

Armenia-EU Relations: Challenges and New Perspectives

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Introduction

The relations between the EU and Armenia have gone through various difficulties but also experienced positive developments. In 2013, Armenian authorities refused to ratify the negotiated Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). However, the relations revitalised especially after the revolution of 2018 and the ratification of the new Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2021. This paper introduces the reasons and objectives of Armenia for joining the Eastern Partnership. The paper notes that democratic reforms, especially in the fight against corruption, and improvements in the justice sector and electoral conduct are a priority in Armenia. The paper introduces a selection of EU-funded projects related to Armenia's commitment to eliminate corruption, improve the integrity of its judiciary and conduct free and transparent elections. Positive results of the projects are discussed as well as certain challenges that require further attention and support. The paper also discusses the format of the partnership between the EU and Armenia since the launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), how the partnership evolved and what novelties are introduced. The paper concludes with recommendations, calling for a stronger commitment to enhance the EU-Armenia partnership, introduction of stronger oversight by the EU and the Armenian civil society, diversification of the implementing partners of the EU projects, introduction of experience sharing and cross-border cooperation among the EaP countries, and increase of the EU visibility in Armenia.

Armenia's main objectives to join the EaP initiative

The importance of the EaP for Armenia – past and present

In 2009, the launch of the Eastern Partnership served as a tool for the Armenian authorities to start the internal liberalisation of its politics as well as to diversify its foreign policy. The presidential elections of 2008 in Armenia were marred by violations, and peaceful protests were violently dispersed. Internationally, the elections of 2008 were defined as 'crisis events' and institutions such as the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly called for reform of its

political system, electoral system, judiciary and police forces¹. It was important for the newly elected president Serzh Sargsyan and his Republican Party to gain legitimacy, and the Eastern Partnership became an important instrument to implement democratic reforms in Armenia. The EaP also became a part of the foreign policy of Armenia and its multi-vector policy.

In terms of the democratic reforms, Armenian authorities made certain progress. For example, while the European Commission's (EC) Country Report of 2010 noted certain autocratic tendencies such as cases of torture and ill treatment in detention facilities and police stations, and violence against journalists, the report also noted that Armenia made progress in the judicial sector by improving electronic court-statistics data and on the construction and upgrading of court buildings. It also acknowledged efforts to improve transparency in the public sector and the annual mandatory publication of information on the property of high ranking civil servants².

Furthermore, the EC Country Progress Report of 2012 noted that the negotiations for an EU-Armenia Association Agreement progressed at a good pace; negotiations on the DCFTA and visa facilitation and readmission agreements were launched³. But despite the significance of the EU-Armenia political dialogue, democratic reforms were stalled. In 2013, Armenian authorities refused to ratify the Association Agreement and the DCFTA, and made a sudden U-turn by joining the Russia-led Customs Union. As a result, Armenia only ratified the EU-Armenia Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements that came into force in January 2014⁴.

With the abrupt change in the foreign policy of Armenia, the idea of closer association with the EU embedded in the Eastern Partnership became deadlocked. But thanks to the flexible nature of the EaP initiative, the EU and Armenia negotiated a new framework and signed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in November 2017, which came into full force on the 1st of March 2021. The agreement is a comprehensive framework that strives to improve transparency and integrity of the electoral system, implement judiciary

¹ Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (2009) *The Functioning of Democratic Institutions in Armenia*. Strasbourg. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session8/AM/COE_UPR_ARM_S08_2010_CouncilofEurope_Document16.pdf

² European Commission (2011) *Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2010 Country report: Armenia*. Brussels. Available at: https://www.eas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/armenia_enp_report_2010_eng.pdf

³ European Commission (2012) *ENP Package, Country Progress Report – Armenia*. Brussels. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/dsca/dv/dsca_20121025_10/dsca_20121025_10en.pdf

⁴ European Commission (n.d.) *EU-Armenia. Eastern Partnership: Supporting Reforms, Promoting Change*. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21861/eu-armenia.pdf>

reforms, fight corruption, advance police reform, support SMEs, improve environment and connectivity, energy sector and develop the civil society of the country⁵.

Following the Revolution of 2018, the new government under the leadership of the Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, continued the relations with the EU in the framework of the CEPA. In a speech, Pashinyan noted that CEPA is important for the democratic reforms that are set in Armenia⁶. The actual process of the implementation of CEPA started in March 2021, when it was ratified by Armenia and all the EU Member States. In its Joint Motion for a Resolution on closer ties between the EU and Armenia of March 2024, the European Parliament noted that it was time to launch a visa liberalisation dialogue with Armenia⁷ and on the 9th of September 2024, the European Commission and Armenia announced the beginning of such a dialogue⁸. Notably, with the new government the relations expanded also in the security sector: a civilian EU Mission in Armenia was launched in February 2023, which is tasked with observing and reporting on the situation on the ground on the Armenian side of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border⁹. On the 22nd of July 2024, the European Council also adopted its first ever assistance under the European Peace Facility in support of the Armed Forces of Armenia¹⁰. Additionally, with its obligations under the CEPA, Armenia ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court in February 2023 and became the member of the International Criminal Court in February 2024. Positive signs of deeper relations between the EU and Armenia can also be traced in the high-level meeting of the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, EU High Representative/Vice-President, Josep Borrell, Secretary of State of the United States of America, Antony Blinken, USAID Administrator Samantha Power, and Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan that took place on the 5th of May, 2024.

⁵ EU NeighboursEast (2021) *Facts and Figures About EU-Armenia Relations*. Available at: https://euneighbourseast.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/cepa-factsheet_armenia_en.pdf

⁶ The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia (2019) “*CEPA is of Paramount Importance to the Success of Reforms*” – *PM Addresses European Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee*. Available at: <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2019/03/04/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/>

⁷ European Parliament (2024) *Joint Motion for a resolution on closer ties between the EU and Armenia and the need for a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia*. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2024-0163_EN.html

⁸ European Commission (2024) *EU and Armenia Launch Visa Liberalisation Dialogue*. Available at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-and-armenia-launch-visa-liberalisation-dialogue-2024-09-13_en

⁹ EU External Action (2024) *EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA)*. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/eu-mission-armenia-euma_en

¹⁰ European Council of the EU (2024) *European Peace Facility: Council adopts the first ever assistance measure in support of the Armenian Armed Forces*. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/07/22/european-peace-facility-council-adopts-the-first-ever-assistance-measure-in-support-of-the-armenian-armed-forces/>

The parties agreed to launch a new EU-Armenia Partnership Agenda¹¹. According to the 5th Armenia-EU Partnership Meeting of June 2024, Armenia is in the process to prioritise strategic projects in different sectoral areas aligned with priorities under the new Partnership Agenda¹². Support for stronger ties with the EU is also visible at both civil and political levels. In June 2024, the Parliament of Armenia, by the initiative of pro-Western figures loyal to the prime minister, organised a hearing on a possible referendum on the country's EU membership¹³.

The Future of the EaP Initiative for Armenia

Overall, the Armenian authorities do not consider any major changes in the workings of the Eastern Partnership Initiative. The approach follows the 'more for more' principle: new ambitions will be raised when current targets are met. The basis of the offered and negotiated documents remain largely the same. However, two major novelties can be introduced: (1) the modification/upgrading of the negotiated documents, and (2) the introduction of new formats of cooperation.

On the first point, depending on the willingness of Armenia to deepen its relations, the negotiated agreements have over time been modified. This can be seen especially in the case of political and economic agreements – the Association Agreement and the DCFTA. As Armenia was constrained by its membership in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union and did not want to pivot to the association process with the EU, Armenia and the EU developed and ratified another comprehensive agreement – CEPA – that also sets benchmarks that need to be met. Armenian authorities are currently considering to widen the CEPA and work is currently under way to introduce a CEPA-plus format.

Similarly, while the current political dialogue and the CEPA format do not involve free trade (the DCFTA component) and comprehensive harmonisation of legislation in the economic sector, the EU continues to support the SMEs of Armenia through the EU4Business programme¹⁴. Through the Economic and Investment Plan, Armenia receives support for a

¹¹ European Commission (2024) *Joint EU-US-Armenia High Level Meeting in Support of Armenia's resilience*. Available at:

https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-eu-us-armenia-high-level-meeting-support-armenias-resilience-2024-04-05_en

¹² MFA Armenia (2024) *5th Meeting of the Armenia-EU Partnership Committee*. Available at:

https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2024/06/12/Arm_EU_Statement/12694

¹³ Azatutyun/Free Europe Radio (2024) *Armenian Speaker Sees Referendum on EU Membership*. Available at:

<https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33012322.html>

¹⁴ EU External Action (n.d.) *EU Makes Businesses in Armenia Stronger*. Available at:

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu4business_armenia_en.pdf

sustainable economy, connectivity in the North-South corridor, digital transformation, resilience in the southern regions and energy efficiency¹⁵.

Even if the Association Agreement was downgraded to CEPA, the idea of meeting the established democratic targets, and using the ‘more for more’ principle, continues to serve as a positive conditionality tool in the EU-Armenia relations. We can, for instance, trace this on the case of the visa facilitation and liberalisation processes. Armenia and the EU launched a visa liberalisation dialogue as of September 2024 to support Armenia in achieving a visa-free regime for short-stays in the EU. This process is merit-based and visa-free travel will be granted only when Armenia meets all the criteria¹⁶. The launch of the visa dialogue is the result of the signing and ratification of the EU-Armenia Visa Facilitation and Readmission in 2013-2014 and the political will of the new authorities to move to the visa-dialogue stage.

On the introduction of new formats, Armenia and the EU have launched new cooperation in the security sector. While not initially planned in the EaP, Armenia and the EU started their cooperation through the European Peace Facility. The goal of the CEPA is to enhance political and economic relations, including intensifying dialogue and cooperation in foreign and security policy, as well as the common security and defence policy which is planned to be done through the Peace Facility¹⁷. The aim of this assistance – worth €10 million – is to enhance the logistical capacities of the Armenian armed forces, and to contribute to improved protection of civilians in crises and emergencies. The cooperation also strives to enhance the interoperability of Armenia’s Armed Forces, preparing for a possible scenario of future Armenian participation in international military missions (including those deployed by the EU)¹⁸.

Main priorities and expectations of Armenia

Although the Armenian authorities have not made a policy change in favour of the EU accession process, the EU-Armenia cooperation agenda in the framework of the Eastern Partnership involves a rigorous partnership agenda. It is also important to note that, although

¹⁵ EU NeighboursEast (2021) *Factsheet: EU and Armenia*. Available at:

<https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/eu-armenia-relations-factsheet/>

¹⁶ European Commission (2024) *EU and Armenia Launch Visa Liberalisation Dialogue*. Available at:

https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-and-armenia-launch-visa-liberalisation-dialogue-2024-09-13_en

¹⁷ European Interest (2024) *Council Decides to Support the Armenian Armed Forces under the European Peace Facility*. Available at: <https://www.europeaninterest.eu/council-decides-to-support-the-armenian-armed-forces-under-the-european-peace-facility/>

¹⁸ European Council of the EU (2024) *European Peace Facility: Council adopts the first ever assistance measure in support of the Armenian Armed Forces*. Available at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/07/22/european-peace-facility-council-adopts-the-first-ever-assistance-measure-in-support-of-the-armenian-armed-forces/>

Armenia does not have an official EU candidacy policy, it is a member of the Council of Europe, which requires it to make democratic reforms. To be able to implement the democratic reforms, Armenia prioritise its partnership with the EU. The following areas are a priority in the country in its reform agenda: anti-corruption struggle, electoral support and judicial reforms.

From 2007 until 2024, the European Commission and the EU Member States allocated EUR 87.53 million to the ‘legal and judicial development’, EUR 109.33 million for the ‘public sector policy and administrative management’, EUR 4.31 million for anti-corruption organisations and institutions in Armenia¹⁹. The expectations of the Armenian authorities for the EU support and partnership are reflected in the CEPA and its implementation roadmap, and in the state strategies, such as the 2019-2023 and 2022-2026 Judicial and Legal Reform Strategy, Police Reform Strategy and the 2024-2026 Action Plan, 2023-2026 Anti Corruption Strategy of Armenia.

One of its priorities in the judicial sector is to get closer to European institutional standards. Armenia strives to improve the process of selecting judges, and it plans to raise their salaries and implement integrity checking of judicial candidates²⁰. Armenian authorities have introduced a new independent state body, the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), to ensure the independence of courts and judges. Yet, more efforts are needed to ensure the impartiality of the body, as occasional reports suggest that certain candidates who received negative integrity checks were still appointed to judicial positions by the SJC²¹.

In the fight against corruption, it is a priority for Armenia to receive support to strengthen its legislation and institutional frameworks for anti-corruption and asset recovery. The Corruption Prevention Commission was created in 2019, and it has been tasked to monitor public officials’ financial disclosures. A law on forfeiture of illegal assets was adopted in 2020²².

¹⁹ European Commission (2024) *EU Aid Explorer*. Available at: https://euaidexplorer.ec.europa.eu/explore/recipients_en

²⁰ World Bank (2023) *Supporting Judicial Reforms in Armenia: A Forward Look. Public Expenditure and Performance Review of the Judiciary in Armenia*. Washington DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank. Available at: <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/a8b97de2cdf5b18ef2d9584d4f758801-0080062023/original/Forward-Look-Armenia-Judiciary-eng.pdf>

²¹ Hakobyan, L., Makaryan, G. and Igityan, A. (2024) *CEPA EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform Final Report*. Available at: <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/5752ebf7-1b3a-495a-a100-10a10049469c/downloads/Zekuyts%20ENG.pdf?ver=1717933094160>

²² Bak, M. (2022) *Overview of corruption and anti-corruption in Armenia*. U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre. Available at: https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/assets/uploads/kproducts/Overview-of-corruption-and-anti-corruption-in-Armenia_2022-final.pdf

Police reform is yet another priority, including efforts to build up the Ministry of Internal Affairs and increase the structure and capabilities of the police²³.

Election conduct remains important. Following the shift from a Presidential to a Parliamentary republic in 2015, a new Electoral Code was adopted in 2016 which introduced innovative methods of election administration, such as voter registration at the polling station through Voter Authentication Devices, and video recording at the polling stations. Additionally, in April 2021, the National Assembly adopted the amendments to the Criminal Code on Administrative Offenses, which allowed to bring charges to candidates and political parties/factions for bribing votes and the Electoral Code was further amended²⁴.

Examples of Implemented Projects and Main Results

Major contributions to the democratic reforms have been made in the framework of the Partnership for Good Governance (Phase I, Phase II and Phase III), which provides tailor-made support to Armenia in the field of human rights, the rule of law and democracy and is co-funded by the EU and Council of Europe. For instance, between January 2019 and February 2023, “Implementation of judicial reforms” projects were carried out, resulting in an assessment of the Judicial and Legal Reforms Strategy for 2019-2023 and the adoption of the Draft Judicial and Legal Reforms Strategy for 2022-2026 by the Government of Armenia. Additionally, an institute of the performance of evaluation of judges was established, and the first round of performance evaluation of 23% of all judges was completed²⁵.

The EU has provided funding for the “Development and introduction of E-Justice solutions in Armenia”, implemented from November 2021 until November 2023, and that established e-Justice portal that serves as a focal point for all interconnected information systems and allows all persons to connect and send/receive information from a single access point²⁶. The project was important for the digitalisation of the justice system of Armenia, and for the implementation of the Action Plan of the Judicial and Legal Reforms Strategy for 2022-2026,

²³ European Council of the EU (2024) *Joint press statement following the 5th meeting of the EU-Armenia Partnership Council*. Brussels: Press Office. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/02/13/joint-press-statement-following-the-5th-meeting-of-the-eu-armenia-partnership-council/pdf>

²⁴ OSCE (2021) Armenia: Joint urgent opinion on amendments to the electoral code and related legislation. Available at: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/d/484355_1.pdf

²⁵ Council of Europe (2023) *Partnership for Good Governance in Armenia*. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/partnership-for-good-governance-in-armenia-results-factsheet-march-202/1680ab43a2>

²⁶ EU4Armenia (2021) *Development and Introduction of E-justice Solutions in Armenia*. Available at: <https://eu4armenia.eu/projects/eu-project-page/?id=1645>

particularly, in the implementation of the sections related to the establishment of the unified e-court and e-justice management systems²⁷.

From June 2020 to August 2022, “Consolidation of the Justice System, Armenia” was implemented with a budget of EUR 2.2 million. The project strived to improve the quality of the Armenian justice system, strengthen its independence, efficiency, integrity, accountability and transparency²⁸.

Table 1: Summary of the Selected Projects

Sector	Example of projects	Main Result
Justice	Implementation of judicial reforms: January 2019 - February 2023	Strategy on the Judicial and Legal Reforms of Armenia for 2019-2023 developed; Judicial Code amended; Institute of the performance of evaluation of judges was established; Handbook on improving quality of judicial decisions was designed and training of judges delivered
	Development and introduction of E-Justice solutions in Armenia: November 2021- November 2023	E-Justice portal is developed and established; The communication and visibility of the portal is developed
	Consolidation of the justice system, Armenia: June 2020 to August 2022	Advised the Ministry of Justice on important amendments to the Mediation Act; Supported to the establishment of the national arbitration centre; Supported the Armenian Academy of Justice for the implementation of its training programme and designed training manual; Strengthened the professional ethics and integrity of judges and public prosecutors, especially in the form of consultations on rules of conduct, acceptance of gratuities, conflicts of interest and disciplinary procedures
Electoral support	Long term electoral assistance to the election related stakeholders of Armenia: 1 st of January 2015 to 31 st of December 2017 ²⁹	Support was provided to the adoption of new legislation on the conduct of elections and political parties; Voter Authentication Devices introduced; 108 electoral commissions’ members, judges, civil society and proxies of political parties and more than 300 Territorial Election Commissioners trained; Capacities of observers increased

²⁷ Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Armenia (2022) *2022-2026 Strategy for judicial and legal reforms of the Republic of Armenia*. Available at: https://moj.am/storage/uploads/Strategy_Final_ENG.pdf

²⁸ IRZ (2023) *Armenia – annual report*. Available at: <https://www.irz.de/index.php/en/partner-states/armenia/3930-armenia-annual-report-2022>

²⁹ Council of Europe (2018) *Results of projects in Armenia under the European Union/Council of Europe Partnership for Good Governance*. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/armenia-results-factsheet-2018-en-rev/16808e4e5c>

	Electoral support project in Armenia-3 (ESPA): 5 th of May 2021 – 30 th of September 2021	Enhanced integrity and transparency of elections; Enhancing the capacity of the Central Election Commission in conducting public outreach and external communication; Ensuring health and safety measures during electoral operations to mitigate risks of COVID-19
Corruption	Strengthening institutional capacities to fight and prevent corruption: January 2019 - February 2023) ³⁰	Development of the Anti-Corruption Strategy and Action Plan for 2019-2022; The Corruption Prevention Commission (CPC), a new anti-corruption body, was established in November 2019; Further to the adoption of the Law on Making Amendments to the Public Service Law (19 January 2021), obliging officials to provide information on their expenditures, an additional module on expenditures was added to the methodology for analysis and verification of public officials' declarations

In the area of the conduct of elections, from January 2015 to December 2017, Armenia implemented the project entitled “Long term electoral assistance to the election related stakeholders”. As a result of the project, Armenian authorities followed the Venice commission recommendations of the Council of Europe and adopted the new Electoral Code in May 2016. The project contributed to the training of 108 electoral commissions’ members, judges, civil society and proxies of political parties in the process of dealing with electoral complaints and appeals. More than 300 Territorial Election Commissioners were trained on the new Electoral Code and management of the electoral process. The project deployed 200, 250 and 150 domestic observers during the local elections in Gyumri and Vanadzor (2 October 2016), parliamentary elections (2 April 2017) and Yerevan municipal elections (14 May 2017), respectively³¹. The project “Electoral support project in Armenia-3 (ESPA)” (5 May 2021 – 30 September 2021) built on some of the results of the project “Long term electoral assistance to the election related stakeholders”, and also introduced new activities. For instance, an assessment was made of the Voter Authentication Equipment and whether additional devices were needed and training of 4,500 Voter Authentication Device Operators was organised. Upgrade was done to Central Verification Information System (CVIS) to upload the voters’ list to the Voter Authentication Devices. The Central Election Commission (CEC) received support

³⁰ Council of Europe (2022) *Results factsheet: Partnership for Good Governance in Armenia, January 2022*. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/factsheet-armenia-en-new-factsheet-10122021/1680aa8e19>

³¹ Council of Europe (2018) *Results of projects in Armenia under the European Union/Council of Europe Partnership for Good Governance*. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/armenia-results-factsheet-2018-en-rev/16808e4e5c>

in the implementation of national campaigns around inclusiveness and women's participation³².

Armenia also received support in the fight against corruption through the project "Strengthening institutional capacities to fight and prevent corruption" (January 2019-February 2023). As a result of the project, the law on Making Amendments to the Public Service Law was adopted in January 2021, and a template for asset declaration was developed and used by the newly established Corruption Prevention Commission to collect declarations from public officials³³ and a Code of Conduct for Public Servants³⁴ was adopted in July 2022.

Challenges and Difficulties

There are two are the major challenges that do prevent Armenia from to advancing the defined agenda further and implement reforms more efficiently: (1) the fact that Armenia has not changed its foreign policy orientation over time, and (2) the slow progress in democratic reforms.

While there have been significant results emerging from the EU-supported projects, we should keep in mind that Armenia has not changed its foreign policy and does not intend to start an EU-accession process. This fact makes it harder for the EU to demand more consistent reforms. This is reflected in the above-discussed issues. For instance, in the justice sector, although, the institute of integrity checks was introduced in the appointment of judicial candidates (stipulated by the Judicial Code), there were occasional cases when judges were elected by the Supreme Judicial Council, despite the negative integrity checks by the Corruption Prevention Commission. Additionally, disciplinary proceedings by the RA Ministry of Justice and the Ethics and Disciplinary Commission of the General Assembly of Judges remains problematic and have been assessed as ineffective³⁵.

³² UNDP (2021) Project document: Armenia. Available at: <https://info.undp.org/docs/pdc/Documents/ARM/Prodoc%20ESPA%203%20-%20Snap%20support%20-May%204%20-signed%20first%20page%20and%20content.pdf>

³³ Council of Europe (2022) *Results factsheet: Partnership for Good Governance in Armenia, January 2022*. <https://rm.coe.int/factsheet-armenia-en-new-factsheet-10122021/1680aa8e19>

³⁴ Council of Europe (2022) Newsroom PGG II - Armenia: Armenia adopts a model code of conduct for public servants. Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/corruption/-/model-rules-of-conduct-for-all-armenian-public-servants-adopted-implementation-to-follow>

³⁵ Hakobyan, L., Makaryan, G. and Igityan, A. (2024) *CEPA EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform Final Report*. Available at: <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/5752ebf7-1b3a-495a-a100-10a10049469c/downloads/Zekuyts%20ENG.pdf?ver=1717933094160>

In the area of election conduct, for example, it was acknowledged that the Voter Authentication Devices were used during the parliament elections in Armenia in 2021, which contained an electronic copy of the voter list for the respective polling station. However, certain discrepancies were mentioned regarding the Central Election Commission, noting that the CEC published scanned copies of the signed voter lists after the election day, which is a violation of data privacy and the maintenance of secrecy. Additionally, the CEC received support to develop and implement national campaigns around inclusiveness and women's participation, however, the campaigns were limited in their outreach and women were sidelined throughout the campaign³⁶.

In the fight against corruption, acknowledgment was made that the Anti-Corruption Strategy and Action Plan for 2019-2022 were developed in inclusive and transparent manner, through the organisation of public consultation process, with the participation of civil society. However, there are issues with the implementation of the strategy and it has been noted that for instance in 2022, only 58% of the measures of the Action Plan were fully implemented³⁷.

Mutual benefits of the EU-Armenia relations

Three distinct dimensions of Armenia – political system, civil society and the security sector – serve as important factors for the development and enhancement of the EU-Armenia relations.

First, even if relations with the EU progress slowly, Armenia remains in the post-revolution reform process. Previously classified as a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime, the country is now classified as a transitional or hybrid regime thanks to its post-revolution reforms in the prevention of corruption, electoral and judicial reforms³⁸. Armenia can become a positive example in the South Caucasus for the advancement of democratic reforms and the benefits of being supported by the EU.

Second, Armenia has been an important country where democratic developments and struggle for freedoms are well visible. Even if Armenia refused to ratify the Association Agreement in

³⁶ OSCE ODIHR (2021) *Republic of Armenia: Early parliamentary elections, 20 June 2021. ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*. Warsaw: OSCE ODIHR. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/4/502386.pdf>

³⁷ OECD (2024) *Baseline Report of the Fifth Round of Monitoring of Anti-Corruption Reforms in Armenia. The Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/fb158bf9-en.pdf?expires=1719761201&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=4477A9AF0951054872C25378B322BF38>

³⁸ Freedom House (2022) *Nations in Transit 2022: Armenia*. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/nations-transit/2022>

2014, Armenian civil society (both opposition parties, NGOs and civil movements) remained active. A good example of the active participation of the Armenian civil society in social and political sectors can be observed in the current initiative to have a referendum on the EU Accession of Armenia. Three political parties that do not have seats in the current parliament, together with a civil movement, endorsed the proposal calling for a referendum on starting a process of Armenia's membership to the EU. The Central Electoral Commission of Armenia has approved the application to initiate the referendum: September 16-November 14 is set as a timeframe to collect signatures for submitting the bill for a referendum³⁹. Armenian diverse spectrum of opposition parties and civil society organisations present a good opportunity to develop further EU policies, support and cooperation with the civil society in democratising Armenia.

Third, following the worst escalation over the Nagorno Karabakh since 1994, and the fleeing of the ethnic Armenians to Armenia⁴⁰, Armenian official rhetoric is prone towards peace. On August 30, 2024, the Commission on Delimitation and Border Security of the State Border between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan and the State Commission on the Delimitation of the State Border between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia signed the Regulation on joint activity. Armenia's official position in the region is embedded in its new 'The crossroads of peace' project that strives to develop communications between Armenia and its neighbouring countries, including with Azerbaijan and Georgia through renovating, building and operating roads, railways, pipelines, cables and electricity lines⁴¹. Armenia can serve as a partner to implement cross-border cooperation projects with Azerbaijan with the support of the EU, aimed at maintaining and preserving peace in the region. Eastern Partnership that comprises of the six partners countries and contains also a multilateral cooperation format can introduce a cross-border cooperation component and stimulate cooperation among Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

³⁹ ArmenPress (2024) *Three political parties in Armenia start referendum petition for EU membership*. Available at: <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1199594>

⁴⁰ Paylan, S. (2024) *How Armenia's 'Crossroads for Peace' plan could transform the South Caucasus*. Atlantic Council. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-armenias-crossroads-for-peace-plan-could-transform-the-south-caucasus/>

⁴¹ The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia (2023) *Prime Minister Pashinyan presents the "Crossroads of Peace" project and its principles at the Tbilisi International Forum*. Available at: <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2023/10/26/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/>

Finally, Armenia lags behind Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in terms of the advancement of cooperation with the EU. At the same time, Armenian authorities have launched the visa dialogue process, and other reforms in the anti-corruption, judicial and police sectors. EaP can not only bring the expertise from the EU Member States to Armenia for work on the reforms but also to introduce positive experiences from Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine that might be valuable for Armenia. Multilateral platforms among the EaP countries, facilitated by the EU to share best practices in reform projects, could be useful both for enhancing partnership and implementing reforms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Stronger commitment for deep relations

Since the revolution of 2018, although there have not been any abrupt foreign policy changes, we can observe tangible shifts and positive rhetoric towards democratic reforms and the EU-accession process. It is therefore important to accelerate the negotiations and new commitments between the EU-Armenia. The period between 2009 and 2017 showed that there can be frictions and drawbacks in EU-Armenia relations, as happened with the Association Agreement. In practice, several years were lost until a new CEPA agreement was designed and came into its full effect only in 2021. It is essential that the EU pushes forward their commitment to launch the EU-Armenia Partnership Agenda, that will provide new opportunities for deeper cooperation.

Better oversight over the implementation of the EU-funded projects

As the democratisation of Armenia deepens and slows down in Armenia over time, the process of democratic reforms is not easy and quick. In some areas improvements are acknowledged, at the same certain negative aspects remain. Similar to the democratisation process, the EU-funded projects bring important results, at the same certain areas remain in need of further support and improvement. The EU needs to introduce a structure/team that will monitor the implementation of each project, identify the positive effects and the areas that need attention. Based on the monitored results, the EU can further expand its assistance and decide on the areas that need attention.

Enhancement of monitoring rights of the civil society

It is necessary to involve an oversight of the implementation of the projects also by the civil society. Based on the CEPA, the EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform was established. The EU

needs to grant a higher status to the Platform and equip it with monitoring tools. It would be beneficial to empower the Platform in the monitoring of the implementation of the CEPA and the EU-funded projects in each sector. Monitoring function on the civil society can keep the authorities of Armenia more transparent and accountable, and the project results might be more effective and sustainable.

Diversification of implementors and beneficiaries of the EU-funded projects

In the case of Armenia, various projects are implemented by international actors. For instance, the discussed “Electoral Support Project in Armenia-3 (ESPA)” project was implemented by the UNDP; the implementing party of the “Implementation of judicial reforms” project was the Council of Europe. It is necessary to diversify the implementors and the direct project beneficiaries and include civil society organisations. The EU can introduce a mandatory criteria of involving a competent CSO(s) (depending on the funded sector) that will be a part of the implementation of the projects and will serve as a voice and provider of the expertise from the civil society.

Utilise success stories from other EaP countries

The level of partnership with the EU among the six Eastern Partner countries varies. Moldova and Ukraine started the Accession negotiations with the EU. The case of Armenia illustrates that there can be positive enhancement of the EU-Armenia relation, despite the ups and downs in its relations with the EU during the last ten years. It is therefore important to utilise positive lessons learnt from the cases of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova in various sectors of cooperation with the EU. For instance, it is expected that Armenia will start negotiations with the EU over the visa dialogue, an area where the three partner countries have completed their negotiations and were granted the visa free regimes. It would be important to design the visa-dialogue process and reform strategy of Armenia based on the positive experiences of the three countries.

Moldova and Ukraine are also in the EU accession negotiation process, which means that these countries are/will be better equipped in the implementation of the reforms in the area of elections, struggle against corruption and judiciary. The EU can introduce multilateral dialogues among the EaP countries to share the positive experiences in the reforms and discuss any difficulties and challenges.

Increase the EU visibility in Armenia

We can observe positive rhetoric towards the EU and democratic reforms among the Armenia officials and the idea of the EU-accession negotiations is discussed on the civil and political levels in Armenia. The EU needs to increase its visibility in the country, spread its values, and increase the awareness of democratic reforms, the role of CEPA and the idea of EU-Accession among the general public of Armenia.

Introduce cross border cooperation

With its peace agenda and negotiations with Azerbaijan, Armenia strives to establish cooperation with its neighbouring countries. The EU needs to take an active role in the peace negotiation processes and introduce a cross-border cooperation package for the civil society and business representatives in the South Caucasus region. These projects should involve a partnership agenda between bordering communities of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and cover joint problems (e.g. climate issues, agriculture, business development, innovation). The projects can also concern reconciliation and seek to build understanding between peoples.