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## **ARMENIA SUSPENDS SCHENGEN VISA PROCESSOR'S ACTIVITIES DUE TO LINKS WITH TURKEY - REPORTS**

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Armenias Justice Ministry suspended activities at a Turkey-linked company hired by the German Embassy in Yerevan to process tourist visa applications over concerns about data protection, local news sites reported.

Berlins embassy this week began referring Armenians to the website of a private company called VisaMetric to apply for visas after ending appointments on its own website, according to an announcement dated March 6.

VisaMetric LLC registered in Armenia earlier this year, and its founder and only shareholder is an Istanbul-based company called VisaMetric Visa Services and Consultancy Foreign Trade Organization, the news site Hetq reported.

A VisaMetric website said it was established in 2013 by iDATA Danışmanlık AŞ, which says it is authorized by the German and Italian missions in Turkey to issue visas, and Visa Management Service (VMS), a Moscow-based company with offices across Russia, as well as in Georgia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine that appears to handle visas to Italy.

The Justice Ministry said last week it had suspended VisaMetrics activities in Armenia after opening an investigation into whether the company complies with Armenian regulations on data protection, Hetq said.

Germanys choice of a firm with a parent company in Turkey was a source of major interest in Armenia amid concerns about transferring personal information to Turkey, PanArmenian.net cited a statement from the ministry as saying. It did not elaborate further.

Armenia has no diplomatic ties with Turkey, with which it is at loggerheads over a spate of political and historical disputes, including the World War I-era genocide of Armenians who lived in the Ottoman Empire, the precursor to the Turkish Republic.

It was not immediately clear how Armenians would apply for Schengen visas if the only company authorized to issue them was unable to operate. It was also not clear how long the investigation by the Justice Ministrys Agency for Personal Data Protection would take.

No one authorized to discuss the matter at iDATA was immediately available to speak on Monday

when contacted.

The German Embassy in Yerevan was closed on Monday due to the Easter holiday. The ambassador, Matthias Kiesler, told a news conference last week that VisaMetric was chosen for its experience in region, according to Hetq.

The VisaMetric website says it supports visa-application processing for diplomatic missions from Italy, Germany, Malta, Portugal and Slovenia and operates dozens of centers in Turkey, Azerbaijan, Russia, Georgia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and China. The website does not mention Armenia.

More and more European embassies are using external service providers to handle visa processing. Critics of Germanys decision to privatize the service say it risks leading to more personal data leaks.

The decision by the German Embassy applies to Schengen visas for Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Austria and Sweden, it said. A Schengen visa is a short-term authorization to visit or transit through one of the 26 countries in Europe that have effectively abolished their internal borders under the Schengen agreement.

Turkey severed diplomatic ties and closed its land border with Armenia a quarter-century ago to protest Armenias incursion into territories the international community says belong to Azerbaijan.

Efforts by Russia, the United States and France to help Turkey and Armenia normalize relations have failed, and Yerevan this year officially shelved the protocols it signed in 2009 with Turkey, citing a lack of progress towards implementing the agreement.

<https://eurasianet.org/s/armenia-suspends-schengen-visa-processors-activities-due-to-links-with-turkey-reports>

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