

BRIEF

on

Armenia-European Union Visa Liberalization Dialogue

Yerevan

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Introduction

Armenia and the European Union have steadily strengthened their partnership, broadening the scope of cooperation and deepening their engagement across various sectors. In this context, the launch of the Visa Liberalization Dialogue, announced on September 9, 2024, through a joint statement by Deputy Prime Minister Mher Grigoryan and Vice-President of the European Commission Margaritis Schinas, marks a significant step forward.¹

This document provides an overview of Armenia's cooperation with the European Union in fostering people-to-people contacts, highlighting the partnership that led to the launch of the Visa Liberalization Dialogue. It also outlines the technical and political processes anticipated within the framework of the dialogue. Drawing on the experiences of countries with a visa-free regime with the EU, the document identifies the key areas and scope of reforms, outlined in the Visa Liberalization Action Plan.

Background. People-to-People Contacts on the RA – EU agenda

The first comprehensive document on cooperation between the Republic of Armenia and the European Union, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement,² was signed in 1996 and entered into force in 1999. While this agreement did not explicitly address the promotion of "people-to-people contacts," it did provide for cooperation and an exchange of experience among professionals across various fields. Both the European Neighborhood Policy,³ launched in 2004, and the Eastern Partnership program,⁴ introduced in 2009, explicitly highlighted the promotion of "people-to-people contacts" as a key area of cooperation. Significant milestones in this regard include the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas, signed in December 2012, and the Agreement between the

¹ <https://www.gov.am/am/news/item/15944/>

² <https://www.irtek.am/views/act.aspx?aid=25153>

³ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-neighborhood-policy_en

⁴ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership_en

European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the Readmission of Persons Residing Without Authorization, signed in April 2013.

The promotion of people-to-people contacts is also directly addressed in the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed in November 2017, which includes an Article 15 provision, stating: “The Parties shall [...] consider in due course the opening of a visa-liberalisation dialogue provided that conditions for well-managed and secure mobility are in place.”⁵ The launch of the Visa Liberalization Dialogue was officially announced on September 9, 2024.

Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements

According to the Visa Facilitation Agreement,⁶ the procedure and conditions for issuing short stay Schengen visas to RA citizens (for an intended stay of no more than 90 days per period of 180 days) have been simplified. In particular, the Agreement has stipulated the following major changes:

- ⇒ A unified and simplified list of documents, required for the visa application process, has been established.
- ⇒ The visa fee has been reduced from 60 EUR to 35 EUR, with certain groups (such as students, scientists, journalists, athletes, and) fully exempted from the fee.
- ⇒ Long stay multiple-entry visas are now available to several categories of applicants, including business people, civil society representatives, scientists, journalists, and others.
- ⇒ The processing time for visa applications has been set at 10 calendar days, with the possibility of extension to 30 calendar days in exceptional cases.

However, it should be noted that, in practice, the citizens of the Republic of Armenia do not benefit from some privileges established by the Visa Facilitation Agreement due to the overwhelming backlog of consular services and months-long waiting lists for visa appointments. As a result, citizens are often forced to seek assistance from third-party organizations to make a visa appointment, which renders the provisions on reduced visa fees and shortened processing times ineffective.

The Readmission Agreement⁷ outlines clear procedures for the safe and orderly return of individuals. Specifically, it stipulates:

⁵ https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/eu/CEPA_ARM_1.pdf

⁶ https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/Statics/EU_AM_VFA_am.pdf

⁷ https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/Statics/Agreement_EU_Readmission_Arm.pdf

- ⇒ A clear commitment by both parties to readmit their own citizens (previously, readmission was handled through separate agreements with individual Member States or, in their absence, based on international law),
- ⇒ A simplified and standardized return process,
- ⇒ A simplified procedure for issuing travel documents within 3 days,
- ⇒ A procedure for the readmission of third-country nationals who unlawfully stayed in one party's territory and had transited through the other (e.g., holding a residence permit).
- ⇒ Provisions ensuring the protection of personal data and human rights.

The Technical and Political Aspects of Visa Liberalization

To date, the European Union has conducted visa liberalization dialogues with several countries in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kosovo. The process ran relatively smoothly and rapidly in the Western Balkans (in 2008-2010, except for Kosovo, in 2008 – 2012), as the key policies in critical areas had already been aligned at the time the dialogue was launched. In 3 Eastern Partnership states, the Dialogue was carried out at different times. Thus, Ukraine's dialogue lasted for 9 years (2008-2017), Moldova's for 4 years (2010-2014), and Georgia's for 5 years (2012-2017).

Based on the current experience, the technical part of the dialogue has been launched with the development of the Visa Liberalization Action Plan, which shall be drafted and presented by the European Commission following consultations with the parties. This document typically outlines the scope of expected reforms in four key areas:

- 1. Data Protection and Document Security:** The proposed reforms in this area include the full implementation of a biometric system in line with European standards, the harmonization of travel document issuance procedures, and measures to prevent the issuance of counterfeit documents.
- 2. Border Management, Migration, and Asylum:** These reforms aim to strengthen border control, establish a functioning asylum system, and ensure continuous capacity enhancement for migration authorities.
- 3. Public Order and Security.** The reforms in this area include measures for combating organized crime and corruption, strengthening the independence of the judiciary, and fostering greater cooperation between law enforcement agencies of the parties.
- 4. Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms:** These reforms include measures, aimed at alignment with international standards for human rights protection, ensuring the rights of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, also through signing various conventions.

Under the established procedure, the European Commission regularly assesses the effectiveness of reform implementation. Once sufficient progress is achieved, the Commission shall submit a proposal to the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament to grant visa-free travel to the citizens of the country in question. In the European Parliament, the decision shall be made by a simple majority, while a qualified majority will be required with the EU Council. However, experience shows that in the EU Council, visa liberalization issues are typically put to a vote only after an informal consensus has been reached among Member States, given the political sensitivity of migration-related matters. Therefore, alongside the reforms outlined above, it is important to consider the political factors that may influence the Member States' decisions. In particular:

- ⇒ **Increasing sensitivity to migration policy within the EU**, particularly in light of the rising influence of right-wing and populist forces.
- ⇒ **Waning influence of states traditionally dominant within the EU, against the backdrop of complex domestic political processes** (significant disagreements in Germany among the ruling coalition forces on financial, economic, migration, and climate policies; complex processes in the aftermath of the 2024 parliamentary elections in France which led to a close vote distribution between the left-wing, centrist, and right-wing parties.
- ⇒ **Geopolitical processes**: Varied scenarios of the EU policy in the region due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, complex relations between the EU and Georgia.
- ⇒ **Economic ties between the EU and Azerbaijan, particularly deepening cooperation in the energy and military sectors.**

Conclusion

Armenia and the European Union have gone a long way in fostering people-to-people contacts. However, despite the privileges outlined in the Visa Facilitation Agreement, Armenian citizens continue to face challenges in the visa application process, primarily due to the overload on consular services amid rising demand. This issue can be fully and radically addressed through visa liberalization only. To achieve this goal, Armenia will be required to implement substantial reforms in areas such as data protection, border management, public order and security, and human rights protection. The experience of peer countries suggests that this process may take several years to complete. In the meantime, as the decision on visa liberalization rests with the EU Member States, Armenia must engage in intensive diplomatic efforts with all EU countries to secure the necessary political support.

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