



**TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP PROGRAM
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**WHAT’S NEXT FOR ARMENIA AFTER THE LAUNCH OF THE VISA
LIBERALISATION DIALOGUE**

Mariam Anastasyan

Abstract

The recent approval by the European Commission to launch the Visa Liberalization Dialogue (VLD) represents a significant political endorsement for Armenia. This decision sparked optimism among Armenians, displaying the EU’s support for Armenia’s democratic aspirations for deeper European engagement and integration. This article looks at Armenia’s relationship with the European Union and its implications concerning the visa liberalization process. It discusses the challenges and conditionalities that Armenia should enact to accomplish visa liberalization. Simultaneously, it reflects on Armenia’s window of opportunity to leverage the momentum to drive change within its legal and institutional frameworks.

Introduction

The EU-Armenia partnership is founded on a series of agreements and policies that laid the ground for the current cooperation. Starting with the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) in 1999 and followed by the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2003 to strengthen cooperation between the European Union and its Neighbors, the integration was solidified by the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009, targeting six post-Soviet states, including Armenia, and culminated in the signing of the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) on March 1, 2021, marking the present EU-Armenia agenda.

The initiation of the EU-Armenia Visa Liberalization Dialogue (VLD) in September 2024, marks an important milestone in EU-Armenia relations, and builds upon the effective implementation of the EU-Armenia Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements that Armenia has enacted proactively since 2014, serving as one of the main pillars and prerequisite for the initiation of Visa Liberalization Dialogue (VLD). Yet to achieve the momentum of the possible visa-free travel for Armenian citizens within the EU’s Schengen Area in the foreseeable future, Armenia should undertake a number of technical and legal benchmarks - enactment of the biometric data and travel documentation, border management, and the fight against illegal migration, respect of human rights and rule of law - stipulated by the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP), which presents a major challenge for the Armenian Government.

The Historical Context from the EU’s Perspective

To acknowledge the importance of Visa Liberalization Dialogues within the EU’s integrational processes, one should look back at the EU’s external oversight mechanisms from the 1990s and 2000s. During this period, the EU put forward the so-called *restraining* tools for border control regulations, migration, and security, by offering relaxed travels for the citizens of the EU Neighborhood Countries, with the incentive to implement readmission agreements and adhere to the EU standards by the “harmonization of legislation and policy convergence”¹ among the countries involved. If deemed successful, they would be granted a visa-free-regime. These policies were characterized by European scholars as confrontational,² that the EU pursued to securitize its “external frontiers while leveraging from neighboring countries as buffer zones.”³ They contend that this approach aimed to establish a “short-term security strategy”⁴ centered on migration and border control, as a nucleus for advancing “long-term good governance”⁵ in the Neighborhood countries. In doing so, the EU put forward “conditionality and

¹ Judith Kelley, “New Wine in Old Wineskins: Promoting Political Reforms Through the New European Neighbourhood Policy.” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 44 (1) 2006, 30

² Andrea Gawrich, Inna Melnykovska, and Rainer Schweickert. “Neighbourhood Europeanization through ENP: The Case of Ukraine” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 48(5), 2010, 1214

³ Judith Kelley, “New Wine in Old Wineskins: Promoting Political Reforms Through the New European Neighbourhood Policy.” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 44 (1) 2006, 30

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ *Ibid*

institutional socialization principles,⁶” to continue to exert its “external governance”⁷ standards by simultaneously “preserving its internal security from the external threats.”⁸ Within this context, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) frameworks played distinctive roles in introducing the notion of “positive political conditionality”⁹ by incorporating visa facilitation and readmission agreements as an integral part of the EU’s “common operational instruments for the negotiations within the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP).”¹⁰

Armenia’s path towards the VLP

The European Commission’s green light to launch a Visa Liberalization Dialogue (VLP) with Armenia came as a culmination of a decade of hard work to achieve this anticipated breakthrough. The progression from the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCAs) to the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and consequently the Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP) not only defined the basis of Armenia’s willingness to adhere to the EU legal norms but also served as a strategic platform in addressing border management and illegal migration origination from and passing through Armenia.

The 2011 EU-Armenia Joint Declaration on a Mobility Partnership created a solid infrastructure for bilateral collaboration on migration-related issues, promoting the mobility of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) country citizens within the EU Schengen Area. The Mobility Partnership concluded with the signing of the EU-Armenia visa facilitation and readmission agreement in 2014, an effective implementation of which served as a “positive political conditionality” that opened the door for the initiation of the Visa Liberalization Dialogue. The applications initiating the VLD were further articulated in the 2021 EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA). The agreement details such areas such as “cooperation on migration, asylum, and border management, the joint management of migration flows, and “addressing the root causes

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Sandra Lavanex, “EU external governance in wider Europe” *Journal of European Public Policy*, 11 (4) 2004, 681

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Alena Vieira and Syuzanna Vasilyan, “Armenia and Belarus, Caught between the EU’s and Russia’s conditionalities?” in *The European Union and its Eastern Neighborhood with Eastern Partnership?* edited by Andriy Tyushka, Tobias Schumacher (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 185

¹⁰ Florian Trauner and Imke Kruse, “EC Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements: A New Standard EU Foreign Policy Tool?” *European Journal of Migration and Law* 10 (2008), 418.

of migration" as well as the "movement of persons and readmission [...] provided that conditions for well-managed and secure mobility are in place,"¹¹ among others.

The Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) is regarded as the cornerstone of current EU-Armenia relations after the infamous "U-turn"¹² of President Sarkisian, deciding against signing the long-negotiated and much-anticipated Association Agreement with the European Union back in 2014. The decision, which redirected Armenia's foreign policy towards the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), resulted in stagnation in bilateral relations and was referred to as a "missed opportunity"¹³ with "negative repercussions."¹⁴ Following the setback of ties, CEPA emerged as a "special model for cooperation:"¹⁵ on the one hand, it differed from the Association Agreements as such, however, on the other hand, it enabled Armenia to gradually adjust its legislation with European *acquis*.

European Union as a central factor in Armenia's foreign policy reorientation: Long-term implications of the VLD

The 2018 Velvet Revolution and the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh represented a pivotal period for Armenia to project changes within its foreign policy trajectory. These new realities prompted Armenia to reflect on its long-standing alliance with its traditional partner Russia by calibrating¹⁶ its approach and gradually shifting to renewed relations with the EU. The revolutionary changes of 2018 led to the new reform-oriented government that aimed at more diversification in its foreign relations. This approach became more vivid after the second war in Nagorno-Karabakh, which exposed the limitations of Armenia's reliance on Russia and prompted to seek new partnerships.

¹¹ "Council decision on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Armenia, of the other part." 25 September 2017 (entered into force on March 1, 2021)

¹² Richard Giragosian, "The Eastern Partnership: the view from Armenia," European Council of Foreign Relations, 2015, accessed November 22, 2022, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_armenia3032/.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Stefania Cyclist. "CEPA as a Model of Cooperation: The Example of EU-Armenia Relations." *The Polish Institute of Political Affairs*, 2021. Accessed November 22, 2024.

¹⁶ De Waal, Thomas. *Armenia Navigates a Path Away From Russia*. *Carnegie Europe*, July 11, 2024. Accessed November 26, 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/armenia-navigates-a-path-away-from-russia?lang=en>

In this context, the EU reemerged as a vital partner for Armenia’s political and economic modernization. According to the 2024 Partnership implementation report on Armenia,¹⁷ the country has gone through a difficult path over the past years and CEPA has emerged as a “blueprint”¹⁸ to conduct reforms and support the Armenian Government in modernizing the country and building “functioning democratic institutions.”¹⁹

As emphasized by the Head of the EU Delegation to Armenia, Ambassador Maragos, on November 12, at the Crossroads of Peace, Combining Security and Democracy conference attended by PM Nikol Pashinyan “the European Union and Armenia have been working relentlessly together, to strengthen our partnership, explore new opportunities, and identify the tools and the mechanisms which will bring us closer. [...] these joint efforts are grounded in shared values and commitments to a rules-based international order and human rights, the rule of law, and democratic governance.”

The Ambassador also mentioned the perspectives of signing a new EU-Armenia Partnership Agenda - a new all-inclusive document, which is being currently negotiated and is set to prove more ambitious goals on all dimensions, including the Visa Liberalization Dialogue.

Indeed, the launch of the Visa Liberalization Dialogue is a key breakthrough for Armenia, followed by a series of turbulences within the country’s political landscape that have shaped its pathway toward closer integration with the EU. However, it is imperative that Armenia requires a great deal of *homework* to fulfill and deliver the technical and legal *conditionalities* prescribed by the EU.

What are those technical and legal conditionalities that Armenia shall meet for visa liberalization, and most importantly, how can Armenia leverage this process for long-term implications, to not only diversify its foreign policy but also to remedy its legal and institutional frameworks for deeper EU integration?

¹⁷ European Commission, *Partnership Implementation Report on Armenia*, 2024, accessed November 22, 2024. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6452-2024-INIT/en/pdf>.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

The legal and technical criteria for the implementation of the Visa Liberalization Dialogue, in general, are listed in the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) that Armenia has yet to receive. VLAPs are tailor-made documents designed per each partner-country seeking visa-free-regime with the EU. The VLAPs are comprised of several primary baskets of conditionalities that Armenia should meet: 1) security of the travel documents, 2) border management 3) legal and institutional reforms.

The security of travel documents is closely related to the use of biometric passports and the collection of biometric data. To establish efficient border control and collect data in a safe and secure manner, Armenia shall develop and establish a biometric passport data system. The biometric data system creation is not only related to domestic security matters but is also one of the prerequisites for the establishment of the Visa Free Regime with the EU. This will facilitate unified collection and exchange with the EU Member States thus aligning Armenia with EU norms regarding border management and visa policy.

According to the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs, Arpine Sargsyan during the Government session on October 3rd. “The Armenian government is in the final stages of a tender process for the companies to provide biometric passports and identification cards. The winning companies will be identified by March 2025 with production scheduled to start by mid-2026. These passports are designed to provide high security for biometric data, facilitate the detection of forgeries, and guarantee the smooth passage through border crossing points.”

Border Management: In parallel to document security and biometric data collection, Armenia shall strengthen its border management and security control to address illegal migration, human trafficking, smuggling, and other forms of organized crime. These regulations are important from the perspective of meeting EU standards regarding migration and asylum policies. By ensuring these compliances, Armenia on the one hand, shall re-enforce its internal security and prevent its appearance as a “country of origin” for illegal migration, and on the other hand, will meet EU’s expectations and strengthen its policy framework with long-term implications.

Legal and institutional reforms: Armenia shall demonstrate a firm commitment to strengthening judicial independence and the rule of law by guaranteeing universal human rights and freedoms of all individuals, including refugees and asylum seekers. It should

combat corruption, enforce transparency, and fair legal practices. The specificities of the so-called *reforms portfolio*, as mentioned, are still subject to the VLAP that Armenia is currently negotiating with the EU. The reforms envisaged by the VLAP will be assessed against their strong adherence to EU standards within Progress Reports as a measure of Armenia’s readiness to embrace the visa-free regime.

To leverage long-term implications for Armenia both internally and externally, Armenia should not refer to these reforms merely as technical obligations on its way to deeper European integration but rather should use them as a strategic opportunity to advance democratic governance within the country by advancing internal political modernization and institutional change. Meanwhile, it should be noted that despite the importance of technical conditionality, political conditionality remains an even larger decisive factor within the visa liberalization process. The unanimous endorsement of all EU Member States (MS) is required to grant Armenia a visa-free-regime. Therefore, Armenia should also seek active diplomatic engagement with individual EU Member States by advocating for the effectiveness and efficiency of its reforms.

To date, Armenia has made gains in addressing its needs and obligations under the VLD through structural and institutional approaches. In October 2024, a working group was established under the direct headship of Armenia’s Deputy Prime Minister to oversee VLD talks and coordinate VLAP with the EU, including a number of representatives from the government’s sectoral institutions. Subsequently, in November 2024, a delegation from Brussels visited Yerevan to start the negotiations and develop the road map, reaffirming both sides’ commitments to advancing political and technical cooperation towards Armenia’s preparations in meeting EU standards for visa-free-regime.

Conclusion

Migration management and border security remain a critical issue within the European Union and its Member States. As a result, the conditionality for better governance was put forward within its Neighborhood Policy, requiring implementation of the *basket of criteria* that must be fulfilled for the visa-free regime. For Armenia, this process necessitates a strategic approach and strong diplomatic ties with individual EU MS to advocate for the meaningful implementation of the benchmarks outlined in the VLAP.

As noted by Margaritis Schinas, the Vice-President of the European Commission during the launch of the VLD with Armenia. “[...] the launch of the EU visa liberalization dialogue is an important decision, underpinned by the democratic reforms initiated by the Republic of Armenia. We view this process as a strategic agenda for further modernization of migration, mobility, and border management fields and we acknowledge the necessity for continued and focused efforts to achieve this objective.”²⁰ Indeed, Armenia should further commit to undertaking these reforms, not only solely to secure a visa-free regime but also to signal its dedication to progressing democratic reforms and moving the country forward. Only in doing so, Armenia can leverage from EU’s technical and financial assistance in capitalizing on its institutional and legal frameworks thus not only aligning with European norms but also aspiring for a better future for its citizens.

Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge that the path to visa liberalization is not just a technical process but also a political one since unanimous approval from individual EU MS will be required at the end of the day. Therefore, Armenia shall have to work diligently on its national legal norms and legislation, while simultaneously, cultivating strong relationships with the EU MS grounded in shared values.

The argument that Armenia’s unique position presents geopolitical challenges²¹ for the country to achieve its European aspirations is not without precedents. The three European Neighborhood Policy countries - Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine - have already achieved the *long-fought*²² visa-free regime with the EU. Armenia should learn from the experiences of fellow *neighbors*, who, despite similar geopolitical hardships, successfully navigated the complex process of European integration. Therefore, Armenia should seize the opportunity to strengthen its democratic institutions, cultivating progress for both the country and the European future of its people.

²⁰ Schinas, Margaritis, Vice-President. EU and Armenia Launch Visa Liberalization Dialogue. Delegation of the European Union to Armenia, September 9, 2024. Accessed November 27, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/armenia/eu-and-armenia-launch-visa-liberalisation-dialogue_en?s=216

²¹ Neset, Siri, Mustafa Aydin, Ayça Ergun, Richard Giragosian, Kornely Kakachia, and Arne Strand. Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War: Prospects for Regional Cooperation and/or Rivalry. Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2023. CMI Report 2023:4

²² Park, Jeanne. "The European Union’s Eastern Partnership." Council on Foreign Relations, March 13, 2014. Accessed November 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/european-unions-eastern-partnership#chapter-title-sup-1>.



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