

Armenia's Road to Schengen: Reform, Security, and the Politics of Visa Liberalization

EU [Regulation 2018/1806](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council divides third countries into two categories: those whose citizens are required to obtain visas when crossing the external borders of the EU and the Schengen Area, and those whose nationals are exempt from this requirement. At the time of writing, citizens of 102 countries still need visas to travel to the EU and Schengen states. Armenia is among them.

According to the [Global Passport Index](#), Armenian citizens currently enjoy visa-free or visa-on-arrival access to 80 of the world's 198 countries. This places the Armenian passport below those of all its immediate neighbors: Georgian passport holders can travel without a visa to 131 countries, Turkish citizens to 121, and Azerbaijani nationals to 82. That picture, however, may gradually change. The South Caucasus country has now entered a process that

could eventually grant its citizens visa-free travel to 29 EU and Schengen Area states.

In November 2025, as part of Armenia's deepening rapprochement with the European Union, Brussels handed the Visa Liberalization Action Plan ([VLAP](#)) to the Armenian authorities. The document is structured around four thematic blocks - document security, integrated border management, migration and asylum, public order and security, and external relations and fundamental rights- and contains 74 benchmarks that Armenia must fulfill.

The VLAP divides the reform process into two phases: first, the adoption of the required legislation; second, an assessment of its implementation and enforcement. The EU has committed to supporting these reforms both technically and financially through the [Resilience and Growth Plan for Armenia](#).



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Brussels' Real Test: More Than VLAP Compliance

VLAP implementation is only one dimension of the EU's evaluation. In parallel, Brussels has established a broader set of criteria it will apply when assessing whether to abolish short-term visa requirements for Armenian citizens. These include the visa refusal rate for Armenian applicants in EU and Schengen member states; the number of Armenian nationals refused entry at EU external borders or found to be irregularly resident in the Union; the volume of return decisions and actual returns to Armenia; the number of asylum applications submitted by Armenian citizens in the EU; and an overall assessment of the potential migratory and security implications of future visa liberalization. Should the process conclude successfully, the EU would amend Regulation 2018/1806 by removing Armenia from the list of countries whose nationals are required to hold visas when crossing the external borders of EU member states.

Early Momentum, Structural Challenges

Six months after handing over the VLAP to Armenia, the European Commission [published](#) its first progress report on implementation on April 30. The document highlights substantial progress achieved by Armenian authorities in a relatively short period. In several areas, Armenia is already well advanced in fulfilling the benchmarks. Nevertheless, significant work still lies ahead not only in adopting legislation but also in strengthening institutional capacity and ensuring effective implementation.

Among the early achievements, Armenia has laid the legal foundation for a unified state population registry; completed the public tender for the issuance of biometric ID cards and passports, expected to begin in the second half of 2026; assumed full responsibility for border checks at official crossing points with Georgia and Iran and at the country's international airports; and updated the Criminal Code and Criminal Procedure Code to incorporate revised definitions of human trafficking and exploitation.

Despite this progress, the report outlines 53 recommendations that Armenian authorities must still address. These are distributed across the four thematic blocks of the VLAP: eight under document security; 15 under integrated border management, migration, and asylum; 20 under public order and security; and 10 under external relations and fundamental rights.

Several of the remaining reform priorities deserve particular attention. On human trafficking, the U.S. State Department's 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report ([TIP](#)) places Armenia in the Tier 2 category, indicating that while the government does not yet fully meet minimum standards for eliminating trafficking, it is making significant efforts to do so.

Armenia is also expected to adopt a Law on the Prevention of and Protection from Discrimination, a measure facing resistance from conservative groups within the country. The draft law designates the Human Rights Defender of Armenia as the principal equality body, which will require both institutional capacity-building and additional financial resources. Armenia has yet to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence ([the Istanbul Convention](#)), another politically sensitive commitment likely to encounter domestic opposition.

In parallel, despite substantial efforts to support the integration of more than 115,000 displaced Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, the long-term integration of this population remains a significant social and economic challenge. Armenia must also establish an independent national Data Protection Authority with a clear legal mandate, autonomous governance structures, and sufficient human, technical, and financial resources.

A notable asset in the process is the strong political will demonstrated by Armenia's executive branch. The Ministry of Internal Affairs has been designated

as the principal body responsible for coordinating VLAP implementation. In this regard, Armenia has followed the model used by Western Balkan countries such as Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, where Ministries of Internal Affairs coordinated the reform process, rather than the more recent examples of Georgia and Moldova, where Ministries of Foreign Affairs led the efforts.

Border Management and the Russia Factor

One particularly sensitive issue concerns Armenia's border governance arrangements with Russia. Although Armenian border guards now exercise full responsibility at official border crossing points with Georgia, Iran, and the country's international airports, the situation along sections of Armenia's external borders remains more complex.

Under bilateral agreements dating back to the early post-Soviet period, Russian border guards continue to participate in the protection of Armenia's borders with Türkiye and Iran. Following the deterioration of Armenia-Russia relations after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, and especially after 2022, Yerevan has gradually sought to reduce its dependence on Russian security structures. Nevertheless, Russian border guards still maintain a presence along segments of the Armenian - Turkish and Armenian - Iranian borders, including through joint patrol arrangements.

For the European Union, this issue goes beyond technical border management. Effective control over external borders is viewed as a core component of state sovereignty, institutional capacity, and security governance. In previous visa liberalization processes involving the Western Balkans, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, Brussels consistently emphasized that border management should be exercised fully by national authorities accountable to their own state institutions.

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As a result, the gradual transfer of border-management responsibilities from Russian to Armenian authorities is likely to become an increasingly important political and symbolic benchmark within the broader visa liberalization process. While the EU is unlikely to demand abrupt changes that could destabilize Armenia's security environment, Brussels will nevertheless expect a clear long-term trajectory toward autonomous Armenian control over border governance.

Migration, Security, and the EU's Risk Calculus

Beyond VLAP compliance, the EU will closely scrutinize a broad range of statistical indicators before any visa-free decision is made.

The number of Armenian citizens applying for EU and Schengen visas increased tenfold between 2020 and 2024, [rising](#) from 10,017 applications in 2020 to 100,352 in 2024. At the same time, the visa refusal rate remained relatively stable at approximately 12–13%. The financial burden on Armenian applicants has also been considerable. In 2024 alone, Armenian citizens spent more than EUR 8 million on visa application fees, while cumulative expenditures between 2014 and 2024 are [estimated](#) at approximately EUR 50 million.

Another important indicator concerns refusals of entry at the EU's external borders. According to [Eurostat](#), the numbers remain relatively low and continue to decline: 640 people in 2022, 470 in 2023, 395 in 2024, and 275 in 2025.

Armenian citizens are likewise not among the leading groups seeking asylum in the EU. Eurostat [data](#) demonstrates a broader downward trend in first-time asylum applications: 4,470 in 2022; 5,175 in 2023; 4,330 in 2024; and 2,865 in 2025.

Approximately 80% of these applications are concentrated in France and Germany, while the recognition rate stands at only 3%. Eight EU member states – Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, France, and the Netherlands – already [classify](#) Armenia as a safe country of origin.

One of the most common grounds cited by Armenian asylum seekers relates to healthcare access. This issue may gradually be mitigated through the introduction of Armenia's Universal Health Insurance system, launched in January 2026 and expected to cover the entire population by 2029.

A further issue concerns the possible alignment of Armenia's visa policy with that of the European Union. Brussels may eventually require Armenia to introduce visa requirements for nationals of countries currently exempt under Armenian law but subject to EU visa restrictions. At present, citizens of Belarus, China, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and several other states may enter Armenia without visas.

Such alignment could have significant economic implications, particularly for Armenia's tourism sector. In 2025, Russian citizens accounted for approximately 40% of all tourists visiting the country, followed by visitors from Georgia and Iran.

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It might also affect foreign students from Iran and Russia pursuing their studies in Armenia.

Finally, the activity of Armenian organized criminal networks in several EU member states is likely to feature prominently in the EU's security assessment. This risk could be mitigated through enhanced cooperation with Eurojust, Europol, and Frontex, as well as through the deployment of police attachés in partner countries where such networks are particularly active.

The Political Window Is Open — But Not Indefinitely

There is clear political will on both sides of the process. The EU has provided Armenia with a roadmap, while Armenian authorities have demonstrated early momentum in implementing reforms. The central question is therefore no longer whether Armenia can eventually achieve visa-free travel with the EU, but rather, how quickly it can do so.

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The experience of other Eastern European countries demonstrates that timelines vary considerably. Moldova completed the process within three years, Georgia within four, and Ukraine within seven. Armenia's trajectory will depend not only on the pace of domestic reforms, but also on political dynamics within the European Union itself.

A key challenge is that many VLAP benchmarks remain broadly formulated, leaving room for differing interpretations. To avoid benchmarks becoming "moving targets," Armenian authorities should develop a detailed implementation roadmap with clear internal deadlines and maintain continuous coordination with EU institutions and member states.

Domestic politics will also matter. Following the June 2026 parliamentary elections, the new parliament will need to assume greater ownership of the process, particularly regarding politically sensitive reforms such as anti-discrimination legislation and ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

At the same time, Armenia's visa liberalization process will unfold against a changing political climate in Europe. The growing influence of anti-immigration and right-wing populist forces in several EU member states could complicate efforts to secure unanimous political support for visa-free travel. For that reason, Yerevan will need to engage not only with EU foreign ministries but also with interior ministries, which often view visa liberalization primarily through a security lens.

Armenia must also take into account the EU's institutional calendar and aim to complete the core phase of VLAP implementation before the mandates of the current European Commission and European Parliament expire.

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Finally, Armenia's case remains unique. Unlike the Western Balkan countries or other Eastern Partnership states, Armenia is pursuing visa liberalization alone, without a broader regional enlargement framework or coordinated lobbying effort. This creates both risks and opportunities: while Armenia must carry the political burden of the process alone, successful implementation of reforms could also allow it to advance independently, without waiting for others to move forward alongside it ■