

Monitoring Report

**Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia
on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas
(second monitoring)**



Yerevan 2015



The Project was implemented by the Analytical Center on Globalization and Regional Cooperation (ACGRC)

Authors: Stepan Grigoryan
Nikolay Israyelyan
Translated into English by:Khachatur Adumyan

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Introduction

EU-Armenia Relations in the Area of Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas: Development Trends

The EU-Armenia agenda changed considerably after the well-known statement made by the President of Armenia on 3 September 2013. Armenia discontinued the association talks with the EU and embarked on a process of membership in the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union.

Over time, visas and readmission remained a key area of EU-Armenia relations, including the implementation of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas and the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the Readmission of Persons Residing without Authorisation, as well as the possibility and the willingness of the sides to transition to the second stage of visa liberalization—the Visa Dialogue. The mobility and visa facilitation process will enable Armenia to carry out reforms in a number of fields, such as irregular migration, security, document and personal data protection, border security and management, the fight against and prevention of organized crime, terrorism, discrimination, and corruption, human rights promotion, including the adoption of the Law against Discrimination, cooperation between law-enforcement agencies, and the like. The first monitoring conducted by the Analytical Center on Globalization and Regional Cooperation (ACGRC)¹ indicated quite some progress by the Armenian Government and the European Commission towards the implementation of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas and the Agreement on the Readmission of Persons Residing without Authorisation.

This is evidenced by the statement made by European Council President Donald Tusk during his visit to Armenia on 20 July 2015 about the results of talks with the Republic of Armenia President Serzh Sargsyan, which emphasized the success achieved by Armenia in the field of mobility and the need to continue and deepen cooperation with the EU, linking it to social and political reforms, reforms related to the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the involvement of civil society in these reforms.²

The importance of these issues was further underlined in the Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit held in Riga on 21 and 22 May 2015, Paragraph

¹ <http://acgrc.am/bokeng.pdf>

² <http://www.president.am/hy/interviews-and-press-conferences/item/2015/07/20/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-answers-at-press-conference-with-Donald-Tusk/>

23 of which (“Mobility and people to people”) reads: “The Summit participants reconfirm that enhanced mobility of citizens in a secure and well-managed environment remains a core objective of the Eastern Partnership. This will facilitate easier and more frequent travel, business and people to people contacts... They welcome the progress to date in the implementation of the Visa Facilitation and Readmission [Agreement] with Armenia... They look forward to consideration in due course of the opening of a visa dialogue with Armenia, provided that Armenia continues to ensure sustained progress in the full implementation of the Visa Facilitation Agreement and Readmission Agreement.”¹

Right to Freedom of Movement

The monitoring implemented under this Project concerns one of the fundamental human freedoms—the right to freedom of movement. Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted on 10 December 1948 provides: “Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.”² The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (adopted on 4 November 1950) and the protocols supplementing it further clarify the scope of the right and define the grounds for restricting the right to freedom of movement.³ The freedom of movement does not include a general and universal right to enter any country of one’s choice, although it is the very element of the right that is missing and that people most often wish to have. Furthermore, according to the international standards, authorizing a foreigner’s entry is considered a sovereign power of the state, and foreigners that enter into or reside in violation of the country’s legislation are considered irregular migrants. A person may end up in a situation of irregular migration either because of entering a country unlawfully (entry without the documents required by law, presenting false documents, entering not through the border-crossing points, and so on) or as a consequence of staying longer than permitted after lawfully entering the country.⁴

The human right to freedom of movement is also enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia (“Chapter 2. Fundamental Rights and Freedoms of the Person and Citizen”), which provides that “everyone shall have the right to leave the Republic of Armenia and “everyone citizen and every person who has the right

¹ http://armedia.am/static/content/european_union/Riga_summit_Declaration.pdf ;
<http://acgrc.am/Riga%20Declaration%20220515%20Final.pdf>

² http://www.un.am/res/Human%20Rights/Armenian%20Documents/UDHR_arm.pdf

³ <http://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?DocID=20870>

⁴ http://www.smsmta.am/?menu_id=31

to reside in the Republic of Armenia shall have the right to return to the Republic of Armenia.”¹

The EU-Armenia Cooperation in the Framework of the Eastern Partnership Program

The Eastern Partnership Program was launched at the Summit of the Heads of EU States and Eastern Partners (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova) in Prague on 7 May 2009, where a Joint Declaration was adopted.² In July 2010, the EU-Armenia Association Agreement talks were launched. Talks on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, which was intended as a part of the Association Agreement, started in June 2012 and ended in July 2013.

The multilateral cooperation within the Eastern Partnership takes place through four platforms—democracy, good governance and stability; economic integration and convergence with EU policies; energy security; and people to people contacts.³

People to people contacts is one of the four platforms of the cooperation within the Eastern Partnership. For Armenian citizens to enter the EU area, it presupposes obtaining an entry visa (also in the case of non-member-states of the EU, which apply the provisions of the Schengen acquis). In view of this area of EU-Armenia relations, talks on a Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreement with the EU began in Yerevan in February 2012. After three rounds of negotiations, the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas was signed on 17 December 2012, and the Readmission Agreement on 19 April 2013.⁴ These Agreements were ratified by the European Parliament on 9 October 2013 and by the Armenian National Assembly on 12 November 2013, and entered into force on 1 January 2014.⁵

According to the Republic of Armenia Government Decree 1255-N dated 4 October 2012, citizens of the EU Member States and non-member-states that apply the provisions of the Schengen acquis may travel to Armenia without a visa from

¹ <http://www.parliament.am/parliament.php?id=constitution>

² Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit-
http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/neighbourhood/eastern_partnership/documents/prague_summit_declaration_en.pdf

³ <http://mfa.am/hy/country-by-country/eu/>

⁴ <http://www.mfa.am/hy/country-by-country/eu/>

⁵ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/content/20131004IPR21533/html/Visas-Parliament-gives-green-light-to-EU-Armenia-visa-facilitation-agreement> ,
http://armenianow.com/news/49985/armenia_eu_visa_facilitation_readmission_agreement_parliament_ratification

10 January 2013, which has been an important and commendable move by Armenia.¹

As noted above, Armenia discontinued the Association Agreement talks with the EU on 3 September 2013 and started a process of accession to the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). On 2 January 2015, Armenia joined the Eurasian Economic Union: the Agreement on Armenia's Accession to the Eurasian Economic Union entered into effect, and Armenia became a full member of the EEU next to Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia.²

This sharp change of the foreign policy vector limited the EU-Armenia relations to cooperation in the humanitarian, scientific, educational, and cultural fields. Visas became even more important considering that the cooperation in these fields implies active movement and mobility of persons. This situation will apparently continue until the new format of EU-Armenia cooperation is carved out.

The EU took an important decision on 12 October 2015: the EU Foreign Affairs Council authorized the European Commission and the EU High Representative to start negotiations on a new comprehensive and legally-binding agreement with Armenia and issued the respective mandate. This agreement will replace the current Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Armenia. The European Union has expressed its readiness to continue developing and strengthening cooperation with Armenia in all the fields of mutual interest within the framework of the Eastern Partnership. These negotiations were officially launched on 7 December 2015.³

Observations

The aforementioned two agreements, which are aimed at regulating and facilitating the issuance of visas to and the return of several categories of Armenian citizens, entered into force in n January 2014. However, the general public know little about those matters and the new rules, which often leads to violations of the citizens' rights. Given the low level of awareness, it is essential to raise the awareness of the mass media, because they are a strong tool for improving public awareness. Low awareness is also a reason for people's negative attitudes and stereotypes towards the EU. The EU and Armenia have accomplished much work with respect to visas. Hence, it is very important for the results to be more visible and tangible.

Under this Project, the Analytical Center on Globalization and Regional Cooperation, relying on the rich experience of studying the EU-Armenia dialogue,

¹ <http://www.mineconomy.am/arm/135/1/news.more.html>

² <http://www.eurasiancommission.org/hy/nae/news/Pages/02-01-2015-1.aspx>

³ http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/armenia/press_corner/all_news/news/2015/2015_10_13_hy.htm

especially in the fields of visa issuance and readmission, and taking into consideration Armenia’s achievements in these fields and the possibility of moving to the next stage of visa liberalization—the visa dialogue, has developed and presented the Recommendations on Forming and Implementing the Roadmap to the Symmetrical Visa-free Regime between the EU and Armenia.¹ The study was carried out by experts of the Analytical Center on Globalization and Regional Cooperation and Iryna Sushko (international expert and head of the “Europe without Barriers” Civic Initiative, Ukraine). The Recommendations have been endorsed by the following civil society organizations: Open Society Foundations-Armenia, the Asparez Club of Journalists, the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly Vanadzor Office, the Helsinki Committee of Armenia, and the Transparency International Anti-Corruption Center. It is the first time that such recommendations are presented by civil society. Information about our recommendations on the possible transition to Visa Dialogue and the awareness-raising seminars held in Tsaghkadzor (Armenia) in June 2015 is available on the website and official bulletin of the State Migration Service, as well as the website of the “Europe without Visas” coalition.²

The Recommendations on Forming and Implementing the Roadmap to the Symmetrical Visa-free Regime between the EU and Armenia have been presented to the relevant authorities of Armenia, the EU Delegation in Armenia, the diplomatic missions in Armenia, civil society organizations, and others. On 7 May 2015, the ACGRC officially launched the Recommendations at an event attended by the Head of the EU Delegation in Armenia, ambassadors of EU Member States, and other dignitaries. Importantly, the Recommendations were posted on the official website of the EU Delegation in Armenia. The 16th session of the EU-Armenia Cooperation Committee took place on 4 November 2015, during which the Parties discussed a number of issues related to the future EU-Armenia cooperation agreement, and reiterated the importance of the visa dialogue as a key item in the EU-Armenia agenda.

The visa facilitation and readmission agreements have been in effect for about two years now, and this Project monitoring has reviewed the current situation and produced some conclusions on their impact.

The effective implementation of the agreements with the EU and continued progress towards visa liberalization require persistent action by all the stakeholders, including the Armenian authorities, the public at large, especially active groups, and the European institutions.

¹ <http://www.acgrc.am/publications.html>

² <http://visa-free-europe.eu/2015/08/recommendations-on-forming-and-implementing-the-road-map-to-the-symmetrical-visa-free-regime-between-the-eu-and-armenia/>;
http://www.smsmta.am/?show_news&news_id=478

Methodology

(Methodology of the 2015 Monitoring)

The following methods were used during this study:

1. Review of the relevant Armenian and European legislation

The domestic and international legislation on this sector was reviewed. First of all, the visa facilitation agreement and the agreement on the readmission of persons residing without authorisation between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia were reviewed.¹ The EU Visa Code², the Schengen Agreements³, the Dublin Convention⁴, and other international legal instruments were reviewed. As to domestic documents, the Republic of Armenia Law on the Passport of a Citizen of the Republic of Armenia, annual reports of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, a number of decrees of the Republic of Armenia Government on migration and readmission, and other texts were reviewed

2. Review of the websites of EU consulates, the visa centers operating in Armenia, and the relevant state authorities

The study reviewed the official websites of the consular posts of the diplomatic missions of EU Member States in Armenia, the visa centers operating in Armenia, the Passports and Visas Department of the Police of the Republic of Armenia, and the State Migration Service of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Emergency Situations of the Republic of Armenia. There was a particular focus on analyzing the information contained in the relevant websites, in view of the importance of seeking information from the worldwide web in the contemporary world. The vast majority of the Internet users are young and middle-aged people, which also happen to be the most active and most mobile parts of society. Therefore, websites are becoming the most important source of information, which need to contain the most up-to-date information, which is especially important in the sphere of visas and migration.

¹ http://mfa.am/u_files/file/Agreement_EU_Readmission_Arm.pdf

² <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2009:243:0001:0058:EN:PDF>

³ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/e-library/documents/policies/borders-and-visas/schengen-agreements/index_en.htm

⁴ [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:41997A0819\(01\)&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:41997A0819(01)&from=EN)

3. Inquiries (see the questions below)

After reviewing the legislation and the rules that are in place, questions were prepared during the first stage of implementation of the program, which were intended for the state authorities in charge of the sector and the consular posts of the diplomatic missions of EU Member States, as well as the visa centers operating in Armenia. The questions were prepared in view of the importance of visas and migration for the public at large, especially the issues and cases encountered in everyday life and especially in the mass media, as well as the issues that came up during the 2014 monitoring.¹ Individual meetings were conducted with a number of national and international experts (Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova).

For the first time, inquiries were carried out among applicants that had been refused a Schengen visa in order to understand the overall situation.

4. Recommendations on Forming and Implementing the Roadmap to the Symmetrical Visa-free Regime between the EU and Armenia

Considering that Armenia has overcome the first stage of visa liberalization with the EU, and there is a possibility to move to the second—Visa Dialogue stage, the Recommendations on Forming and Implementing the Roadmap to the Symmetrical Visa-free Regime between the EU and Armenia were prepared.

5. Monitoring of the online media

As the Internet is a primary source of information, and the level of public awareness is still low, online media were monitored with a view to comparing the reporting and tracking how various events are reported in the online media. The news websites that are read the most were selected for the monitoring. Without the monitoring of the online media, this study would have been incomplete and unilateral, because they are a key source of news for the public, and the dissemination of accurate information by them is essential

6. Statistical desk research

Statistics of EU visas were studied, alongside the experience of some other Eastern Partners (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia), which have completed the first phase of visa liberalization. Some of them (such as Moldova) have already achieved a visa-free regime with the EU.

This Project included a comprehensive overview of the process of obtaining EU entry visas (only visas with a validity of up to 90 days). The domestic and international legislation on the sector was reviewed. The Agreement between the

¹ <http://arm.acgrc.am/bookarm.pdf>

European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas and the Agreement on the Readmission of Persons Residing without Authorisation were studied. The study focused on the activities of the diplomatic missions and consular posts of the EU Member States (Germany, Poland, France, Italy, Lithuania, and Greece, as well as the Czech Republic, Romania, and Bulgaria for the first time this year) in Armenia, as well as the visa center of Greece in Armenia, the visa center of Lithuania in Armenia (the visa center of Italy in Armenia was opened in October 2015), and the Passports and Visas Department of the Police of the Republic of Armenia and the State Migration Service of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Emergency Situations of the Republic of Armenia. The first phase of the Project focused also on the official websites of the consular posts of Germany, Poland, France, Italy, Lithuania, Greece, the Czech Republic, Romania, and Bulgaria, the visa centers, and the aforementioned state authorities of Armenia. Subsequently, questionnaires were prepared for the consular posts, the visa centers, and the domestic authorities of Armenia. The replies to the questionnaires provided information for analyzing the situation since the entry into force of the two agreements. The successful experience of the other Eastern Partners (Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia) was studied, as well.

For the first time ever, the refusals were analyzed on the basis of inquiries with the rejected visa applicants. The information was used for the comprehensive analysis of the refusals and their reasons, and for preparing recommendations to the consular posts of the EU Member States in Armenia.

The online media were monitored, considering that the internet is a key source of information, and that public awareness is very low.

The beneficiaries of this Project are NGO representatives, active groups of civil society, journalists, state authorities, consular posts of the EU Member States in Armenia, the visa centers, and the public at large.

The Project included awareness-raising activities in Vanadzor and Yerevan, as well as a two-day seminar in Tsaghkadzor for journalists and civil society representatives.

Chapter One

Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas:¹ Provisions and Practice

THE PROVISIONS

The Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas contemplates the following key changes:

- ✓ The issuance of a visa is easier, as fewer documents are required of the visa applicants (Article 4).
- ✓ The visa fee was reduced from 60 to 35 Euros, and free visas are issued to a number of categories (Article 6).
- ✓ The decision to issue a visa is taken faster, within 10 days (in certain cases, it can be prolonged to 30 days) (Article 7).

Under the Agreement on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas, the following categories of Armenian citizens benefit from a facilitated procedure of issuing a visa:

- Close relatives – spouses, children (including adopted), parents (including custodians), grandparents, grandchildren visiting citizens of Armenia legally residing in the Member States, or citizens of the Union residing in the territory of the Member State of which they are nationals;
- Members of official delegations;
- Pupils, students, post-graduate persons and accompanying teachers;
- Persons travelling for medical reasons and necessary accompanying persons;
- Journalists and technical crew accompanying them in a professional capacity;
- Participants in international sport events and persons accompanying them in a professional capacity;
- Business people and representatives of business organisations;
- Members of the professions participating in international exhibitions, conferences, symposia, seminars or other similar events;
- Representatives of civil society organisations and persons invited by Armenian community non-profit organisations registered in the Member States;

¹ http://www.mfa.am/u_files/file/EU_AM_VFA_am.pdf

- Persons participating in scientific, academic, cultural or artistic activities, including university and other exchange programmes;
- Drivers conducting international cargo and passenger transportation services to the territories of the Member States in vehicles registered in Armenia;
- Participants of the official exchange programmes organised by twin cities and other municipal entities; and
- For visiting military and civil burial grounds.

Fees for processing the visa application are waived for the following categories of persons: a) Pensioners; (b) children under the age of 12; (c) members of national and regional governments and of Constitutional and Supreme courts, in case they are not exempted from the visa requirement by this Agreement; (d) persons with disabilities and the persons accompanying them, if necessary; (e) close relatives – spouse, children (including adopted), parents (including custodians), grandparents or grandchildren – of citizens of Armenia legally residing in the territory of the Member States, or citizens of the Union residing in the territory of the Member State of which they are nationals; (f) members of official delegations, including permanent members of official delegations, who, following an official invitation addressed to Armenia, shall participate in meetings, consultations, negotiations or exchange programmes, as well as in events held in the territory of one of the Member States by intergovernmental organisations; (g) pupils, students, postgraduate students and accompanying teachers who undertake trips for the purposes of study or educational training, including exchange programmes as well as other school-related activities; (h) journalists and technical crew accompanying them in a professional capacity; (i) participants in international sport events and persons accompanying them in a professional capacity; (j) representatives of civil society organisations and persons invited by Armenian community non-profit organisations registered in the Member States when undertaking trips for the purposes of educational training, seminars, conferences, including in the framework of exchange programmes or Pan-Armenian and community support programmes; (k) persons participating in scientific, academic, cultural or artistic activities, including university and other exchange programmes; and (l) persons who have presented documents proving the necessity of their travel on humanitarian grounds, including to receive urgent medical treatment and the person accompanying such person, or to attend a funeral of a close relative or to visit a seriously ill close relative.

Diplomatic missions and consular posts of the Member States shall issue multiple-entry visas with the term of validity of one year¹ to the following categories of persons, provided that during the previous year they have obtained at least one visa and have made use of it in accordance with the laws on entry and stay of the visited State.

Diplomatic missions and consular posts of the Member States shall issue multiple-entry visas with the term of validity of a minimum of 2 years and a maximum of 5 years to the categories of persons referred to in paragraph 2 of this Article, provided that during the previous 2 years they have made use of the one year multiple-entry visas in accordance with the laws on entry and stay of the visited State.

In justified cases of urgency, the consulate may allow applicants to lodge their applications either without appointment, or an appointment shall be given immediately.

For purposes of this Agreement, countries may be divided into three categories:

- Countries that are full participants to the Schengen Agreements (Austria, Belgium, Hungary, Germany, Greece, Spain, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Finland, France, the Czech Republic, Sweden, and Estonia), for which the provisions of those Agreements are binding. Although Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland are full participants to the Schengen Agreements, they are neither EU Member States nor parties to the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas. The Governments of Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland and the Government of Armenia need to concluded bilateral agreements on the facilitation of the issuance of short-term visas, with conditions similar to those of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia (see the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas).²

¹ The dates specified on the visa do not give the citizen the right to be present in the Schengen Area throughout the mentioned time period. A single-entry visa contains information on the number of authorized days (e.g. 15 days). As to the multiple-entry visas, the citizen is allowed to stay in the Schengen Area for up to 90 days during a specific 180- day time period. Information about the calculation of eligible visa days in the Schengen Area can be found using the official Schengen Calculator of the European Commission: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/border-crossing/schengen_calculator_en.html.

² http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/schengen/index_en.htm

- Countries with which bilateral agreements need to be concluded (the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Denmark, although Denmark is a Member State and is in the Schengen Area).
- Non-full members of the Schengen Agreements, which may issue only national visas, but the visas for the Schengen Area are valid in their territories (Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Romania).

In many countries, there are so called “visa centers”, authorized by embassies to accept visa applications from citizens. As it is mentioned in the Agreement on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas, “external service provider may charge a service fee.” The Agreement further provides that “this fee shall be proportionate to the costs incurred by the external service provider while performing its tasks and shall not exceed EUR 30” (Agreement on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas, Article 6, Paragraph 3). Applicants also have the possibility to lodge their applications directly at the consulates. For the Union, the external service provider shall conduct its operations in accordance with the Visa Code and in full respect of the Armenian legislation. In Armenia, such a center has been opened by the Embassy of the United Kingdom, which charges, in addition to the visa fee, 59 British pounds for its services.

At present, there are visa centers accepting Schengen area visa applications in Armenia, which cooperate with the embassies of Lithuania and Greece in Armenia (visas for Spain, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Denmark, Hungary, and Greece). Another visa center was opened in October 2015, which cooperates with the Embassy of Italy (visas for Italy, Finland, and Malta).

Although the Agreement contemplates facilitation of the issuance of visas for certain categories of citizens, it is also a complex bureaucratic process, and the decision to issue a visa is subject to some discretion. In addition to the visa issuance discretion, there is the discretion of the border guard on the border—whether or not to let the person in, i.e. having a visa does not preclude the refusal to grant entry on the border (however, this is applied only in exceptional cases), because the destination country border point is the final “checkpoint” for entry into that country.

All the consulates of the Schengen States in Armenia joined the Visa Information System (“VIS”) on 23 June 2015. VIS was created for simplifying the visa processes and improving the security of the visa application process. It is a unified and centralized biometric database of persons that have applied for a visa at least once. Schengen visa applicants will be required to provide their biometric data (fingerprints and digital photo). The biometric data and the information contained in the Schengen visa application will be registered in the centralized VIS database. Biometric technology helps to protect the applicants against theft of personal data and prevent false identification that sometimes leads to refusal of visa

or entry to persons that genuinely have the right of entry. Biometric technology is widely used in the EU for enhancing the protection of travel documents.¹ As from 23 June 2015, Armenian citizens applying for a Schengen visa must personally appear for giving biometric data (fingerprints and digital photo). This applies to short-term Schengen visa applications (a maximum stay of 90 days during a 180-day period): for further visa applications within a 5-year period, the fingerprints will be copied from the former VIS application file. For every subsequent Schengen visa application, the fingerprints for the 5-year period must be provided again. The requirement to provide fingerprints is waived for children under the age of 12, persons whose fingerprints physically cannot be taken, heads of state, members of national governments, and spouses and official delegation members accompanying them when officially invited by governments of EU Member States or international organizations.²

The following questions were posed to the consulates:

❖ Please, provide statistical data on visas and fill out the following table:

Year	Number of applications	Number of visas issued	Number of refusals	Number of free visas	Singl e-entry visas	Multip le-entry visas	Multiple-entry visas (valid for one year or longer)	Number of appeals	Number of decisions changed as a result of an appeal
2014									
2015									

- ❖ What are the most common reasons for refusing to issue a visa?
- ❖ Is written notice of refusal always given, including the justification of the refusal?
- ❖ Can the applicant appeal the decision after receiving the refusal, and if yes, is information about it available on the embassy’s official website?
- ❖ Do you put a stamp in the passport in case of refusal, and if yes, what is its legal justification?

¹ <http://eunewsletter.am/hy/%D5%B4%D5%A1%D5%BF%D5%B6%D5%A1%D5%B0%D5%A5%D5%BF%D6%84%D5%A5%D6%80-%D6%87-%D5%A9%D5%BE%D5%A1%D5%B5%D5%AB%D5%B6-%D5%AC%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%BD%D5%A1%D5%B6%D5%AF%D5%A1%D6%80%D5%9D-%D5%B7%D5%A5%D5%B6%D5%A3/>

² For details, see <http://ec.europa.eu/vis>.

- ❖ What steps are being taken by the consular post in order to avoid long queues at the time of handing in the applications (especially during the summer and winter holidays)?

The responses were analyzed, and the results for the individual Member States are presented below.

THE PRACTICE

Consular Services of the Schengen Area Member States in Armenia

➤ Germany

The official website of the German Embassy is up to date and contains rather detailed information on the whole process of applying for a visa in Armenian and in German (there is also brief information in English), as well as on the visa facilitation agreement. Online registration for the visa interview is possible on the site, which is very convenient for applicants. There is a list of the countries (Belgium, Luxembourg, Sweden, Austria, and the Netherlands) for which the German Embassy issues visas. The website also contains memos that clearly explain the steps of applying for a visa.

The website of the German Consular Section states that the list of the required documents is prepared in agreement with the embassies of the Schengen Area Member States in Armenia. It means that the same visa documents are required at all of the mentioned embassies.

In response to our written inquiry, the German Consulate provided the following visa statistics for 2014 and 2015: 4,000 of the 17,000 applications were refused (including cancelations) during 2014, and 1,800 of the 13,000 visas issued were multiple-entry visas (with a validity term of one year or more). In January-July 2015, 2,700 of the 10,200 applications were refused (including cancelations), and 1,270 of the 7,500 visas issued were multiple-entry visas (with a validity term of one year or more).

The most common stated reason for refusal is the low likelihood of the applicant returning to Armenia, the insufficiency of funds, and the unclear and non-credible purpose of the visit. As to the refusals, the German Consulate stated that the refusal is provided to the applicant with written justification of the reasons for refusal (in the past, it was not mandatory). The applicant may appeal the decision in the relevant court of Germany (the Administrative Court of Berlin) within one month, and the website contains detailed information about the appeal possibility and procedure.

The passports of applicants are not stamped in case of refusal, but in accordance with Article 20 of the Visa Code, all the passports for the accepted

applications are stamped, and if a visa is issued, it is placed over the stamp. The presence of a stamp in the applicant's passport means that the German Embassy has reviewed his application. The stamp does not affect the determination of future applications to the German or other Schengen embassies. Every visa application is reviewed on the basis of the current circumstances. However, citizens are very often unaware of these provisions of the law, which confirms the importance of these initiatives and projects in raising the awareness of citizens and building their capacity to protect their rights.

For avoidance of queues, the Consul recommends applying very early in advance, but the applicants do not necessarily have advance knowledge of the visit (for instance, one or two months ahead of the visit). This is a very important issue in the case of Germany, because the German Consulate accepts visa applications for a number of Schengen states, and as registration is possible only online, it is often quite problematic (sometimes, the closest available date for an interview is a month away).

Interestingly, the German Consulate requires information on relatives living in not only the EU, but also Russia, including a requirement on the lawful grounds of such relatives' stay in Russia (for children, parents, or siblings abroad (including in Russia)), such as evidence in the form of a registration report or a copy of the residence permit.¹

Another document that must be signed and presented is the declaration on false information (see the application form²), although the final page of the visa application form already contains a specific section on false information.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the German Consulate cooperated readily and swiftly responded to our inquiries.

➤ **Poland**

The consular post at the Polish Embassy, too, was very willing to cooperate. The consular post is doing a very good job organizing the daily reception of citizens. The official website contains very detailed, up-to-date, and comprehensive information; it specifies the countries, other than Poland, for which the Polish Embassy issues visas (Slovenia, and Slovakia, and Switzerland effective from March 2014). For each country, detailed three-language (Polish, Armenian, and English) information is provided on the documents required to apply for a visa, the queuing procedure, the possibility of appealing refusals, and the like. The website also contains information on the Agreement on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas and the main novelties introduced thereby, as well as the collection of biometric data.

¹ http://www.eriwan.diplo.de/contentblob/2173646/Daten/5670754/Merkblatt_Geschaefte_arm.pdf

² http://www.eriwan.diplo.de/contentblob/3873244/Daten/2963782/Erklaerung_Falschangaben.pdf

The consular post at the Polish Embassy thoroughly replied to our inquiry. According to information provided by the consular post, the Polish consulate issued 4,143 visas in 2014 and 2,044 visas during January-June 2015.

The most commonly reported reason for refusal is the failure to properly substantiate the purpose of the trip (Article 32.1(b) of the Visa Code). The Polish consulate stated that this negative trend continued to rise in 2015, during which more of the applicants have presented false documents. The applicants have much more frequently consciously presented false information or intentionally tried to conceal the truth related to their Schengen “story,” information on relatives living in the Schengen area, and the like.

According to Article 32.2 of the Visa Code, the Polish Embassy provides written information on every case of refusal, including the reason for refusal, as well as the possibility of an appeal (the information on the refusal refers to the appeal process and deadline). The official website of the consular post, too, contains information on the possibility of appealing in case of a visa refusal.

The passport of a refused applicant is not stamped. However, all passports are stamped in accordance with Article 20 of the Visa Code to confirm that the application has been accepted.

An interesting move by Poland was the decision to grant Armenian citizens, as from January 2014, the right to work in Poland for a period of up to six months without a special permit; it is an indication of gradual improvements in the attitudes of the Europeans towards Armenian citizens.

It was also interesting to learn from the website that the Ambassador of the Republic of Poland receives citizens every Wednesday from 10am to noon in order to hear their comments and complaints, and that it is necessary to sign up in advance by calling (+374) 10 54 24 91 or sending an e-mail to erewan.amb.sekretariat@msz.gov.pl. Meeting the Ambassador is yet another possibility for citizens to raise their issues.

The visas section of the website of the Polish Embassy contains detailed information on the consequences of unlawful residence in Poland, the conditions, the return, and other matters.

The implementation of a system of mandatory online registration was one of the first steps aimed at solving the problems of applicant queues and waiting time. Moreover, the Polish Consulate proposed an interesting solution: every Friday, in the morning, registration becomes possible for the following week, thereby almost precluding long queues and cases of having to wait one or two months for the nearest interview date, which is currently the case in some other consular posts, especially during the summer and winter holidays.

For the Polish Consulate, it is particularly important to highlight the transparent practices and readiness to cooperate.

➤ France

The official website of the consular post at the French Embassy is up to date and contains information on the new rules, as well as detailed information (in Armenian and French) needed for citizens applying for a visa. The registration for presenting the visa application may be performed only online. In addition to French visas, the consular post at the French Embassy is responsible for visas for Portugal and Iceland.

The website of the French Embassy is the only one that contains information on the embassies of other EU Member States in Armenia, which is convenient and commendable.

The visas section of the website of the French Embassy contains the full list of documents, but no mention of the collection of biometric data or the possibility or procedure of appeal.

Interestingly, the French Consulate is the only one that requires an additional document containing information on the applicant's family (father, mother, spouse, and children).¹

Besides, according to the Embassy's website, the French Consulate is the only one that requires an additional document that is a "written undertaking to return," which reads: "I hereby undertake, after my return to Armenia, to appear at the French Embassy located at 8 Grigor Lusavorchi, Yerevan, with my passport, a copy of the visa stamped by the border police, and this notice. I have been informed that I will be prosecuted in case of failure to honor this commitment, and that my and my possible guarantors' subsequent visa applications will be refused."²

In response to our inquiry letter, the French Consulate stated that the information on virtually all of our questions could be found on their website, refusing to provide statistics on visas issued and refusals. The website contains no information on either the visa statistics or a number of other important questions, such as the reasons for refusal or the possibility and procedure of appeal. The response only stated that the consulate does not provide statistical data, and in all visa issuance/refusal matters and processes, it follows the provisions of the Visa Code and the French Law on Migration and Asylum.

➤ Italy

Before 2015, the visa information on the official website of the Consular Section of the Italian embassy was very general, but it now contains an announcement that the Consulate started to cooperate with the visa center from

1

[file:///D:/ALL%20BEFORE%202014/My%20Documents/Downloads/Formulaire_schengen_code_communautaire-2%20\(3\).pdf](file:///D:/ALL%20BEFORE%202014/My%20Documents/Downloads/Formulaire_schengen_code_communautaire-2%20(3).pdf)

² [file:///D:/ALL%20BEFORE%202014/My%20Documents/Downloads/convocation%20\(2\).pdf](file:///D:/ALL%20BEFORE%202014/My%20Documents/Downloads/convocation%20(2).pdf)

October 2015, suggesting to apply to the center for visas to Italy, Malta, and Finland. The website also informs that the Embassy does not schedule appointments for accepting visa documents, i.e. a visa applicant cannot apply to the Embassy and has to apply to the visa center, contrary to the provisions of the Visa Code and the Armenia-EU Visa Facilitation Agreement.

Thus, the website of the Italian Embassy provides no visa-related information other than the announcement about applying to the visa center, and refers potential applicants straight to the visa center's website.

The Italian Consulate, too, responded to our inquiry, but refused to provide visa statistics, citing confidentiality. The most common stated reason for refusals is the insufficiency of documents, the scarcity of financial means, and migration risks. Written notice of refusal is always given. Review is not possible in case of refusal, but the applicant may apply again or appeal the refusal within a 60-day period in the Lazio Administrative District, but there is no mention of the appeal in the website. The Italian Embassy no longer puts a refusal stamp in the passport in case of refusal (the past practice has thus changed) since the full implementation of the VIS system in Armenia (from 23 June 2015). To avoid queues, the Embassy started to cooperate with the visa center—an external service provider, as from October 2015.

➤ **Lithuania**

The Consular Section at the Lithuanian Embassy in Armenia contains detailed information, including in Armenian. A visa appointment can be scheduled only online. In addition to Lithuanian visas, this Consulate issues visas also for Latvia, Estonia, Denmark, Spain, and Hungary. As the Lithuanian Consulate accepts visa applications for a number of other European countries, as well, it has started to cooperate with the respective visa center in order to avoid queues and to improve the possibilities available to potential applicants.

However, the website of the Consular Section at the Lithuanian Embassy in Armenia does not contain information about either appeals or the collection of biometric data. The Lithuanian Consulate did not provide us information about visas and did not respond to our inquiry letter altogether, so our efforts had to be limited to the information available on the website.

➤ **Greece**

The Consular Section of the Embassy's website has been upgraded with information. It currently contains detailed information in Armenian and English. Appointments can be scheduled only online. The website contains information on visas, the required application documents, and the like.

The Consulate did not provide visa statistics, noting that the 2014 statistical data can be found on the EU's official website, and the 2015 data is not ready yet. The refusals are mostly due to the absence of one of the required documents. In response to our inquiry, the Consulate noted that a sealed and signed letter is sent about refusals, and appeals are possible by presenting the necessary documents (although the website does not refer to appeals). The Consulate places a stamp in the applicant's travel document in accordance with Article 20 of the Visa Code, if the application is acceptable and subject to consideration. Given the possibility of queues during the year, the Consulate has started to cooperate with the respective visa center, although it is still possible to apply to the Consulate directly, which is positive.

➤ **The Czech Republic**

This is the first time for the Czech Embassy in Armenia to be monitored: although the Embassy operates from 2012, the Consular Section started operating from 4 May 2015,¹ before which the Polish Embassy in Armenia issued visas for travel to the Czech Republic. The opening of European embassies in Armenia is important progress for Armenian citizens applying for visas, because just a few years back, visa applicants often had to travel to places like Tbilisi or Moscow or use the services of private companies transferring visa documents, which implied additional costs and time.

The website of the Czech Embassy contains detailed visa information in Armenian and Czech. Applicant interviews can be scheduled only online and may also be canceled in advance. The website contains memos explaining the steps that an applicant should take depending on the purpose and type of visit, as well as the list of required documents and the like.

In response to our inquiry, the Czech Consular Section suggested visiting the official websites of the EU and the Czech Embassy in Armenia, noting that the website contains the answers to the questions. However, the website does not contain visa statistics.

Refusals are communicated in writing, including the reason for the refusal. If the applicant still disagrees with the Embassy's decision after learning about the reason for the refusal, he may appeal the refusal. The website contains detailed information on the appeal procedure.

¹ http://www.iravunk.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=26491:2015-05-04-13-55-28&catid=41:lurer&Itemid=57

Prospective Members of the Schengen Area

For the first time ever, this monitoring covered the consular sections of Romania and Bulgaria in Armenia. They are not members of the Schengen Area and may issue only national visas, but the multiple-entry Schengen visas are valid in their territories. Therefore, the questions addressed to them were somewhat different. The inclusion of Romania's and Bulgaria's consular sections in this monitoring provided a more complete overview of the situation.

The following questions were posed:

- ❖ Do you have a unified list of documents required for a visa, similar to the consulates of the other EU Member States in Armenia?
- ❖ Does the embassy's official website contain information on the visa issuance rules (online scheduling of appointments, the application form, and the like), and if yes, in what language/s?
- ❖ What is the process of issuing long-term and multiple-entry visas?
- ❖ What are the visa application and refusal statistics for 2014 and for January-July 2015?
- ❖ What are the most common reasons for refusing a visa?

➤ **Bulgaria**

The official website of the Bulgarian Embassy in Armenia refers to the visa section of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (<http://www.mfa.bg/en/pages/109/index.html>), which contains comprehensive visa information in English and Bulgarian, and partial information in Russian. From January 2012, it was decided that anyone with a valid multiple-entry Schengen visa may enter Bulgaria without a Bulgarian visa. The list of documents required for a visa is virtually the same as the unified list of documents required for a Schengen visa.

From early 2015, Bulgaria took a step towards facilitating the issuance of visas to Armenian citizens: those who intend to travel to Bulgaria for the first time may receive a one-year short-term double- or multiple-entry visa. Minors wishing to rest in youth camps are issued five-year short-term multiple-entry visas. Three-year short-term double- or multiple-entry visas are issued to tourists that previously had similar visas. Real estate owners may benefit from these terms, as well. This simplification of the visa regime is offered to citizens of Armenia, Russia, Georgia, the Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.¹

¹ <http://news.am/arm/news/251631.html>

The number of refusals by the Bulgarian Consulate has traditionally been very low. The most common reason for refusal is the mismatch between the purpose of the visit and the presented documents.

➤ **Romania**

The website of the Romanian Embassy in Armenia contains a link to the <http://erevan.mae.ro/en> website presented by the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which contains complete visa information in English and Romanian.

The Consular Service of Romania in Armenia responded to our inquiry by stating that, during 2014, it issued about 700 visas, of which 90% were single-entry visas. About 85% of the visas were issued free of charge, and refusals were below 1%. There were no appeals. The visa statistics are virtually the same for 2015.

The required visa documents are the same as those contained in the unified list of documents of the Schengen Area. The most common reason for refusals is the absence of one of the required documents, and the number of refusals by the Romanian Consular Section has traditionally been very low.

➤ **The Visa Center**

Compared to a few years ago, when there were no external organizations officially providing visa services, a number of visa centers already operate in Armenia.

To facilitate the visa application process in Armenia, the Spanish Visa Support Visa Center was launched back in June 2014, when the Spanish Embassy in Armenia (resident in Moscow) decided to cooperate with VFS Global, a large private company that provides services to the diplomatic missions of a number of countries, in accepting applications for visas with a validity of up to 90 days. From 15 January 2015, the Lithuanian Embassy in Armenia, too, started to cooperate with VFS Global in accepting visa applications¹ for Schengen visas to enter Estonia, Denmark, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Spain. On 4 May 2015, the Greek Visa Center was opened in Yerevan.² Presently, these centers operate as one visa center—the Unified Visa Applications Center located at 48/1 Nalbandyan Street (Yerevan), which accepts visa applications for seven Schengen countries.

Given the importance of the visa center in accepting applications, it was decided to also monitor the center—its activities and website. The questions addressed to the Visa Center were compiled on the basis of the issues frequently raised by ordinary citizens in the mass media.

The following questions were posed:

❖ *Which countries do you serve?*

¹ <http://www.mediamax.am/am/news/foreignpolicy/12829/>

² <http://www.banks.am/am/news/newsfeed/10782/>

- ❖ *What is the service fee?*
- ❖ *Please, describe the application and appointment scheduling process.*
- ❖ *Do you have statistics on the number of citizens that used the Visa Center's services from its opening to July 2015 (if yes, please, provide a breakdown by countries)?*
- ❖ *How many applicants were served by the Center free of charge?*
- ❖ *In view of long queues due to the summer and winter holidays, what measures are you taking to address this problem?*

However, the Visa Center did not respond to our inquiry letter at all (leaving the impression that they operate outside of the Armenian legal framework), and we had to limit the study to information on its website. The website contains detailed information on the visa types, required documents, fees, additional services (filling out a visa application, taking a photo, delivering the passport, and so on). There are options for online scheduling and online tracking of applications. In addition to the visa fee, a 20-24 euro service fee (including value-added tax) is collected depending on the country. Complaints and comments regarding the Visa Center's work can be sent to feedback.ltar@vfshelpline.com and feedback.grarm@vfshelpline.com.

From the very first months of the Visa Center's activities, numerous complaints have emerged in connection with the quality of citizen services, huge queues during the holidays, a particular case of losing the applicant's documents, and the like. These issues were covered extensively in the online media.¹ Heated discussion of the Visa Center's work unfolded in the social media. Our organization, too, received a number of complaints. Based on applications by numerous citizens, the State Commission for the Protection of Economic Competition even launched proceedings with respect to the Visa Center²

From October 2015, the Italian Embassy in Armenia, too, started to cooperate with a visa center, namely the company TLS CONTACT, which is located at 4 Vardanantz Street (Yerevan), but considering that this particular visa center became operational at the final stage of our monitoring, we did not review its activities. The website of this visa center, too, is quite comprehensive and contains information on the visa types and the required documents; online scheduling is possible, and the service fee is 10,000 Armenian drams. In addition to Italy, this visa center covers visa applications for Malta and Finland. In this case, however, the Italian Consulate informs that it no longer accepts visa applications, which contradicts Paragraph 3 of Article 6 of the EU-Armenia Agreement on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas, which provides that the Member States shall

¹ <http://www.tert.am/am/news/2015/07/08/visa/1728056> ; <http://www.1in.am/1665462.html>

² <http://civilnet.am/2015/08/14/visa-application-center-investigation/#.Vi4qfdIrJkg>

maintain the possibility for all applicants to lodge their applications directly at their consulates.

To conclude, although some embassies have organized a rather efficient process of accepting the citizens' visa applications, queues emerge especially during the summer holiday season in embassies that, in addition to their national visas, issue visas for other EU Member States, and there are some difficulties connected to the online scheduling of applications. The visa centers have encountered similar problems. Following especially our inquiries concerning these issues, the consulates have taken some steps, and we hope that in the future, too, they will increase capacity as necessary, bearing in mind the seasonality factor, because experience and our monitoring have shown that, in some cases, queues emerge, and people sometimes do not receive the visa on time. To this end, it is very important for the embassies to have the technical and human resources, to organize and manage the queues properly, to have waiting areas with chairs, and so on.

According to the responses of the consulates, the process of issuing long-term and multiple-entry visas is virtually the same as that for single-entry visas, except for the need to justify the goal of frequent visits. However, our monitoring showed that the embassies are not very likely to issue long-term visas.

Having compared the information on the official websites of the consular sections of EU embassies in Armenia, their activities, and the provisions of the EU-Armenia Agreement on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas, it becomes clear that the Consulates are not always fully following the Agreement. Levels of compliance and modes of daily operation vary between Consulates.

➤ **Inquiries with Refused Applicants**

The consular sections of some embassies in Armenia, disregarding or not fully complying with the EU-Armenia Agreement on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas, sometimes refuse issuing a visa without a proper justification. Citizens have complained about a number of such cases, including in the social media. There are frequent cases of refusing the long-term (one-year) multiple-entry visa, instead issuing a shorter (for instance, six-month) visa, as described above.

During 2014, the Schengen Area embassies in Armenia received a total of 52,021 visa applications, of which 5,259 (10.1%) were refused. 9,134 (19.5%) of the 46,757 visas issued were multiple-entry visas.¹

To complete the study of refusals, we made inquiries with some of the refused citizens. During January-July 2015, we were contacted by 58 such citizens. In the inquiries and complaints, they described the main problems encountered in the

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/visa-policy/index_en.htm

work of the consulates in serving citizens. We were further contacted by many citizens with respect to problems of online scheduling for appointments with the consulates (especially in the summer months). In some cases, the consulate had put a refusal stamp in the citizen's passport, which is not permitted. Others were refused without written justification. Some of the written notices of refusal did not contain specific justifications. In many cases, well-known public figures and academics were unable to schedule an appointment. In the online media, we encountered a number of reports describing violations of citizens' rights by the consulates (in one particular case, where there was an official invitation from the EU, a newborn was refused and the mother was issued a visa, and in another, a former high-level public officer was refused). To make the monitoring of these refusals continuous, in view of their importance, the ACGRC contains an announcement inviting citizens refused by the consular services of EU Member States in Armenia to send refusal information to acgrcyerevanoffice@gmail.com: this, however, does not imply support in obtaining a visa. Rather, it will help to analyze the refusal cases with a view to preparing recommendations for the consular services of EU Member States in Armenia and the EU institutions in the future.

Thus, it is important for us to continue inquiries with refused visa applicants, because sometimes, the consulates refuse without providing the justification. Moreover, it is important to inform citizens of the procedures for appealing refusals.

The consular staff should respect human dignity and not discriminate based on sex, race, ethnicity, religion, age, and sexual orientation. When consular staff violate the rights of visa applicants, the latter may appeal to their supervisors or to the foreign affairs ministry of the respective country (the websites of many such ministries contain a feedback section). Armenian citizens are advised to study the www.visa-free-europe.eu website of the Visa-free Europe Coalition for visa matters. The following link on the site can be used for complaints: <http://visa-free-europe.eu/about-us/visa-whistle-blower/>.

Chapter Two

Passports and Visas Department of the Police of the Republic of Armenia; State Migration Service of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Emergency Situations of the Republic of Armenia

Another part of this project monitoring focused on the performance of the domestic authorities responsible for the sector—the Passports and Visas Department of the Police of the Republic of Armenia; State Migration Service of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Emergency Situations of the Republic of Armenia. Questions related to the project scope and relevant functions were prepared and sent to the heads of the respective agencies in the form of official letters. Responses were received in a rather short period of time, containing detailed answers to our questions.

Passports and Visas Department of the Police of the Republic of Armenia

The following questions were posed to the Passports and Visas Department of the Police of the Republic of Armenia:

- ❖ Do all of the regional passport authorities of Armenia have portable stations for issuing biometric passports?
- ❖ What is the procedure of issuing biometric passports for persons with disabilities, and are appropriate conditions created for issuing biometric passports to them?
- ❖ How many biometric passports were issued in 2014 and January-July 2015?
- ❖ Is there cooperation with the relevant EU bodies in document security? Is there information sharing about lost/stolen passports? Are passport samples exchanged with the European side?
- ❖ Are anti-corruption seminars and training courses organized for the staff of the passport authorities in an attempt to facilitate the implementation of the reforms?

Taking into consideration the reforms implemented in the system in recent years, it is important to ensure the presence of portable stations for issuing biometric passports and identification cards, especially for citizens with limited mobility, as well as the residents of remote and borderline areas (this was a mandatory requirement of the EU). The Passports and Visas Department informed us that one portable station operates in each region of Armenia (save for Ararat and Armavir, which are served through the station at the headquarters of the Passports

and Visas Department), and two portable stations in the City of Yerevan. Presently, there are talks with the Polish side for purchasing new hardware and portable stations by yearend 2015. The availability of equipment in the regional passport authorities is an important step towards document protection, personal data security, and compliance with the EU’s technical requirements.

According to the law, a passport is issued within 15 working days for a fee of 25,000 Armenian drams. A citizen can obtain a biometric passport faster for an additional fee. According to the Republic of Armenia Government Decree dated 19 December 2013, the additional fee for issuing or exchanging an Armenian citizen’s biometric passport or identification card within one working day is 20,000 drams, and within three working days—10,000 drams.¹

The biometric passport issuance procedure is regulated by Article 5 of the Republic of Armenia Law on the Passport of a Citizen of the Republic of Armenia, which provides that a biometric passport shall contain a technical part—the data storage, which shall contain the mandatory data required by Paragraphs 2 and 3 of the same Article, as well as the fingerprints of the right and left hand index fingers. For children, fingerprints are taken after the age of six, and the photo is changed every time a new passport is issued, regardless of age. Photos and fingerprints are taken at the police station, and for applications abroad—in the respective diplomatic mission or consular post of Armenia. The Eurodac common system of fingerprints was created and operates under the Dublin Convention to address irregular migration between the Eastern Partnership countries and the EU.²

According to Article 4 of the Republic of Armenia Law on the Passport of a Citizen of the Republic of Armenia and Article 3 of the Republic of Armenia Law on Identification Cards, an identification card and passport shall be issued to a citizen declared as legally incapable on the basis of the legal guardian’s application, to a citizen declared as having limited capability—on the basis of the citizen’s own application, and to a citizen having first-degree disability—on the basis of a representative’s application, which shall be accompanied with the disability certificate copy authenticated by a notary.

According to the response we received from the Passports and Visas Department of the Police, 198,104 identification cards and biometric passports were issued during January-June 2014, compared to 96,520 identification cards and 56,945 biometric passports (not including the number of citizens with limited mobility) during the same period in 2015. Clearly, the number of identification cards and biometric passports is quite large for such a short period of time. Although the current stage of the visa facilitation and readmission agreements does not require issuance of biometric passports (citizens do not have to hold a

¹ <http://www.pastinfo.am/hy/node/39529#sthash.rc5gCrDF.dpuf>

² <http://eapmigrationpanel.org/page18357.html>

biometric passport in order to benefit from the visa facilitation agreement), it will be a mandatory prerequisite for continuing the visa liberalization process.

It is essential that the identification cards and biometric passports are ICAO-compliant and have been reviewed by the relevant experts. Their samples are exchanged under the appropriate procedures. Data on stolen and lost documents is provided to Interpol National Central Bureau of Armenia.

Another important change was introduced for citizens by a Government Decree dated 8 July 2015, which approved the list of embassies and consulates presented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which are authorized to issue or change passports. The list includes the Armenian embassies in Argentina, Belarus, Bulgaria, Brazil, Great Britain, Vietnam, Georgia, Denmark, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Iran, Spain, Italy, Kazakhstan, Canada, China, Kuwait, Lebanon, Lithuania, Mexico, the United Arab Emirates, Poland, Romania, Syria, Turkmenistan, Sweden, and Switzerland, and the Armenian Consulates General in Aleppo, Batumi, Marseilles, Odessa, and Sochi. The Armenian embassies in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Russia, the USA, Ukraine, France, and the Czech Republic, and the Armenian Consulates General in Los Angeles, Rostov-on-Don, and Saint Petersburg may issue ordinary passports when it is impossible to issue a biometric passport.¹

In addition to training courses required by law, the staff of the passport authorities take part in conferences and workshops where the newly-adopted legislation and amendments are presented.

To curb corruption risks, boost the effectiveness of reforms, and deal more efficiently with the local population, the regional passport authorities were placed under the direct supervision of the regional police authorities, which can be considered progress in terms of improving transparency. Importantly, Armenians abroad can pose questions to a representative of the Police through Skype, including questions on acquiring or terminating Armenian citizenship, obtaining or exchanging an Armenian citizen or identification card, registering at a place of residence, acquiring a residence permit, and on other key functions of the Passports and Visas Department.

While the Passports and Visas Department has implemented commendable reforms (including improved citizen services, technical refurbishment, and introduction of more protected documents), a number of questions still remain:

- In the early stages of issuing biometric passports and identification cards, there were long queues in some of the passport authorities, but this problem has been virtually solved now.
- There were complaints about the Government-established stamp duty for the passport (1,000 drams for the old-sample passport, and 25,000 drams

¹ <http://news.am/arm/news/276004.html>

for the new biometric passport, although holders of a biometric passport no longer have to pay an annual fee of 1,000 drams for passport validity abroad). The fee issue will become more serious when the biometric passport becomes mandatory for applying for a Schengen visa. It would be desirable to have a special favorable policy for vulnerable groups.

- Currently, a person receiving a new passport must receive a biometric passport. Old-sample passports are issued to children. Citizens also have the right to seek a five-year extension to the old passport, but may not apply for a Schengen visa with those passports. With the launch of the Visa Dialogue, the biometric passport will become mandatory.

State Migration Service of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Emergency Situations of the Republic of Armenia

The following questions were posed to State Migration Service of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Emergency Situations of the Republic of Armenia:

- ❖ Do you perform general monitoring of compliance with the provisions of the Readmission Agreement?
- ❖ Please, provide readmission statistics for the period after the entry into force of the Agreement.
- ❖ What specific steps must Armenia take for returned/readmitted citizens or non-citizens, and what programs are implemented in practice?
- ❖ Do you plan negotiations to conclude readmission agreements with countries that are not party to the Readmission Agreement?
- ❖ Have implementation protocols been concluded with the EU Member States that are a party to the Readmission Agreement?

As the interconnected processes of readmission and visa facilitation are crucial for the EU, they entered into force concurrently. The procedures of returning irregular migrants are defined by the domestic legislation of the EU Member States. The readmission agreements define only the inter-state procedures of return. The Migration Service believes that the entry into force of the EU readmission agreement will hardly result in a significant increase in the number of persons returned; rather, it is expected simply to regulate the procedures of return. Although it is common practice for the receiving side to bear the costs of returning irregular migrants, the readmission agreement with Armenia provides that the sending side will bear the costs of returning irregular migrants.

The Republic of Armenia Prime Minister's Decree 1228-A dated 12 December 2012 approved the "Action Plan for the Armenia-EU Readmission Agreement." On 19 March 2014, the Republic of Armenia Government enacted Decree 300-N "On the Measures to Ensure Implementation of the Agreement on the Readmission of

Persons Residing without Authorisation between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia.” The decree regulates the procedure of Armenian state authorities reviewing applications received under the aforementioned agreement. The State Migration Service under the Republic of Armenia Ministry for Territorial Administration was designated as the “competent authority” of the Republic of Armenia under the agreement. To monitor the implementation of the commitments under the agreement and to discuss the issues that arise, an inter-agency group led by the Head of the State Migration Service was created.

Under the Readmission Agreement, the Republic of Armenia has to review applications on the readmission or transit of Armenian nationals or third-country nationals residing in the territory of a Member State without authorization and to respond within the established time period (from two working days up to 12 calendar days). Under the current procedure, a person may be returned from the first point of entry, which is often quite hard to determine.

A readmission request goes through the following procedure (four bodies are involved in the readmission process on the part of the Republic of Armenia—the State Migration Service, the National Security Service, the Police, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs): the State Migration Service receives a request and informs the Police for checking whether the person specified in the request is a citizen of the Republic of Armenia. After the citizenship has been checked, the Police replies to the State Migration Service, which in turn informs the Ministry of Foreign Affairs so Armenian consular officers in the Requesting State are informed about the need to issue a return document, and notifies the National Security Service to arrange entry into Armenia at the border. In some cases, an interview attended by a diplomatic officer of the Republic of Armenia may be organized in the EU Member States for the purpose of determining the person’s citizenship. However, the return process is rather complicated [and bureaucratic], so the person is not necessarily returned after his citizenship has been established.

According to the State Migration Service, a bilateral memorandum on the return procedures needs to be concluded with each Member State of the EU, in addition to the readmission agreement, in order to expedite the return of citizens.

Under the EU-Armenia Readmission Agreement, bilateral implementing protocols have already been received from Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and the Benelux countries. The draft protocols are currently undergoing domestic approval in accordance with the Armenian legislation.

As stated above, the State Migration Service under the Republic of Armenia Ministry for Territorial Administration and Emergency Situations has a crucial role to play in the implementation of the visa facilitation and readmission agreements, as it is the primary agency in charge of implementing the readmission agreements. The State Migration Service is involved in the process—from drafting the

agreement texts to implementing them. Prior to concluding a framework agreement on readmission with the EU, the Republic of Armenia concluded 10 agreements with 13 states since 2003, including 12 European countries (the Czech Republic, Norway, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Denmark, Latvia, and Lithuania) (for the text of the agreements, see http://smsmta.am/?menu_id=15) and one CIS country (the Russian Federation).

In response to our inquiry, the State Migration Service informed that, during 2014, 68 readmission requests concerning 163 persons were received (including 56 from Sweden and 12 from Poland). In the first half of 2015, 61 readmission requests concerning 139 persons were received (including 46 from Sweden 9 from Poland, 4 from Belgium, and 2 from Bulgaria). Clearly, most readmission requests come from Sweden.

Interestingly, according to the official data of the Migration Service, EU Member States are the destination for only 10% of the migration from Armenia. Armenia is in the “top ten” in terms of the number of citizens seeking asylum in the EU, or even in the “top three” in some countries (such as Belgium and France).

Armenia is currently negotiating readmission agreements with Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia.

In the context of the readmission agreement, the reintegration of persons returning/returned to Armenia is very important, as well. The government and civil society have certain obligations in this area. Although the Readmission Agreement does not stipulate specific obligations with respect to returning/returned citizens, the Government of Armenia endorsed the procedure of maintaining the <http://www.tundarc.am> online information portal under Priority Area 8 (“Return of Armenian Citizens from Foreign States and Support to Their Subsequent Reintegration in Homeland”) of the “2012-2016 Action Plan for Implementation of the State Policy of Migration Regulation of the Republic of Armenia” approved by the Republic of Armenia Government Decree 1593-N dated November 2011. Through this portal, persons wishing to return to Armenia from foreign states can ask questions to the state authorities and even obtain answers through videolink.

The Republic of Armenia Law on Employment prescribes 13 state programs of employment regulation for returned migrants. Under Government Decree 534-N, returned persons are considered non-competitive in the labor market and are eligible for state programs of employment. However, the effectiveness of these programs and the number of actual beneficiaries need to be examined.

Through the first practical program under the EU-Armenia Joint Declaration on the Mobility Partnership, and under the EU-funded Targeted Initiative for Armenia project, the French Office for Immigration and Integration, in close cooperation with the State Migration Service of Armenia, opened a Referral Center for Reintegration in Yerevan, which aims at supporting establishment in Armenia

after returning from abroad. Armenian citizens that have lived in a European country for at least one year and have contacted the Center for support within at least six months of their return may apply to the project. The Center maintains regularly updated information on all of the available reintegration projects. A forum of 11 NGOs and international organizations working in the field of reintegration has been created.

Citizen awareness on readmission is significantly lower, although it is a very important procedure. Having basic knowledge about readmission would cause Armenian citizens to think twice before leaving Armenia for good.

These types of projects demonstrate how important it is for the EU to further improve the management of migration flows in Armenia. They also demonstrate the extensive support provided for capacity building of the relevant agencies for improving migration management and the reintegration process.

Various projects and types of support are available for the reintegration of returnees, from advice to the provision of a certain amount of funding for starting a small private business, or professional training, children's education, health care, and the like. Such projects are implemented by the government, international organizations, and/or non-governmental organizations, and are not sustainable. However, the returnees need lasting support. Otherwise, they may become motivated to emigrate again.

Publishing and disseminating information materials and organizing various events are important ways of raising the awareness of returnees and the public at large on these matters. To this end, the project organized a seminar for journalists in the Town of Tsaghkadzor, and awareness-raising events in Vanadzor and Yerevan with the aim of presenting the changes in this sphere to the public. These activities demonstrated strong public interest in these matters (as illustrated by the large numbers of persons participating in the events organized under the project) and the low level of awareness, which confirms the need for such events and projects covering the various regions of Armenia, given their importance for individual and collective rights of persons.

We highly appreciate the willingness of the State Migration Service to cooperate and the detailed response to our inquiry, as well as the active involvement of its representative in the event in Tsaghkadzor, although much still remains to be done in solving the problems related to migration.

Conclusion

The visa facilitation and readmission agreements have been in force since January 2014. The monitoring carried out by the Analytical Center on Globalization and Regional Cooperation (ACGRC) with the support of Open Society Foundations-Armenia in 2014 and 2015 provided insights into the materials collected during two years.

This study and the collected materials support certain conclusions and recommendations. At ACGRC's initiative, some of the recommendations were reflected in the visas section of the Recommendations from the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Conference held in Riga in May 2015.¹ Below are the findings and recommendations of our study.

Consular Services of EU Member States in Armenia

- ✓ The consular services should make more frequent use of the possibilities provided by the Schengen acquis in order to issue multiple-entry long-term visas.
- ✓ The consulates and visa centers should inform eligible applicant of their right to apply for a long-term visa. Long-term (minimum term of one year) visas should be the rule, rather than the exception. This step, too, will reduce migration risks.
- ✓ The consulates should avoid issuing single-entry or short-term visas to applicants with a positive Schengen visa history. This is essential, because the two-year study and monitoring revealed many cases of applicants receiving a shorter visa than the one requested, despite presenting the relevant justification and documents.
- ✓ The long-term visa maturity should be at least six months, as stipulated by Article 24.2 of the Visa Code.
- ✓ The consulates should not demand the long-term visa applicants to provide invitations containing precise plans for their future visits, for visas with a term of one year or longer, because it is often impossible to present such an invitation, and whenever presented, such visit plans are far from being precise.
- ✓ The consulates should accept the electronic versions of documents, especially if they are sent from abroad: this would not increase the likelihood of falsifying documents; rather, it would considerably streamline and speed up the collection of the necessary documents by the applicant. Some consulates refuse to accept electronic versions or copies of documents (mostly, the invitations).

¹ <http://eap-csf.eu/assets/files/Recomendations-Riga-2015.pdf>

- ✓ The consular services should give visa applicants a genuine choice between the possibility to lodge their applications directly at the consulates or applying to an external service provider.
- ✓ So long as the issuance of long-term (one year and longer) multiple-entry visas remains a problem, it is important to harmonize the visa requirements and procedures between EU Member States.
- ✓ The consular services should be more transparent by providing statistical data on the number of visa applications, the number and types of visas issued, and the number of refusals.

Visa Centers Operating in Armenia

- ✓ We urge the visa centers to operate more transparently and not to turn down cooperation offers, because the Unified Visa Applications Center did not respond to our inquiry letters at all.
- ✓ The selection of visa centers should be more transparent, enabling local companies to participate in the tenders, as well. The selected companies should strictly comply with the Armenian and EU legislation concerning data privacy and document security and transportation (in view of one case of documents lost by one of the visa centers).
- ✓ The consular sections and visa centers should improve the selection and training of their technical personnel, including on topics of customer service. Although embassies have the capacity to address this issue, the problem is rather acute in the case of the visa center staff, because they need not only professional knowledge and skills, but also expertise in document security, custody, transportation, and return. Thus, the selection and training of the technical personnel remains a weakness of the visa centers.
- ✓ The consulates and visa centers should have conditions and facilities for the visa applicants (including queue management systems, seats, sun and rain cover, and the like).
- ✓ The consulates and visa centers should continue their efforts at increasing capacity, especially in view of seasonality, because most of the complaints had to do with the online scheduling of appointments. To solve this problem, it will be important to improve their facilities, human resource capacity, queue management systems, and the like.
- ✓ The consulates and visa centers had frequent cases of credible visa applicants with a positive history suffering the consequences of long queues, the unavailability of online scheduling, and requirements for additional documents.
- ✓ As the consulates and visa centers do not maintain information on the number of visas issued free of charge, and citizens having to use to visa center services end up paying them, it can be concluded that the Visa

Facilitation Agreement provision on free-of-charge visa issuance for certain categories of citizens is still not fully effective in practice.

The European Union

- ✓ As noted in the recommendations on the visa dialogue, it is essential for the European Commission to monitor the visa sphere and assess the situation, taking into consideration the number of refusals, the number of citizens refused entry on the border, the number of return decisions due to irregular stay in the EU territory, the number of persons returned, and so on.
- ✓ It is crucial for the European Commission to provide additional statistics in order to better assess compliance with the Visa Code and comprehensively analyze the data related to visas.
- ✓ We recommend to the EU and to the consular services of EU Member States in Armenia to pay close attention to appeals against refusals and to ensure a more transparent and streamlined process of reviewing decisions, which will enable the appealing citizens to get replies within a reasonable period. There is no data on the number of decisions changed as a result of appeals, which would make it possible to assess the effectiveness of the appeal process.

Armenian Citizens and State Authorities

- ✓ Armenian citizens and civil society representatives, as well as state authorities should follow up on the implementation of the reforms in this field.
- ✓ Citizens applying for a visa are urged to be more diligent in the preparation and collection of documents required for a visa, and refrain from changing the reasoning documents after receiving a visa (for instance, changing the destination country), because the visa may be canceled in such cases, or entry may be prohibited at the border.
- ✓ We recommend various public awareness-raising activities in this field, including publishing and dissemination of information materials. This recommendation concerns especially the non-governmental organizations active in relation to visas and migration.
- ✓ We recommend to the Armenian state authorities to continue organizing seminars, study tours, and training programs for their staff working in this field.

The Armenia-EU relations in the field of visas and migration were also affected by the situation in the EU in 2015, given the unprecedented influx of migrants to the EU. According to data of the EU's Frontex (the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member

States of the European Union), over 750,000 migrants crossed the border into the EU during 2015.¹ During September and October, the influx of migrants slowed down (with about 170,000 migrants arriving in September, compared to 200,000 in August), compared to only 280,000 in 2014. On the background of these events, the EU Member States starting discussing possible revision of the migration policy, tightening of the Schengen rules, changes in the rules of movement within the Schengen Area, and other sharp moves as necessary. Hence, the position of European citizens and politicians on these matters has become more radical, which can question further progress in visa facilitation and liberalization. In this situation, the EU countries in support of liberalization and the proponents of this policy will possibly be in minority. Hence, Armenian politicians, Armenian diplomatic missions abroad, and non-governmental organizations and active groups of civil society need to continue working actively with European opinion leaders, including civil society organizations active in the field, in order to somehow influence the policy decision makers. The efforts should continue with a view to proving that tightening of the visa rules is not an effective tool for migration control, and the potential visa-free framework between Armenia and the EU does not pose a threat to the EU Member States.

It is important for Armenian citizens to know that there is an international consortium dealing with visa issues—the Visa-free Europe Coalition, which is a consortium of non-governmental organizations of Eastern Partnership states, which deal with visa issues,² and the Analytical Center on Globalization and Regional Cooperation is a member of this consortium.³ The consortium has for years been active in this field through monitoring, reporting, recommendations, and other initiatives.

This exercise has shown that there is clearly progress. Much work is being carried out by the EU and Armenia, but it is important to note that active efforts in this field should be continued, and the cooperation should be deepened. For a deeper and more comprehensive comparative review of the work of consulates, inquiries with refused visa applicants should continue. The announcement on ACGRC's website, which is a means of collecting information on refusals from applicants, will help to raise awareness of the problems and complaints.

To conclude this study into the practical application of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas and the Agreement on the Readmission of Persons Residing without Authorisation, we believe there is a need to make our monitoring continuous and more extensive.

¹ <http://frontex.europa.eu/news/710-000-migrants-entered-eu-in-first-nine-months-of-2015-NUiBkk>

² <http://visa-free-europe.eu/>

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Monitoring Report

**Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia
on the Facilitation of the Issuance of Visas
(second monitoring)**

ԷԴԻՏ ՊՐԻՆՏ
Երևան, Թումանյան 12
հեռ.՝ (374 10) 520 848
www.editprint.am
info@editprint.am



EDIT PRINT
12 Toumanyán str., Yerevan
Tel.: (374 10) 520 848
www.editprint.am
info@editprint.am