



# POLICY BRIEF

## Armenia's migration cooperation with the European Union and Eurasian Economic Union

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June 2020

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief aims to analyse Armenia's cooperation on migration with the European Union (EU) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), looking in particular at the resulting simultaneous efforts and obligations, as well as their impact on the national migration policy and actual flows experienced.



A large share of the labour migrants would opt for the EU rather than Russia, however, the visa requirements and language barriers turn Russia into a more favourable destination.

## MIGRATION FLOWS FROM ARMENIA TOWARDS THE EU AND EEU

Since its independence in 1991, Armenia has experienced considerable emigration, mainly arising from the political and socioeconomic situation in the country (e.g. high unemployment rates, low income levels) and various other reasons<sup>1</sup>. Whereas only 15% of Armenian migrants went to the EU over the recent years, 75% aim for Russia and 10% for the USA.

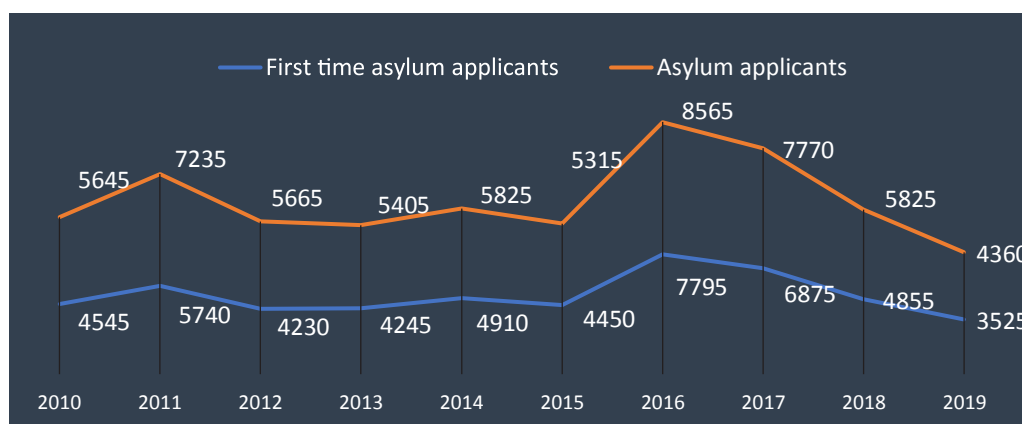
The available evidence shows that a large share of the labour migrants would opt for the EU rather than Russia, however, the visa requirements and language barriers turn Russia into a more favourable destination. Naturally, the visa regime plays a decisive role as the entry permit remains most difficult to obtain. The complete lack of warranty to obtain a visa when re-applying for it has prevented the formation of a significant and stable flow of (labour) migrants to the EU. The overwhelming majority of Armenian migrants enter the EU legally with a tourist visa but then seek to obtain a permanent residence and access to social services in an EU Member State (EU MS) in different ways, such as through applying for asylum. Moreover, in recent years, many Armenians left the country due to health problems, particularly when in urgent need for treatment and severe cases.

The myth whereby the EU's asylum system can be easily misused still exists in Armenia. Asylum seekers tend to move to the EU with their families. Usually, they enter legally with a valid visa and only afterwards violate the rules of stay. In pursuit of their dream to find employment inside the EU and thereby secure a more prosperous and better life, they pay a high price. They sell their belongings and use up their savings, dissolve relationships and leave their jobs in order to move to Europe. However, through their decision to apply for asylum, they disrupt their children's education, investing a lot of money and time before eventually returning home.

Between 2010 and 2018, Armenian nationals submitted 57.250 asylum applications across the EU, with Germany, France, Austria and Belgium receiving 88% of them. The peak observed in 2016 resulted from the growth of asylum applications filed by Syrians of Armenian ethnic origin, who hold a Syrian and Armenian (dual) citizenship. Meanwhile, Armenia has officially been recognized as a "safe country" of origin, thereby allowing for an accelerated asylum procedure in some EU MS (e.g. France, Norway, and Bulgaria). In spite of not recognizing Armenia as a safe country of origin officially, other EU countries (e.g. Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, etc.) do also consider it as such, particularly since the political changes of 2018. Subsequently, the first-time asylum applications filed by Armenian nationals across the EU MS decreased substantially from 6,875 in 2017 to 4,855 in 2018 and 3,525 in 2019 (Figure 1). The efforts undertaken by the Armenian authorities might have also led to this decrease. In particular, the authorities, together with the international partners and civil society organizations, have initiated information campaigns to raise awareness about the negative consequences of irregular migration.

<sup>1</sup> The political changes of 2018 had a significant impact on the migration dynamics, resulting in a positive net-migration rate in 2018 for the first time after a decade marked by a negative migration balance. This shift has manifested the overly positive perception of the new government within the population, large parts of which have started to plan their future within the country rather than abroad.

Figure 1. Asylum applications of Armenian citizens in the EU and EFTA Member States, 2010-2019



Source: Eurostat data

Other examples of migrants seeking permanent residence in the EU have included Armenian students entering within an educational or research program, as well as minor flows of high-quality specialists holding an employment contract (see Table 1).

### First residence permits for occupational reasons (in thousands, 2017 figures)

Table 1. Number of Armenian citizens residing (holding valid resident status) in an EU MS per end of year

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
<b>Subsidiary protection</b>	1.452	1.547	1.633	2.136	2.017	1.609	1.732	1.316	1.465
<b>Study</b>	1.198	1.206	1.987	1.672	1.707	1.665	1.602	1.581	1.67
<b>Refugee status</b>	2.67	2.966	3.23	3.406	3.548	3.575	3.616	3.788	3.828
<b>Work</b>	5.578	5.556	6.798	4.675	4.492	4.578	4.841	4.987	4.909
<b>Family reunification</b>	15.629	16.107	17.886	19.513	20.821	21.617	23.529	25.154	26.291
<b>Citizenship</b>	1.446	1.384	1.708	2.253	2.447	3.013	3.085	2.528	N/A
<b>Other grounds</b>	18.604	20.621	20.593	23.767	24.132	25.75	25.23	26.537	27.565
<b>Total</b>	46.577	49.387	53.835	57.422	59.164	61.807	63.635	65.891	65.728

Source: Eurostat data

The migration towards Russia but also other EEU countries (e.g. Belarus and Kazakhstan) is quite different as most migrants primarily seek employment – be it seasonal, non-seasonal but short-term (up to one year), or long-term (above one year). Those seeking permanent residence in Russia are mostly reunified family members or first-time emigrants. The visa-free regime, intensive air traffic with and geographical proximity to Russia decreases the travel costs considerably, making Russia a far cheaper destination as compared to the EU MS and allowing Armenian nationals to move freely and repeatedly return home. Moreover, the knowledge of the Russian language and culture due to the Soviet past is quite common among the Armenian population.

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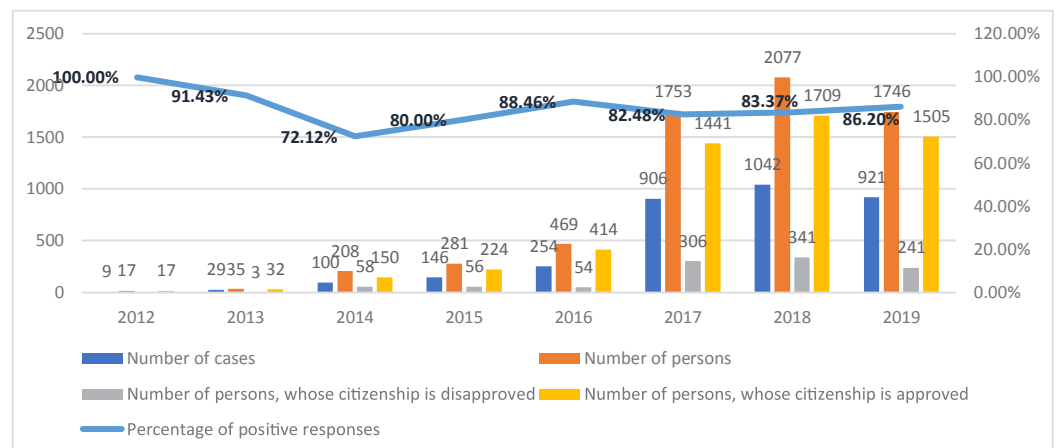
The lack of operational projects and the limited interest of the EU MS left Armenia's expectations unfulfilled. The projects mostly aimed at preventing irregular migration to the EU and assisting the return of Armenian citizens irregularly residing in the EU.

## Migration cooperation with the EU

Since the Armenian Government's declaration<sup>2</sup> that strong collaboration with the EU represents a national priority, the cooperation on migration between Armenia and the EU has intensified. The development of innovative approaches to migration occurred in particular within the frameworks of the **European Neighborhood Policy** (as of 2004) and **Eastern Partnership Initiative** (as of 2009), whereby Armenia took on new migration-related responsibilities with the EU. The cooperation intensified further through the ratification of the **EU-Armenia Joint Declaration on a Mobility Partnership** of 2011, involving ten EU MS. Aiming to facilitate legal migration, prevent and combat illegal immigration and human trafficking, it provided for a widened and deepened cooperation based on reciprocity. Armenia's engagement with the EU also derived from the increased migration and mobility towards the EU – be it for studying, employment or other purposes. However, the lack of operational projects and the limited interest of the EU MS left Armenia's expectations unfulfilled. The few projects implemented under the Mobility Partnership mostly aimed at preventing irregular migration to the EU and assisting the return of Armenian citizens irregularly residing in the EU as well as their further reintegration back home, rather than at facilitating the legal (labour) migration and mobility of Armenian nationals to the EU MS.


The **EU-Armenia Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements**, which entered into force on 1 January 2014, resulted in the establishing of two EU-Armenia joint committees that convene on an annual basis in order to monitor their implementation. Armenia has been undertaking consistent steps towards the effective implementation of these Agreements. High-ranking EU officials on many occasions have acknowledged Armenia's considerable progress in fulfilling its respective commitments. The number of readmission requests received under the EU-Armenia Readmission Agreement multiplied in 2017 as compared to previous years, with the share of positive responses on behalf of Armenia amounting to over 80%, once the citizenship of the concerned individuals is confirmed (Figure 2). While only Sweden and Poland filed readmission applications in 2014, ten EU Member States did so in 2019, with Germany filing the most requests as of 2017. Overall, 3,146 readmission requests (about 6,257 persons) were received in 2014–2019, with the Armenian citizenship confirmed for 5,133 persons under the EU-Armenia Readmission Agreement.

Figure 2. Dynamic of readmission requests during 2012-2019



Source: Migration Service of Armenia

<sup>2</sup> The legal framework for the Armenia-EU relations was the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement that was signed in 1996 and entered into force in 1999. In 2017, this agreement was replaced by the new Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) signed between Armenia and the EU. In 2018, CEPA was ratified by Armenia and is still pending to be ratified by the few EU MS.



As stipulated in a number of multilateral and bilateral documents (e.g. CEPA and "Partnership Priorities", Riga and Brussels Joint Declarations, "20 Deliverables for 2020"), the issue of readmission also relates to the launch of the **Visa Liberalization Dialogue** (VLD), which remains unfulfilled to date. The self-assessment report shared by Armenia with the EU concerning its VLD preparedness, stipulates that most of the conditions usually required in the first phase of the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) have already been fulfilled by Armenia. Moreover, the Armenian authorities launched a series of official visits to different EU MS in 2019, in order to discuss readmission, asylum and visa related issues at bilateral level and meet the benchmarks for a possible conclusion of VLAP. The latter is essential for Armenia, as it will bring tangible results to its citizens, boost people-to-people contacts and provide increased opportunities for safe and legal migration. The **Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement** (CEPA), signed in 2017, also refers to the cooperation on migration, asylum, border management, and readmission. Thus far, however, only two of nine actions in the area of migration have entered into force<sup>3</sup>.

Overall, the EU has provided solid support and funding to improve Armenia's migration management through different financial and technical instruments. These have included the European Neighbourhood Policy Instruments (Twinning, TAIEX), the Thematic Programme on Migration and Asylum, as well as bilateral funding from individual EU MS. They have promoted the establishment of biometric passports, integrated border management, automated information systems, asylum procedures, the approximation of legislation and institutional capacities etc. Individual EU MS such as the Netherlands, France or Sweden, have also carried out a number of activities and projects with the relevant Armenian state agencies, thereby signaling their interest in cooperating with Armenia on migration matters.

While extending the cooperation on migration matters with the EU remains a priority for the Armenian Government and the national migration policy, the EU mainly confined itself to providing financial support to the institutional and capacity building. The opening up of channels for labour migration and legal mobility of Armenian nationals could represent the next welcome step in the established cooperation.

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## Migration cooperation within the Eurasian Economic Union

Contrary to the EU, the migration cooperation framework of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) has focused mainly on the regulation of labour migration issues. The Treaty on the establishment of the EEU (2014) - consisting of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia - entered into force in January 2015. Similar to the EU, the EEU aims to establish a single market based on the freedom of movement of goods, services, capital and labour force. Armenia's accession to the EEU opened new opportunities in terms of migration, allowing Armenian nationals to reside and work across the EEU member states. Being exempt from the various measures for protection of national labour markets (e.g. quota system, work permits), Armenian migrants solely require an employment contract. Since Armenia's accession to the EEU, the number of Armenian nationals working in Russia – being the main destination for Armenia labour migrants – has increased substantially: in 2019, 210.460 Armenians worked in Russia as compared to 123.228 in 2013 (for more details see Table 2).

<sup>3</sup> Article 14, point (a) - Addressing the root causes of migration. Article 15, point (a) - full implementation of obligations assumed pursuant to the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia on the readmission of persons residing without authorisation.



Table 2. Number of Armenian citizens entering other EEU Member States for employment in 2012-2019

Country of destination	Number of workers from the Republic of Armenia							
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Belarus	202	362	387	383	372	400	432	397
Kazakhstan	28	65	272	2074	2297	3022	3121	2676
Russian Federation	87.938	123.228	194.684	264.135	209.887	232.247	207.945	210.460
Kyrgyzstan	1	1	2	---	---	---	---	---

*Source: Eurasian Economic Commission*

One reason for this increase is the possibility of Armenian migrants, already residing in Russia, to leave the shadow economy and regularise their residence and work status. The requirement for EEU citizens to present an employment contract in order to reside and work freely in another Member State resulted in a considerable decline of the shadow economy, as well as of informal employment.

Most labour migration to Russia is seasonal, ranging from eight to nine months on average. Nearly 96% of all Armenian seasonal migrants leave for Russia (in 2017). Two thirds of the Armenian labour migrants are believed to work in the construction sector, followed by agriculture (18.8%). Both Armenia and Russia profit from this type of circular migration: Russia receives the needed labour force and skills, while Armenia benefits from the remittances received and from the return of skilled migrants. About 80% of all remittances were received from Russia. However, there is also a flipside of this situation. Any changes in the Russian migration policy and economy have a direct impact on the migration flows from Armenia. Over the past five years, the economic difficulties experienced by Russia and the devaluation of the Russian ruble resulted in lower remittances, amounting to 13.3% of the Armenian GDP in 2017 (1,538 Mio US\$) and 12.0 % in 2018 (1,487 Mio US\$).

As of 2012, Russia made several changes to its migration policy. In 2013, entry bans for up to ten years for many foreign nationals, including Armenians, were introduced. Banned migrants who had left Russia were thus unable to return. The entry ban could result from a violation of Russian migration laws, but also from other administrative violations. The bans can be issued by the Main Directorate for Migration under the Ministry of Internal Affairs as well as by other agencies. The effective cooperation between the Migration Services of both countries resulted in the lifting of some 5.177 entry bans issued to Armenian nationals. Since 2014, the Migration Service of Armenia has submitted 13.213 applications to review individual entry bans to the Russian competent authority. 42.7% of the responses received were positive. Meanwhile, an unknown number of Armenians still remained in Russia, risking to receive entry-bans upon leaving the country.

In spite of being the preferred destination of Armenian (labour) migrants, Russia has no specific labour migration scheme or project envisaged to facilitate, regulate or inform Armenian migrants concerning their entry, work or stay in the country. Consequently, they remain rather unprotected, which is presently being addressed by various NGOs trying to protect the rights of labour migrants.

The **Joint Armenian-Russian Working Group**, set up in 2010 to implement the 1994 bilateral agreement<sup>4</sup> on mutual employment and social protection of their respective citizens, convenes once a year to discuss ongoing and urgent migration issues between the two countries. The latest session of July 2019 featured the following issues:

<sup>4</sup> Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Armenia and the Government of the Russian Federation on the employment and social protection of citizens of the Republic of Armenia working in the territory of the Russian Federation and citizens of the Russian Federation working in the territory of the Republic of Armenia, 1994.

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- exchange of statistical information on labour migration;
- exchange of information on changes in the migration legislation;
- cooperation on the lifting of entry bans;
- possibility of changing the purpose of entry in the Russian migration card without leaving the Russian territory.

**Table 3. Statistical indicators on Armenian nationals in Russian Federation**

	2017	2018	2019
Armenian nationals entering Russia	572,900	458,289	-
Migration registration	657,648	641,618	634336
For the purpose of "study"	8 321	9,801	13311
For the purpose of "work"	232,247	207,945	210460
For the purpose of "private"	89,657	87,459	82753
Residence permits issued	13,320	12,058	11856
Naturalized Armenian nationals	25,138	27,134	24024
Number of Armenians committing administrative offenses in the field of migration legislation in Russia	15,828	17,529	-
Number of notifications received on signing labor contract with RA citizens engaged in labor activities	142,951	146,936	-

*Source: Main Directorate for Migration, Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation*

Combating irregular migration and facilitating readmission represent further priority issues for cooperation and regulation. The **Russian-Armenian Readmission agreement** entered into force in January 2011, with 262 readmission cases (361 persons) received in the period 2012-2019. Armenian citizenship was confirmed for 258 persons. Bilateral readmission agreements are currently also being negotiated with other EEU members (Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan). However, the various reintegration programs currently implemented in Armenia target and fund mainly returnees from the EU, rather than from Russia.

## Policy options and recommendations

The survey data shows that different migrant groups engage in moving to the EU and EEU. Labour (seasonal) migration mainly targets the Russian Federation, whereas permanent emigration is mostly directed towards the EU. The cooperation agenda and priority issues differ accordingly - whereas readmission, asylum and visa are in the focus of the EU, the regulation of labour migration is more central within the EEU. Hence, there is no inconsistency between Armenia's migration cooperation agendas towards both Unions. It is in Armenia's national interest to facilitate mobility and protect the rights of its citizens.

Armenia's migration policy reflects the commitments arising from the international agreements signed with the EU and EEU. It also takes into consideration ongoing migration trends, as well as specific problems and developments. While ensuring the continuity of the visa liberalization process with the EU, Armenia's accession to the EEU also highlights the importance of ensuring the free movement of labor migrants within its respective Member States.

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The EU has been by far the largest donor for improvement of the migration and border management in Armenia, focusing mainly on the strengthening of institutional capacities, approximation of legislation, as well as readmission of Armenian migrants from the EU, once their legal status has expired. Armenia, by contrast, is most interested in making the travel and mobility to the EU easier for Armenian citizens. Visa liberalization is the top priority for Armenia, which is making great efforts in this respect. In order to expand the opportunities for labour migration, Armenia aims to negotiate migration partnership agreements with several EU countries. These shall enhance the mobility of students, young and highly qualified specialists or trainees. For instance, the Agreement between Armenia and France covers all parts of the migration cycle. However, it is still pending ratification by the French Parliament. After all, the best way to tackle irregular migration is by providing legal pathways for safe, regular and orderly migration. This will help to regulate the migration flows effectively.

Despite the right of Armenian nationals to stay and work across the EEU if they have an employment contract, the challenges of protecting their rights and interests abroad persist. This issue requires further EEU regulation, as does the overall promotion of legal migration and prevention of irregular migration within the EEU.

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This publication was produced in the framework of the 'Prague Process: Dialogue, Analyses and Training in Action' initiative, a component of the Mobility Partnership Facility II project, with the assistance of the European Union.

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Mobility Partnership Facility

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Eurasian Commission, Number of nationals of the Member States of the Eurasian Economic Union who entered the country (Republic of Armenia, Republic of Belarus, Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Russian Federation) for employment purposes during 2013-2019 (in Russian): <http://www.eurasiancommission.org/ru/act/finpol/migration/tm/Documents/%D0%A1%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8F%20%D0%BE%20%D1%87%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%20%D1%82%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B4%D1%8F%D1%89%D0%B8%D1%85%D1%81%D1%8F%20%202013-%202019%20%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B4%D1%8B.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3NZJkgckwM3IW2uq564YcJ591g-9FOyYlyeWbv9Wspax55FlvLrRofCQSE>, accessed 02.04.2020

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