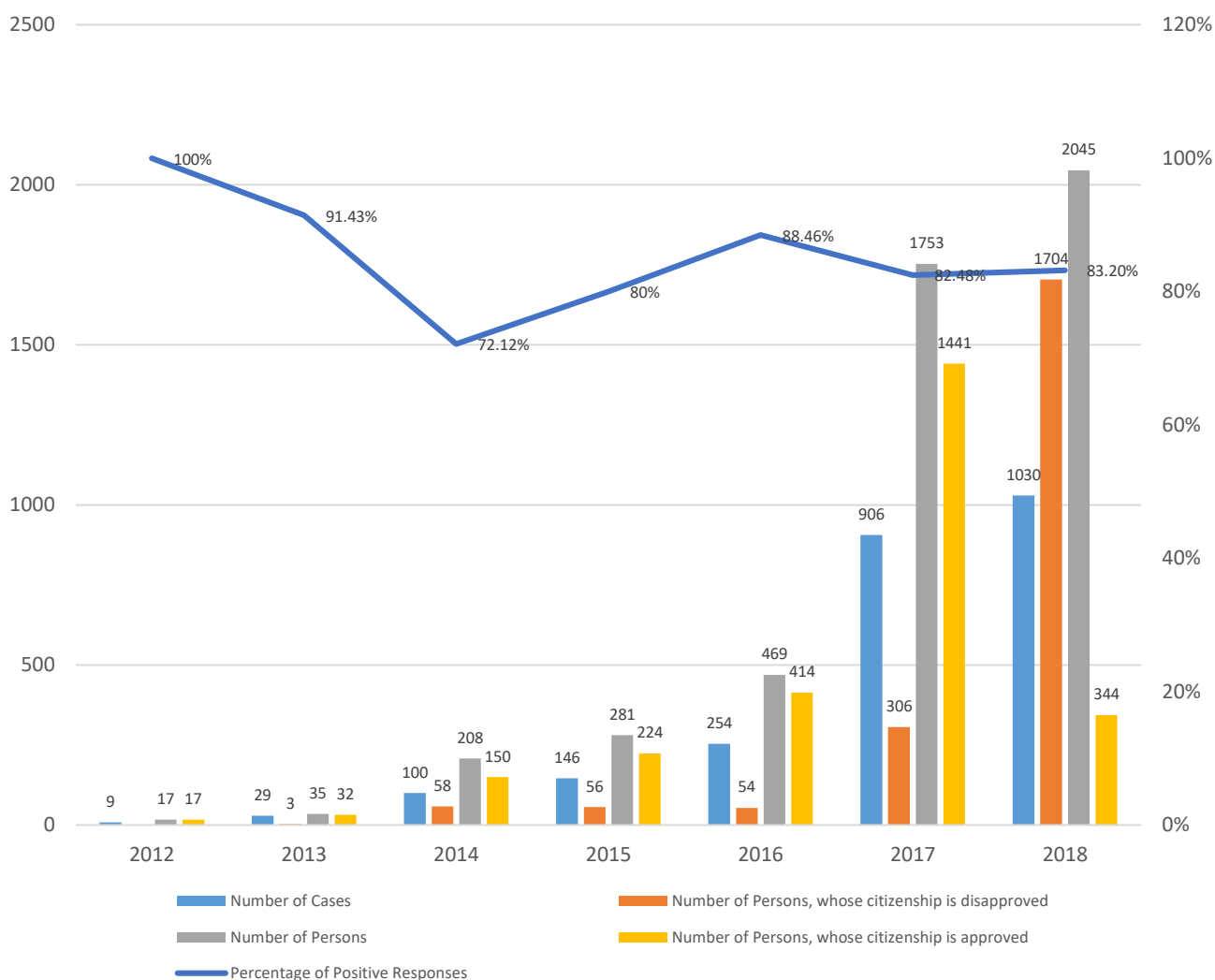
<sup>41</sup> The data are collected from the Eurostat statistical office of the European Union: [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_asyappctza&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctza&lang=en) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

time asylum applicants from Armenia decreased. This coincides with political changes in the country, specifically the 2018 Velvet Revolution. The change in power gave Armenians new hope and expectations.

### Readmission Requests: Statistics for 2018

According to information provided by the Armenian Migration Service, the total number of readmission requests received from EU countries has grown considerably in recent years. In 2015, a total of 146 requests were received from EU Member States, compared to 989 in 2018.

**Figure 5:** The number of readmission requests received from 2012-2018<sup>42</sup>



In 2014, only two Member States of the EU (Sweden and Poland) sent readmission requests, compared to eight requesting Member States in 2018. About 80 percent of the responses confirmed the fact that the individual in question had Armenian citizenship. In the last two years, Germany has topped the list of countries sending readmission requests: in 2017, Germany sent 499 requests (concerning 1,022 persons), compared to 681 requests in 2018 (concerning 1,385 persons).

Table 1 details the numbers of the requests submitted according to country and the number of persons with confirmed citizenship. When applying for asylum some citizens of Armenia provide

<sup>42</sup> The data for this graph was provided to ACGRC by the State Migration Service of the Republic of Armenia.

information about their country of origin, others do not declare their citizenship, opting instead to destroy their personal documents. The Armenian government has shown its willingness to cooperate and assist in the identification of Armenian nationals. The numbers underscore the government's readiness to cooperate on readmission.

**Table 1:** Number of readmission requests received, by countries, 2018<sup>43</sup>

Requesting country	Number of persons mentioned in the requests	Number of persons with confirmed citizenship	% of positive responses
<b>EU MS (Total)</b>	1995	1670	83.37%
<b>Austria</b>	182	116	63.74%
<b>Belgium</b>	44	43	93.48%
<b>Bulgaria</b>	3	1	50.00%
<b>Germany</b>	1385	1211	86.50%
<b>Poland</b>	38	30	90.91%
<b>The Netherlands</b>	139	109	77.30%
<b>Sweden</b>	78	50	64.94%
<b>France</b>	126	110	90.16%

**\* The % of positive responses is calculated relative to the sum of the number of persons with confirmed citizenship and the number of persons without confirmed citizenship during the year.**

According to Eurostat data, 1455 persons were returned to Armenia in 2017, compared to 1935 in 2018.<sup>44</sup> At the same time it should be noted that actual returns include both voluntary and forced returns, but many EU MS do not have sufficient system to record voluntary returns. Often a return order is issued in one year, but the return, in particular if it is forced (deportation), takes place the following year. Thus, numbers might differ. In 2017, the Partnership Implementation Report set the return rate at 29%.<sup>45</sup> It grew to 49% in 2018. The increased percent of returned persons is a positive trend that indicates improved cooperation on border management between the EU and Armenia, as well as Armenia's readiness to accept its citizens back. The Partnership Implementation Report also noted that the electronic Readmission Case Management System became operational in early 2019, and will further facilitate to effectively deal with the expected increase in readmission applications in the near future.<sup>46</sup>

The day-by-day increase in the number of readmission requests received under the Armenia-EU Readmission Agreement is due to the tightening of migration policies of EU MS, including countries that received a large increase in migrants in 2015 and 2016, such as Germany, Austria and Sweden. Another reason is connected with the fact that most asylum services prioritise people both from countries with low recognition rates and countries with high recognition rates because these cases are usually easy to decide. Armenians fall in the latter category, so they are often prioritised for this

<sup>43</sup> The data for this table was provided to ACGRC by the State Migration Service of the Republic of Armenia.

<sup>44</sup> Data are from Eurostat statistical office of the EU.

[http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_eirtn&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_eirtn&lang=en) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>45</sup> European Commission. 2019. Partnership Implementation Report on Armenia.

[https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/partnership\\_implementation\\_report\\_armenia.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/partnership_implementation_report_armenia.pdf) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*

reason. But the underlying reason for the low recognition rate is a result of the fact that political persecution and other grounds for asylum are rare in Armenia.

## **Return and Reintegration Programs**

Presently, a number of organizations in Armenia, including the International Organization for Migration, the French Office of Immigration and Integration, the French-Armenian Development Foundation, the Armenian Caritas and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development, are implementing reintegration programs, the beneficiaries of which are migrants referred or compulsorily returned from EU Member States. The reintegration support programmes in Armenia offer the following types of support: information and counselling, referral to the relevant structures, support to social and health needs, professional training and small business grants. Unfortunately, currently there is no available data regarding the number of people who benefited from reintegration programmes and any details regarding such programmes.

An important project “Assistance to Armenian Migrants in the Return and Reintegration Process” was launched in Armenia by the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN) on 8 November 2018.<sup>47</sup> Under the programme, around 400 returnees will receive information, advice and referrals on reintegration and various mechanisms of direct social and economic assistance. The programme will not only provide practical support to returnees, but also help to develop the capacity of the relevant state bodies.

## **The Reintegration Single-Window Service**

On 22 February 2018, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the French-Armenian Development Foundation and the Migration Service under the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Development. The Memorandum is aimed at deepening cooperation between the sides and, through the “single-window” service, to ensure the continuity of support to migrants returning to Armenia, irrespective of whether they return compulsorily or voluntarily. The “single window” or “one stop-shop” principle ensures that the beneficiary can receive all requested services at one place. The service provides returnees the necessary information on reintegration programmes, the organizations that implement them, the types of support offered and the state bodies related to return and reintegration.

During the first nine months of the service, it received applications from 44 returning migrants, which have been referred to reintegration programs, including 38 from Germany, three from France, two from Austria and one from Poland. Only 13 of the 44 migrants had returned voluntarily; the others had been returned compulsorily.<sup>48</sup> In total, need-specific counselling and referral services were provided to 72 citizens. They were referred to not only specific programmes for receiving reintegration support, but also to state bodies and structures, such as the State Employment Agency under the Republic of Armenia Ministry of Labour and Social Issues, the State Service for Social Security, the Republic of Armenia Ministry of Defense, Republic of Armenia Ministry of Education and Science, the Agency for Registration of Civil Status Acts and the Passports and Visas Department of the Police.

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<sup>47</sup> ERRIN webpage. 2018. *Government to Government Cooperation*.

[https://returnnetwork.eu/post\\_type\\_activities/government-to-government-cooperation/](https://returnnetwork.eu/post_type_activities/government-to-government-cooperation/) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).

<sup>48</sup> Reintegration advisor at the reintegration single-window service.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Armenia has signed the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements with the EU which are important steps for the EU visa-free regime. The Visa Facilitation Agreement has provided a number of benefits for Armenian nationals, such as a lower visa fee rate and a faster procedure for issuance of visas. In addition, the Armenian authorities have improved their cooperation with the EU in the framework of the Readmission Agreement. The number of readmission requests from the EU MS to the Armenian government has increased.

At the same time, there are certain shortcomings and issues that need to be improved in order to decrease the number of refusals of visa applications and to launch the visa liberalization dialogue. For instance, the transition to only biometric passports—a necessary condition for the visa-free regime—has been postponed, most recently due to announced tenders.

There has been a slight increase in the refusal of Schengen visas, especially due to discrepancies in the documents submitted by Armenian citizens when applying for visas. There are also risks that the number of Armenian asylum-seeking applications might increase. The following section highlights certain steps that might assist Armenia in the process of visa facilitation and liberalization with the EU.

### Government of the Republic of Armenia

#### On Democratic Reforms for launching Visa Dialogue:

- In order to accelerate the launch of the visa liberalization dialogue, Armenian authorities need to adopt anti-discrimination legislation and the Istanbul Convention. The parliamentary hearing on Istanbul Convention has been postponed from September 2019 to spring of 2020. Anti-discrimination legislation still has not been mentioned as a topic for a parliamentary hearing.

#### On Data Protection:

- Specific procedures should be developed for biometric data processing, storage, provision, and use. Currently, biometric data is processed and stored the Armenian Police. Instead, a separate competent state institution needs to be created that will undertake these procedures as well as ensure the cyber security of the biometric data.
- The Law on Protection of Personal Data of the Republic of Armenia should be improved; in particular the grounds and procedure of providing biometric data to other countries should be clarified.
- The independence of the Agency for Protection of Personal Data under the Ministry of Justice should be ensured. It will be necessary to transform the Agency into a separate state body, independent from the Ministry of Justice, which will be accountable to the Prime Minister and will be under the control of the Parliament of Armenia. There should be a practice of reporting to the public in the form of an annual report that will be presented to the National Assembly and published.

This will ensure more effective implementation of data protection and make the institution more independent from such bodies as the police and the border management of Armenia, and would also assist in restricting biometric data transfer to other countries.

#### On Issuing Biometric Passports:

- Ensure the uninterrupted process of issuing biometric passports. Accountability and transparency of the calls for bids, tenders, and new contract awards should be ensured.

- The fee for biometric passports should be reduced in order to make them affordable for the whole population. The biometric passport costs 25,000 AMD (about 50 euro), which is quite high for Armenia, where the average salary is 168,152 AMD (about 320 euro)<sup>49</sup>.

#### On Reintegration of the Returned Citizens of Armenia from the EU:

- Despite the existence of a number of reintegration programmes in Armenia, there is currently no programme of state assistance. To this end, we propose developing an action plan for Armenian citizens returning to Armenia under the EU-Armenia Readmission Agreement, which will specify actions, the responsible authorities and the implementation timetable.
- Raise public awareness of migration-related matters. A key challenge for Armenia in the sphere of migration is the low-level of public awareness of the risks and consequences of irregular migration.

#### On Schengen Visa Applications:

- The Armenian government should run public awareness-raising campaigns regarding how to apply for a Schengen visa. The campaign needs to include information about the preparation and collection of documents required for a visa, and advice against providing false data and documents as well as instructions to refrain from changing the reasoning documents after receiving a visa (for instance, changing the destination country), because the visa may be cancelled in such cases, or entry may be prohibited at the border.

## **Armenian Civil Society and International Donors**

#### On Raising Awareness about Schengen Visa Rules:

- The CSOs should disseminate materials on the Schengen visa application requirements and importance of being attentive to the visa application requirements. CSOs should also organize trainings regarding the rights that the citizens of Armenia under the Visa Facilitation Agreement.
- CSOs should also organize campaigns regarding the Schengen Visa Code, Armenia-EU Readmission Agreement and the consequences of illegal migration. Such information campaigns will raise awareness among the population of Armenia, and prevent illegal migration from Armenia.

#### On Monitoring the Government of Armenia for Further Reforms:

- CSOs should monitor how the government implements the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements, as well as steps that are being undertaken to launch visa-free regime dialogue. This will assist the Armenian government with EU-Armenian mobility cooperation and facilitate a quicker start for the visa dialogue stage.

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<sup>49</sup> The average salary is as of January 2018 available at the National Statistical Service of Armenia: [https://www.armstat.am/file/article/sv\\_02\\_18a\\_142.pdf](https://www.armstat.am/file/article/sv_02_18a_142.pdf) (Accessed 12 Sept. 2019).



## **The European Union**

### On EU-Armenia Cooperation in the Field of Visa Facilitation and Liberalization

- The EU needs to be more active in relation to the requirements and need to start the EU-Armenia visa dialogue process. The EU needs to engage active civil society organizations from Armenia in the visa and migration processes, namely in monitoring and evaluating the reforms implemented by the Armenian authorities in these fields. Inclusion of civil society organizations in the EU-Armenia negotiations and official process is highlighted in the CEPA.
- In the framework of the CEPA, EU needs to create a platform between the EU and the Armenian government on the visa facilitation and visa dialogue stage, which would include civil society organizations dealing with the topic. Additionally, when there are discussions or hearings organized regarding visa facilitation and liberalization by the authorities of Armenia, civil society representatives need to be invited.

### On the EU-Armenia Visa Facilitation Agreement and Visa Applications

- The decision on a visa fee waiver that is indicated in the Visa Facilitation needs to be implemented by consulates and visa centres. The visa fee waiver provision is often violated by the consular officers and the visa centre employees (for the same type of visit purpose, a visa fee is sometimes collected and sometimes waived). In order to implement the visa fee waiver consistently, the application forms could include a section related to the visa fee waiver category.
- EU Member States should be encouraged to open visa centres in other towns of Armenia (Gyumri, Vanadzor, and Kapan), so that citizens of remote towns can complete the visa procedures in a more convenient manner.

The project benefits from support through the EaP Civil Society Forum Re-granting Scheme (FSTP) and is funded by the European Union as part of its support to civil society in the region. Within its Re-granting Scheme, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) supports projects of its members that contribute to achieving the mission and objectives of the Forum.

Grants are available for CSOs from the Eastern Partnership and EU countries. Key areas of support are democracy and human rights, economic integration, environment and energy, contacts between people, social and labour policies.