

# POLICY BRIEF

## Assessing Armenia's Migration Strategy for 2017-2021

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Development of migration policy framework is strategic importance issue for Armenia

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Policy brief aims to analyse the 2017-2021 Strategy for Migration Policy of the Republic of Armenia and its Action Plan, identifying the challenges, gaps and obstacles for their implementation, and providing possible solutions in this regard. Taking into consideration the recent changes in the Armenian Government, the new approaches, challenges and solutions in the migration field have also been considered in the Policy brief.<sup>2</sup>

The document will look into Armenia's overall experience in the development of migration policy documents and assess the new priority areas set out in the Migration strategy and its Action Plan for 2017-2021. Finally, it also provides an insight into recent and future migration challenges that should be further considered. The findings, new knowledge gained and recommendations proposed will be useful for the stakeholders involved in migration policy development.

2. The research carried out entailed a review of the relevant policy documents and recent studies, as well as expert interviews with policy makers such as the Heads of the Migration Service, members of State Interagency Monitoring Committee or experts involved in the development of the migration strategy.

“...Migration policy switched from a passive-contemplative and operative-reactive to proactive-foreseeable one”

## BACKGROUND

This Policy brief aims to analyse the 2017-2021 Strategy for Migration Policy of the Republic of Armenia and its Action Plan, identifying the challenges, gaps and obstacles for their implementation, and providing possible solutions in this regard. Taking into consideration the recent changes in the Armenian Government, the new approaches, challenges and solutions in the migration field have also been considered in the Policy brief.

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Taking into consideration the previous gaps and lessons learned and aiming to ensure the actual implementation of the state migration policy, a new Concept Paper was adopted in 2010. For the first time, it was accompanied by an Action Plan (2012-2016) adopted in 2011. The main aim of the document was “to switch from a passive-contemplative and operative-reactive policy to proactive-foreseeable migration policy” (Concept Paper, 2010). The Action Plan provided grounds for aligning the national migration governance system with the one of the European Union in legislative and institutional terms. Notable progress took place in the cooperation on legal migration with the EU and other countries worldwide as well as in the fight against irregular migration and prevention thereof.<sup>2</sup>

## ARMENIA’S CURRENT MIGRATION STRATEGY (2017-2021)

Adopted in March 2017, the current **2017-2021 Strategy for Migration Policy of the Republic of Armenia** is the fourth document formulating Armenia’s migration policy. The Strategy takes into account the outcomes of implementation of the 2012-2016 Action Plan, the related lessons learnt, as well as recommendations resulting from discussions with experts from civil society and international organizations. The 2017-2021 Action Plan for effective implementation of the Strategy was approved in 2017.

Overall, the document consists of an introduction and three chapters. The main challenges set out in the introduction include the decrease of the general population (see graph)<sup>3</sup>. However, no concrete policy response to this issue is prescribed in the Strategy.

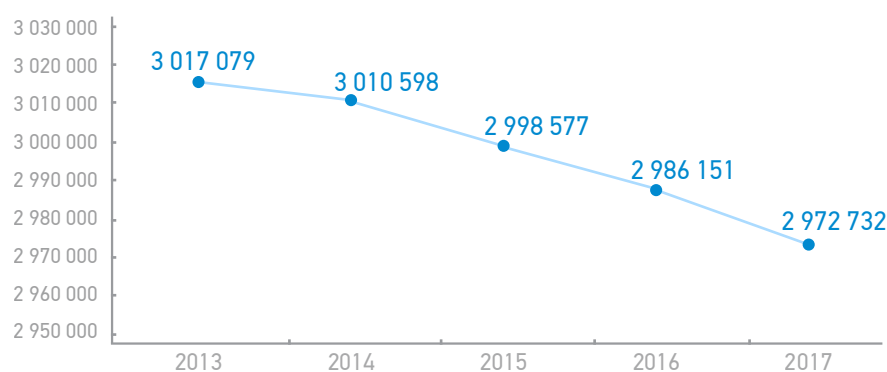
The first chapter presents the long-term vision, fundamental principles and target groups (beneficiary) of the migration policy.

2 In 2015, with the support of Yerevan office of the “People in Need” Czech NGO, the assessment of the implemented migration policy was carried out (the 2012-2016 Action Plan), which was the first attempt in that regard. The assessment was intermediate and was also a pre-requisite for submitting suggestions for the drafting of the new policy paper. It is noteworthy that already in the Migration Strategy for 2017-2021 the recommendations of the evaluation report have been taken into consideration, in particular the inclusion of new priority directions.  
3 Source: National Statistics Service of Armenia.

The second chapter sets out the following priority directions, corresponding to the main challenges currently facing Armenia:

1. Facilitation of legal migration;
2. Improvement of the international protection system;
3. Support to integration of long-term immigrants and refugees and re-integration of returning migrants;
4. Migration and development;
5. Protection of rights and interests of Armenian labour migrants;
6. Prevention of and fight against illegal migration;
7. Enhancement of international cooperation in the field of migration;
8. Further development of the migration management system.

### Total de jure Armenian population size, end of year



Both, the Strategy and its Action Plan, were developed by the Migration Service of Armenia and do not cover the key objectives for border management and trafficking, since those are already set forth in separate strategic documents adopted by the Government.

Overall, the Strategy puts forward 23 topics and 78 mechanisms for achieving the goals set under each policy direction, as well as a comprehensive monitoring and assessment of the Strategy.

The Action Plan aims at enhancing regular migration and further improving the migration management system. It consists of 173 concrete activities for implementation of the concrete actions put forward by the Strategy. It also specifies the responsible implementing institutions and timeframes.

The Strategy is based on an internationally recognized approach. Its goals, objectives and priority directions were predetermined by the "approaches set forth in the migration complex governance framework (model)". These were developed and received universal recognition on the basis of the requirements of the **Declaration of the High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development by the UN (2013)**<sup>4</sup>. The Comprehensive Migration Management model categorizes the activities conducted for regulation

<sup>4</sup> Declaration of the High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/68/L.5>, accessed on 13 July 2018.

of population movements into four basic areas of migration: "migration and development", "facilitating the regulated movements of population", "adjustment of population movements" and "forced migration" (Action Plan 2017-2021, p. 4).

It is worth to mention that some of the activities have been also included in the Roadmap and Action Plan of the new **EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement** (CEPA) signed on November 24, 2017<sup>5</sup>.

## NEW PRIORITY AREAS AND CONCRETE ACTIONS

### 1. Migration and development

Featuring among the policy priorities of the migration strategy for the first time, the main aim in this policy area is to direct the economic and human potential of Armenian emigrants towards the development of their country. The implementation of most of the activities foresees the support and expertise of international organizations.

Among the 23 concrete mechanisms specified in the Action Plan for this area are the following:

- development of targeted programmes for ensuring the mobilisation of the skills, intellectual potential and experience of highly-qualified Armenian citizens residing abroad;
- increase financial literacy of emigrants and members of their families living in Armenia;
- widening of circular migration schemes;
- involving emigrant organizations in local community development programmes

The creation of the [www.sendmoneyarmenia.com](http://www.sendmoneyarmenia.com) website is also worth mentioning. This single integrated information system aiming to reduce remittance costs was designed in line with World Bank standards, providing Armenian emigrants with a reliable comparison of the available money transfer operators with regards to the transaction costs, speed of the transfer and other relevant parameters. According to estimates, even a 5% reduction in transfer fees could result in savings of approximately \$20 million USD<sup>6</sup>.

### 2. Improvement of legal framework and mechanisms for counteracting illegal migration

The state authorities work consistently towards preventing foreign citizens from entering Armenia with forged documents and from

<sup>5</sup> Article 14 and 15 of the CEPA relates to the Cooperation on migration, asylum and border management and Movement of persons and readmission. Document is available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/37967/eu-armenia-comprehensive-and-enhanced-partnership-agreement-cepa\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/37967/eu-armenia-comprehensive-and-enhanced-partnership-agreement-cepa_en), accessed on 15 September 2018

<sup>6</sup> Report on feasibility study for improving money transfer services in Armenia, Grant Thornton, 2018, [http://smsmta.am/upload/Grant\\_Thornton\\_Report.pdf](http://smsmta.am/upload/Grant_Thornton_Report.pdf).

transiting the country illegally. It has become increasingly common for citizens of third countries to enter Armenia with their original passports and then attempt leaving the country with forged documents stipulating citizenship of a Schengen state. Amongst other measures, the Action Plan therefore envisages joint operations for the identification of illegal migrants and the storage of their fingerprints.

### 3. Cooperation within the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union

The Action Plan envisages the approximation of Armenia's legal and institutional framework for migration management to those of the EU and EAEU.

Since signing the EU-Armenia Visa Facilitation Agreement in 2012, the visa liberalization process has topped the agenda in terms of EU-Armenia cooperation on migration. In this respect, the Action Plan foresees the following concrete steps:

- a) Initiate the visa liberalization dialogue with the EU, developing a roadmap; ensure capacity- building for the government agencies represented in the negotiating team;
- b) Establishing the so-called 'Readmission case management electronic system' in order to fulfil the commitments set out in the readmission agreement concluded with the EU;
- c) Conduct negotiations aimed at signing implementation protocols for the readmission agreements signed with EU Member States;
- d) Enhance cooperation with the EU for the purpose of introducing the Integrated Border Management system based on the Single Window/One-Stop Shop concept;
- e) Negotiations with specific EU Member States on simplified conditions of entry and further stay for particular categories of migrants, including young and high-skilled professionals, university graduates, artists etc.;
- f) Negotiations with the appropriate agencies of specific countries on establishing reciprocal visa-free entry regimes. Mobilizing the respective experiences of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine is considered beneficial in this regard.

Joining the **Eurasian Economic Union** (EEU) brought new challenges and opportunities for the Republic of Armenia in the migration sphere. Russia remains the main destination country of (seasonal) labour migration from Armenia with the share of departures to Russia increasing from 89.4% in 2013 to 94.6% in 2015<sup>7</sup>. Since January 2015, Armenian labour migrants enjoy the right to reside and work across the EEU Member States under the sole condition of having an employment contract but without having to meet the

7 Report on scientific-research work by government order: 'Triennial Monitoring (2013-2015) of the External Migration Situation in the RA through Sampling Study', the Armenian-Russian (Slavonic) University, Social Demographic Research Center, Yerevan, 2016. Available at: <http://science.rau.am/rus/7/3557>, accessed on 20 July, 2018.



requirements applied for protection of the national labour markets. This has resulted in an increased number of Armenian citizens working in the Russian Federation. This increase is also linked to the legalization of many migrant workers previously employed in the shadow economy. As a result, the number of Armenian citizens working in Russia has almost doubled from 124,500 in 2014 to 232,247 in 2017<sup>8</sup>.

In order for the EEU Treaty to be fully operational, Member States still need to further regulate the free movement of labour, expand legal pathways and set preventive measures against irregular migration. Moreover, the required employment contract remains an important challenge to the protection of the rights and interests of migrant workers.

#### 4. Institutionalizing the collection of migration data

In the past, international organizations (i.e. ICMPD, IOM) developed the Migration Profiles<sup>9</sup> of Armenia with the support of the Government. The resulting documents were uniform but did not foresee any regular collection or updating of the indicators and data. The Action Plan aims at autonomously developing Armenia's Migration Profile, based on survey results and administrative statistical data. Adopted in 2017, the respective Government Decree<sup>10</sup> sets 144 indicators for the Extended Migration Profile, which is to be updated every three years starting from 2019. During these intervals, the complementary Basic Migration Profiles should provide the essential migration statistics.

#### 5. Monitoring the implementation of the Action Plan

Enhancing of the institutional monitoring system represents another important goal of the Action Plan, which foresees an enhanced status of the Interagency Committee for Monitoring of the Migration Strategy and Action Plan (ICMAP), coordinated and chaired by the Head of Migration Service<sup>11</sup>. For the first time, the Minister of Territorial Administration and Development is assigned to oversee the Action Plan implementation.

## ADDRESSING CURRENT MIGRATION CHALLENGES

The recent change of government in Armenia (May 2018) brought significant expectations for policy changes in various policy areas, including the migration sphere<sup>12</sup>. Here is a brief overview of the most pressing priority areas:

8 Number of citizens, who entered EEU member states for employment, available at [http://smsmta.am/?menu\\_id=187](http://smsmta.am/?menu_id=187), accessed on 15 July, 2018.

9 Republic of Armenia Migration Profile Light 2014, available at: <https://www.pragueprocess.eu/en/migration-observatory/migration-profile-light>, accessed on 15 July, 2018.

10 "Approving the structure and the list of indicators of Migration Profile of the Republic of Armenia" was adopted by the RA Government on 19 October, 2017 by N44 Protocol Decree. Available in Armenian at: [http://smsmta.am/upload/Migration\\_Profile\\_Decree.pdf](http://smsmta.am/upload/Migration_Profile_Decree.pdf), accessed on July 22, 2018

11 The ICMAP gathers representatives of all relevant ministries and departments, 3 independent experts, as well as representatives of five NGOs and international organizations (e.g. UNHCR, IOM, and ICMPD) as observers. The state executive bodies shall submit annual reports on the implemented actions, to be submitted to the Government by the Head of Migration Service within one month after the end of each year. The ICMAP convened twice in 2017 and already twice in 2018.

12 The members of the new cabinet and the high-ranking officials mention the issues raised.

## 1. Comprehensive integration policy approach:

Establishing a comprehensive approach and one single policy document on integration figures among the current policy priorities on migration. The revision of the previous Integration Concept<sup>13</sup> is ongoing with its scope being enlarged. The aim is to define specific target groups of immigrants and define separate Action Plans for their integration based on local experience and expertise (most recently, on integration of Syrian refugees) and international best practices. The organization of language courses, civil orientation trainings and the provision of temporary accommodation represent three key elements in this endeavor. As of 2018, new projects aimed at the integration of newly recognized refugees are financed from the state budget, which envisages more than 18 million AMD for this purpose.

## 2. Organizing return/repatriation to Armenia:

The new reality created by the Velvet Revolution shall result in attractive and favorable conditions for return and repatriation. Experts estimate that 1.2-1.5 million citizens left Armenia since its independence. This exodus was mainly caused by high unemployment rates, low-income levels and various other reasons. The political changes of 2018 have impacted the migration flows significantly as evidenced by the data on border crossings for three semester (January-September) 2018, which has seen 38,200 people less leave the country as compared to the same period of 2017. Representing a 70,9% decrease, this leaves the country with a negative migration rate of only 15,700 persons<sup>14</sup>. The first-time asylum applications filed by Armenian citizens across the EU countries also decreased substantially from January (660) to June (395) 2018<sup>15</sup>. Compared to 2017, the first-time applications thus decreased by nearly 1000 cases<sup>16</sup>.

The current promotion and rhetoric of return and repatriation to Armenia and the fostering of diaspora investments correspond to the political goals announced by the new government, as well as with expectations of the Armenian population and of many Armenians living abroad. The practical implementation of these goals remains challenging and requires further exploration of how to best mobilise the existing positive circumstances for return. A first reasonable step may consist in raising awareness and making practical information available on questions related to the acquiring of documents, establishing a business, education opportunities or the possible recognition of qualifications and degrees acquired abroad. Fostering an interest to return among the diaspora communities and supporting the actual return process represent key priorities of this government.

13 So far, the only policy document is the "Concept Paper on Integration of Persons Recognized as Refugees and Granted Asylum in the Republic of Armenia as well as of Long-term Migrants" and its Action Plan, which were adopted by the Government in 2017. Before 2016 there was no specific policy aimed at integration of foreign nationals in Armenia.

14 Number of arrivals in Armenia and departures from Armenia by the means of transportation in 2018, available at: [https://www.armstat.am/file/article/sv\\_09\\_18a\\_520.pdf](https://www.armstat.am/file/article/sv_09_18a_520.pdf)

15 Source: EuroStat Database, Asylum and managed migration, Asylum and Dublin statistics, Applications. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>

16 bid

### 3. Reintegration Support:

The Readmission agreement between Armenia and the EU entered into force in January 2014. The number of readmission cases multiplied in 2017 as compared to previous years, with the share of positive responses remaining high at approximately 80%, once the citizenship of the concerned individuals has been confirmed<sup>17</sup>. While only Sweden and Poland filed readmission applications in 2014, ten EU Member States have done so in 2018. 598 persons returned to Armenia during 2015-2018 only through the return operations organized by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX)<sup>18</sup>.

Armenia is currently implementing several reintegration programmes, but those target mainly Armenian migrants willing to cooperate and return voluntarily<sup>19</sup>, rather than returnees forced to return under the readmission agreements for whom no specific initiatives are currently available. As their number is growing, certain reintegration measures need to be put in place, while also considering the development of a targeted Action plan on this matter. Such document shall establish a sustainable basis for successful reintegration, assessing the specific needs of forced returnees.

### 4. Labor migration regulation in Armenia:

The issuance of work permits to foreigners in Armenia is another important challenge that calls for an urgent solution. The Law on Foreigners (Chapter 4, Article 22) of 2006 stipulates that foreigners require a work permit in order to seek regular employment in Armenia. However, this provision was not in force as there was no competent authority assigned with its implementation. In 2015, an amendment introduced to the Law on Foreigners prescribed that the eventual employer has to file an application to the competent authorities in order to seek a work permit for his foreign labour force. In 2016, two further Decrees were issued - the first one officially launching the work permit issuance system; and the second one defining the competent state authorities. Three months later, however, both decrees were suspended until 1 January 2019 without making the reasoning for this decision public.

As a result, foreigners in Armenia continue to be employed without having an officially issued work permit. The current system thus remains very liberal, solely requiring from foreigners to be registered at their place of temporary residence in order to seek employment. As the foreign migrants workers are not obliged to register elsewhere or file any sort of application to enter the labour market, the exact number of foreigners working in Armenia remains unknown. The data currently available is solely based on expert estimations with the majority of foreign labour force believed to be citizens of Iran, India and Georgian citizens of Armenian origin. Installing a proper work-permit issuance system thus represents an imminent priority for Armenia, not least to protect the local labour market.

17 Annual Statistics on Readmission Cases, available at: [http://smsmta.am/upload/Dinamika\\_tot\\_ENG.pdf](http://smsmta.am/upload/Dinamika_tot_ENG.pdf). Accessed on August 15, 2018.

18 Source: FRONTEX official statistics

19 So-called Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) projects



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Development of migration policy documents

The development of high-quality migration policy documents requires an institutionalised policy development process. The Government could therefore consider installing a pool of experts for the development of new policy documents. It shall consist of renowned migration experts and be equipped with sufficient funding from the state budget in order to also ensure the sustainability of the process. When developing a policy document, the experts shall present targeted recommendations about its exact content and structure.

### 2. Monitoring and impact assessment of migration policy

Whereas the previous Action Plan (2012-2016) did not address the issue of its monitoring and evaluation, the current one (2017-2021) has dedicated a chapter to this topic without, however, setting any specific indicators or objectives. The document neither specifies the exact methodology for the impact assessment, nor the timelines and number of other details. The development of specific evaluation indicators thus remains a key priority.

As gaps concerning monitoring and evaluation remain a common challenge for many states, the development of a comprehensive manual or guidelines is highly recommended. Such manual could possibly serve the improvement of the governance system as a whole, rather than confining itself to the migration policy field.

### 3. Raising awareness on irregular migration

Since its independence, Armenia has foremost been seen as a source country of migration. Whereas migration remains a widely discussed and extremely sensitive issue for the Armenian society, further awareness raising and evidence is required to inform politicians, journalists, students and the public better on its various, implications, complexities and sub-areas. Against the background of a growing number of asylum claims received by the state, the urgency of this issue becomes ever more evident.

Moreover, the annual number of Armenian asylum seekers registered across the EU, which usually amounted to 4,000-6,000 persons in previous years, has increased to 8,000 since 2016<sup>20</sup>, thereby placing Armenia among the top 30 source countries of asylum seekers to the EU<sup>21</sup>. This trend also exemplifies the need for awareness raising campaigns, targeting potential migrants and the public. These campaigns should focus on the issue and inherent risks of irregular migration and also involve the media whose exchange with experts could result in a more balanced coverage on migration. This may involve the organisation of round table discussions among representatives of the competent authorities, civil society, media, bloggers, the private

The process of development of the migration policy framework has to be institutionalised

20 EUROSTAT statistics is available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum\\_statistics](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics)  
21 A part of this phenomenon was caused by some of the Syrians Armenians emigrating further to Europe

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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

Funded by the European Union



sector and others. A wide-reaching information campaign on legal migration and mobility (e.g. on Schengen rules) could complement these efforts and provide a positive input towards launching the visa liberalization dialogue with the EU.

## RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Report on "Triennial Monitoring (2015-2017) of the External Migration Situation in the RA through Sampling Study". Armenian-Russian (Slavonic) University, EU-funded "Support to Migration and Border Management in Armenia" (MIBMA) project, implemented by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), Yerevan, 2016. Available at: [http://smsmta.am/upload/Survey\\_executive\\_summary\\_EN.pdf](http://smsmta.am/upload/Survey_executive_summary_EN.pdf)

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