



**Threading the Needle:  
Boosting Armenia's  
Resilience and Deepening EU  
Cooperation**

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## Executive Summary

Following the loss of Karabakh and in the light of its radically changed relationship with Russia, Armenia finds itself in a completely new political environment, both vulnerable and alone. This, however, presents opportunities to redefine itself and its place in the world. Armenia is pivoting away from Russia and, potentially, towards the European Union (EU). How this process unfolds is vital to the EU as regional stability and democracy in the South Caucasus would have a significant positive impact on Europe's security, prosperity and geopolitical agency. As Georgia rapidly drifts towards Russia's orbit, Armenia's role as a partner is becoming increasingly vital in preventing the loss of the South Caucasus to autocracy and Russian might. As a geopolitical actor, the EU can promote democracy and counter Russian influence. In addition, the South Caucasus is a vital trade hub with the potential to enhance economic connectivity through the "Middle Corridor", an emerging East-West trade route that connects Europe to East Asia through the South Caucasus and Central Asia, thereby bypassing Russia.

While Armenia seeks to move closer to the EU, however, its efforts are hindered by its dependence on Russia, limited EU resources and attention span, an unstable security context shaped by Russian hybrid attacks and threats, conflict with Azerbaijan and regional volatility. Breaking free from Russian influence would require credible western alternatives on trade, infrastructure and investment. Importantly, Armenia is unable to entirely replace Russia with the EU or the West, especially in the economic realm, but can work to diversify its security partnerships and economy, bolster its resilience and independence, and redefine its relationship with Russia. At the same time, Armenia's stalling reform process, domestic political issues such as polarization, disillusionment, apathy and lack of pluralism, and contradictory public opinion on the EU present significant obstacles to any long-term political and societal development and potential pivot to the West.

The West should support Armenia's security by supporting military reform, providing access to technology, promoting economic diversification and assisting diplomatic efforts to resolve regional conflicts with Azerbaijan and Türkiye. The EU can also play a transformative role in boosting Armenia's reform process and European ties by supporting implementation of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement and advancing the dialogue on visas, learning from its experience with Ukraine and Moldova to promote political pluralism and ensuring that reforms are developed, implemented and monitored jointly with civil society. To incentivize and revitalize the reform process, the EU should offer concrete economic carrots that provide tangible benefits to the population and therefore boost popular opinion of the EU. To avoid another Georgia scenario, the EU will need strategic, lucid public communication and actions that highlight and respond to both progress and setbacks with reform.

## Introduction

On 17 October 2023, Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan told the European Parliament that “Armenia is ready to be closer to the EU, as close as the EU would consider it possible”. Abandoned by Russia, its would-be security guarantor, Armenia faces a desperate security situation. In an increasingly volatile and hostile external security environment, Pashinyan’s statement reflects the country’s ongoing efforts to diversify its external relations away from Russia, and potentially primarily towards the EU.

Armenia negotiated an Association Agreement and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement with the EU in 2013 but, after Russian pressure, was forced instead to join a Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, which in 2015 became the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Current relations between Armenia and the EU are instead built on a [Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement \(CEPA\)](#), which was signed in 2017 and entered into force in March 2021. This agreement provides a framework for improving EU-Armenia cooperation in a wide range of areas, not least supporting Armenia’s progress with reform and alignment with EU standards. The EU [accounted](#) for 12.6 % of Armenia’s total trade in 2023, slightly higher for exports and lower for imports. The EU’s role in Armenia’s trade is therefore small in comparison with Russia.

In the past two years, as Armenia has increasingly looked for EU support and cooperation on various issues, not least linked to security and resilience, several important components have been added to the relationship. These include the [launch](#) of an EU civilian mission in Armenia (EUMA) under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in February 2023, the [announcement](#) of a €270 million Resilience and Growth Plan to support Armenia’s economy and society over four years in April 2024, the provision, for the first time, of €10 million in security assistance to Armenia’s armed forces through the European Peace Facility (EPF) in July 2024, the [start](#) of a visa liberalization dialogue in September 2024 and in 2024 the start of work on a new, more ambitious EU-Armenia Partnership Agenda, which is expected to be completed in 2025. Political dialogue between Armenia and the EU has also increased, involving many high-level visits and a summit in Brussels on 5 April 2024 when Pashinyan met with EU officials and the US Secretary of State.

However, while Armenia is being increasingly vocal about its emerging long-term goal of integrating and cooperating more closely with the EU, there are several external and internal obstacles. First, Armenia is still heavily dependent on, and constrained by, its various structural ties to Russia. Perhaps most crucial from the point of view of further EU cooperation, these include a close economic relationship, which has only grown since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Through the EAEU, Armenia strongly benefits from tariff-free trade with its main trading partner. Partly thanks to [record trade levels](#) with Russia, including re-exports, and the inflow of Russian capital, Armenia’s GDP doubled between 2021 and 2024.

At the same time, Armenia’s membership of the EAEU Customs Union and Single Market is incompatible with free trade agreements with the EU, which presents a dilemma. Replacing the EAEU would put Armenia in an extremely vulnerable position vis-à-vis Russia and is likely to lead to a backlash. It also requires a credible alternative in terms of free trade agreements with the EU, which would require time and effort in terms of the necessary Armenian reform and EU political will. It would also probably depend on an open border with Türkiye, which is tied up with the normalization process with Azerbaijan.



Second, the EU's resources and political will to support Armenia might be limited due to the many other dire internal and external issues the EU currently faces, which include an increasingly volatile and hostile South Caucasus region, and because of uncertainty about the speed and direction of Armenia's pivot away from Russia. Third, Russia and the ongoing strategic rivalry and conflict with Azerbaijan make Armenia's external security context unstable, draining government resources, fuelling internal political instability and limiting Armenia's room for manoeuvre. Fourth, Armenia's potential pivot to Europe is hampered by severe domestic obstacles, not least its stalled reform process, insufficient popular support for closer ties with the EU, and difficult economic and political circumstances.

This report analyses Armenia's ongoing and future path away from Russia and towards the EU and the many related issues and problems and makes policy recommendations to the EU and the West on how to support Armenia. The report seeks to provide answers to two related sets of questions: First, what are the mechanisms for and obstacles to Armenia's further cooperation and integration with the EU? How can the EU support this path? Second, what are the mechanisms for and obstacles to improving Armenia's security, resilience and independence from Russia? What can the EU do to strengthen Armenia in this endeavour?

## Armenia's potential path towards the EU

### Armenia's (stalling) reform process

While Armenia has changed in many respects since the Velvet revolution of 2018, many of the promises that brought the current government to power have yet to be kept. Instead of transformative reform, the Pashinyan government has only implemented limited reforms to electoral processes, constitutional amendments and anti-corruption measures. In the early years following the revolution, in 2018–2020, Armenia made significant progress in international rankings, moving from 45/100 to 53/100 in the Freedom House [Freedom score](#) and from 26/100 to 33/100 in its [Democracy score](#); from 35/100 to 49/100 in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index [ranking](#); and from 122nd to 79th in International IDEA's Global State of Democracy [ranking](#) (2017–2023). Crucially, however, since 2020 Armenia's scores in many of these rankings have stagnated or even deteriorated. One important exception is the Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index, where Armenia has made continuous progress, moving from 79th in 2017 to 43rd in 2024.

Overall, however, while elections are slightly fairer and ballot tampering is less open, administrative resources were still exploited in the most recent [Yerevan city council elections](#). Major reform issues remain unaddressed, public administration, electoral and judicial systems have not significantly improved, and corruption persists, especially in public administration, the military and education. Nepotism and favouritism continue to be accepted as normal and supposedly neutral appointments, such as members of electoral committees, human rights defenders, the anti-corruption council, constitutional court judges, the general prosecutor and the head of public radio/television, have been filled through political affiliation with the ruling party rather than on merit. In a [September 2024 poll](#), the most distrusted public institutions were the National Assembly, the Courts, the President's Office and the Prosecutor's Office. The most trusted were the Armed Forces, the police, the National Security Service and regional and local government.

This has limited public trust and enthusiasm and contributed to political apathy and low voter turnout in recent elections. In the most recent Yerevan elections in 2023, turnout was 28.43% compared to 43.66% in 2018. Much of the public, particularly the youth, are disillusioned and see few viable political alternatives. Many citizens feel limited to choosing between “two evils”, which perpetuates a sense of political stagnation. Moreover, the Pashinyan government has not fully addressed calls for justice for former officials or for broader systemic reforms, which has further fuelled public disappointment. The ruling party has continued to consolidate power, and for several years the central authorities have misused their power against opposition mayors in the regions. In the [September 2024 poll](#), only 16% trusted Pashinyan and 61% agreed that they did not trust any politician or public person.

There are several possible reasons why Armenia has not seen more progress with reform under the current government. Weak administrative capacity and the non-stop crises of recent years – from the 2020 war to the Covid-19 pandemic, [the 2023 Azerbaijani military campaign against Nagorno-Karabakh](#) and the ongoing volatile internal and unstable external security situation partly help to explain the lack of progress, as short-term responses are easier than long term planning under such circumstances. At the same time, however, the current government might not be keen to implement reforms that threaten its hold on power and might be incentivized to uphold a status quo that makes re-election easier, and thereby instrumentalize the apathy, polarization and a weak and illegitimate opposition. While most Armenians are clearly dissatisfied with the current political alternatives and desire the emergence of new political forces, the Pashinyan government actively seeks to discredit and suppress any new third options by portraying them as affiliated with either Russia or the previous elites.

The West's relatively lenient stance on Armenia's reform process since 2018, which mostly ignored stalling progress and instead [highlighted alleged](#) “substantial progress”, allowed Pashinyan's government to avoid facing strong demands for accountability or reform. Armenia's best chance for meaningful change might lie in grassroots efforts, as smaller parties unite to challenge the existing power structure. Without greater external pressure and internal organization, however, Armenia risks remaining politically polarized and stuck in a cycle of short-term solutions rather than pursuing the deeper reforms needed to meet its democratic aspirations.

## **EU perceptions and expectation management**

Perceptions of the EU in Armenia are moderately positive but have fluctuated significantly over the past decade. A [March 2024 poll](#) showed that 56% have a positive image of the EU, 78% see EU-Armenia relations as good and 62% trust the EU – the highest for any international organization. All three numbers show a similar improving trend in recent years compared to previous polls but are still lower than in 2019.

At the same time, the [September 2024 poll](#) found that Armenia's relations with the EU were roughly on a par with the United States and China, and not nearly as good as ties with India and Iran, with which Armenia has developed closer relations in recent years, not least on security and defence issues. Importantly, France is seen separately from, and far surpasses, the EU as Armenia's primary European and most important overall ally. The EU is thus seen as the fifth most important political and security partner, after France, Iran, the USA and India. Importantly, only 20% believe that Armenia's foreign policy course should be “only

pro-EU and the West”, while 57% agree that Armenia should maintain relations with Russia or be pro-Russian. In this regard, the EU is perceived differently than in countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, where EU alignment and non-dependence on Russia are significant national goals. Arguably, the context of popular opinion does not support the case that Armenia’s pivot away from Russia is a pivot specifically to the EU or the West.

Moreover, Armenians have little knowledge of the EU and possibly unreasonable expectations of what the EU can do to support Armenia. The March 2024 poll showed that 27% knew “well or rather well what the EU is about”, and 75% named “strengthening the defence system” as the top priority where the EU should play a greater role. Similarly, the September 2024 poll showed that 58% would vote to join the EU in a hypothetical vote, and the main benefit was seen as “strengthening security and stability”.

Many of these answers reflect the fact that security concerns dominate public opinion in Armenia, and that security support is what is expected and most appreciated from close allies. All this demonstrates a stark need to improve knowledge and awareness of the EU, and to proactively manage expectations of the EU among the Armenian population, especially with regard to the possibility, and limits, of the EU directly strengthening Armenia’s security.

Through various components such as the EUMA, EPF support, the Resilience and Growth Plan and other potential initiatives, the EU has already directly strengthened Armenia’s resilience and security, and could do so further. However, the EU is not yet a credible security actor and the primary benefits for Armenia of EU cooperation and integration lie in other fields, such as economic and social development, and democratic reform. At the same time, however, by improving trade diversification, economic resilience and energy security, the EU can indirectly bolster Armenia’s resilience, security and independence vis-à-vis Russia.

### **EU support for Armenia’s CEPA implementation**

Armenia currently faces several major challenges in connection with CEPA implementation, notably limited administrative capacity and inadequate infrastructure. Armenia’s governmental bodies, particularly in line ministries, often lack the technical expertise to approximate the EU acquis. Training programmes on EU regulatory standards and approximation methodologies for ministry focal points will be essential steps forward, and ongoing EU support for training, expert exchanges and strategic advisory services will be essential to close the gap in expertise. Infrastructure deficits, particularly in transport and water systems, present significant barriers to bringing EU standards to Armenia, especially in rural areas.

Political engagement between Armenia and the EU has strengthened, marked by high-level visits and constructive dialogue. This dynamic is vital to maintaining momentum in Armenia’s reform process, especially in the light of increasing public expectations. In this regard, a joint EU-Armenia communication strategy on CEPA implementation will be essential. Transparency on progress with reform can help manage public expectations and foster trust. The existing trilateral cooperation between Armenia, the EU and the US should be expanded to cover further reform-focused projects, foster synergy across sectors and encourage regional collaboration on energy, transport and trade.

## The importance of Türkiye

The potential for Armenia's long-term integration with the West partly hinges on improved relations with Türkiye, particularly by opening the Türkiye-Armenia border. This step is critical for Armenia to maintain alternative connections to the outside world in general and to the West in particular, given the complications with other neighbours. Armenia's gateway to the north, Georgia, faces stability issues and a possible non-western, Russian-controlled future following recent parliamentary elections. Iran, Armenia's southern gateway, is not a path to Europe. The peace and normalization process with Azerbaijan, which could be decisive for opening regional trade routes, is progressing but far from complete. At the same time, however, according to the September 2024 [poll](#), 56% of Armenians oppose opening the border with Türkiye.

Contrary to popular belief, Türkiye's actions towards Armenia are not solely dictated by Azerbaijan's stance. Instead, Türkiye is using its leverage with Armenia strategically and while Azerbaijan's stance is a factor, it often serves as a bargaining tool rather than a fixed barrier. Türkiye's diplomatic approach is calculated; if Türkiye perceives that opening relations with Armenia would serve its interests more than maintaining leverage, it is likely to act accordingly. Western pressure on Türkiye could make a significant difference. Opening up Türkiye-Armenia relations also has the potential to reduce Russian leverage in Armenia.

## Strengthening Armenia's security and resilience

### End of the overreliance in Russia

For almost 30 years, since the end of the first Karabakh War in 1994, Armenia was heavily reliant on Russia for its security. The cornerstones were the 1997 bilateral Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with Russia and Armenia's membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which was formed in 2002. One consequence of this outsourcing of security to Russia was that Armenia underinvested in its own armed forces.

During the same period, Azerbaijan was [spending](#) enormous amounts raised from its increased energy exports on upgrading its military. Baku began a modernization programme in 2007, and in the following years its military expenditure was triple that of Armenia's, which remained stagnant.

Early indications that Russia and the CSTO had no intention of defending Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan came in May 2021, when Azerbaijani soldiers crossed into Armenia and occupied territory in the provinces of Syunik and Gegharkunik. CSTO Secretary-General Stanislav Zas was [criticized](#) by Armenian officials for downplaying the Azerbaijani incursion as a "border incident". Further border clashes took place in July and November the same year, causing casualties on both sides.

The fiercest fighting since the Second Karabakh War in 2020 came on 12–14 September 2022, when a series of clashes erupted on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border in the Syunik, Gegharkunik and Vayots Dzor provinces, leading to hundreds of deaths on both sides. The fighting ended with Azerbaijani forces taking control of some 215 square kilometres of Armenian territory (see figure 1). While the 2020 war was beyond the scope of the CSTO's responsibility, these attacks were not as they affected Armenia's internationally recognized

territory. Thus, Armenia [appealed to the CSTO](#) for military support in accordance with the organization's article 4 on collective security, but it refused even to evaluate Azerbaijani aggression let alone provide support for Armenia.

In addition, the Russian peacekeepers deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh after the Second Karabakh War did little to prevent either the nine-month Azerbaijani blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh, which began in December 2022, or the September 2023 attack that ended with a mass exodus of Karabakh Armenians. Furthermore, in a concerted effort, Russian officials such as Ministry for Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova and propagandists blamed Armenia and its pro-West policy for Azerbaijan's attack. Another source of deteriorating relations between Armenia and Russia was Yerevan's [approach to Kyiv](#). Russian officials accused Pashinyan of "following in Zelenskiy's footsteps" and helping the West "turn Armenia into another Ukraine"

As a consequence of all the above, Armenia took steps to end its security engagement with Russia and the CSTO. In March 2024, for instance, Yerevan sent an official [request](#) to Moscow to remove Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) border troops from Zvartnots International Airport, where they had been deployed since 1992. On 12 June 2024, [Pashinyan told the Armenian Parliament](#) of the government's intention to pull out of the CSTO.

Russia's reluctance to stand up for Armenia was also felt in arms deliveries. Armenia and Russia signed a new arms supply deal in Moscow in August 2021 and discussion further intensified after the attacks on Armenia in September 2022. In November 2023, however, Pashinyan announced that Armenia had paid Russia for weapons but not received them. At the same time, Russia's defence ties with Azerbaijan were strengthened by a new agreement on military interaction signed on 22 February 2022, two days before the full-scale invasion on Ukraine. Thus, Armenia found itself under military pressure from Azerbaijan without the support of its primary ally, which had strengthened its relations with Armenia's adversary.

Moscow still has strong leverage over Armenia, primarily economic but also through the presence of the 102nd military base in the country. The current 25-year lease expires in 2044. Russia lacks its own border with Armenia, however, so Moscow is attempting to use Azerbaijan as an intermediary by demanding that Armenia make concessions to achieve a peace agreement between the countries at the expense of Armenia's own territorial integrity.

The main push from Azerbaijan is an imposed transport corridor – the so-called Zangezur Corridor – through the southern Armenian region of Syunik (Zangezur in Azerbaijani, see figure 1) along Armenia's border with Iran to connect Azerbaijan's exclave of Nakhchivan with the rest of Azerbaijan, for which Baku has Moscow's support. Under the terms of the ceasefire brokered by Russia after the 2020 war, Moscow is demanding that Russian FSB border guards should control the corridor's security. To undercut Azerbaijan's pretext for threatening to impose this corridor, Armenia has proposed another transit initiative – the so-called Crossroads of Peace initiative – that does not impinge on the country's sovereignty. In addition, objections by Iran to the Zangezur Corridor have led Azerbaijan recently to consider a corridor through Iranian territory instead.

The potential threat that Russia poses to Armenia is primarily external by exploiting the risk of an intervention by Azerbaijan, but also internal by exploiting political divisions in the country to bring about regime change. Russia's betrayal of Armenia's security needs means that the country must look for other partners, especially in terms of diversifying arms supplies.



## Diversification of arms transfers and strengthening the resilience of Armenia

Recent [developments have forced Armenia](#) to nearly double its defence expenditure since 2022. Previously, 90 per cent of armed forces procurement came from Russia, but today the main suppliers are India and France, while Russian supplies from older contracts make up only 5–10 per cent.

India became the largest exporter of military equipment to Armenia in 2022. The current arms package exceeds \$1.5 billion. The contract includes such systems as the Pinaka multi-launch rocket system, MARG-155 self-propelled guns, towed artillery gun systems, Akash surface-to-air missiles, Zen anti-drone systems and anti-tank missiles. In April 2024, it was reported that India would send its first military attaché to Armenia. Procurement from India also signals that Armenia is shifting from Soviet-era 152-mm artillery and ammunition standards to the 155-mm calibre, which is the standard in NATO. This change will make future procurement of artillery and munitions from Russia almost impossible but enable further purchases from western countries.

In September 2024, there was [news](#) that Armenia is seeking India's help with upgrading its SU-30SM jets, the only fighter aircraft that Armenia possesses. This choice is natural since India produces an SU-30 variant on licence and could either sell or lease the aircraft for a preferential price. India also has a geostrategic interest in countering Pakistan's efforts to build up Azerbaijan's fighter fleet.

France is the European country that profiles itself as Armenia's best friend. Its arms deliveries include Bastion armoured vehicles, GM-200 radar stations, a Mistral air defence system and 155-mm Caesar self-propelled guns. France has also shown an interest in training Armenian forces and reforming military institutions in Armenia. Yerevan has recently enhanced its dialogue with other EU member states on defence issues, in particular Greece and Cyprus.

On 5 April 2024, Prime Minister [Pashinyan met](#) with President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, EU High Representative Josep Borell and US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to reaffirm support for Armenia's sovereignty, democracy, territorial integrity and socio-economic resilience. To underpin the new EU-Armenia Partnership Agenda, the EU promised to put forward a €270 million Resilience and Growth Plan for Armenia for the period 2024–2027. Furthermore, in July 2024, the EU decided for the first time to provide support for Armenia from the [European Peace Facility \(EPF\)](#) worth €10 million. The aim of the assistance is to enhance the logistical capacities of the Armenian Armed Forces and to help to improve the protection of civilians in crises and emergencies. It also aims to enhance the resilience of Armenia and accelerate the interoperability of its Armed Forces in case of possible future participation by the country in international military missions and operations, including those deployed by the EU.

The EU's biggest achievement thus far in strengthening Armenia's resilience is the EUMA. Since its deployment in February 2023, there has been no major escalation such as the one that occurred in September 2022 on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, Azerbaijan has been [critical](#) of the EUMA, which it claims was deployed to its borders without its consent. According to [media reports](#), the presence of EUMA, the current mandate of which expires in February 2025, is one of the issues outstanding in the signing of a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

## Policy recommendations

By prioritizing the areas set out below, the EU can play a transformative role in Armenia's European integration journey, enable sustainable reform, strengthen Armenia's democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law, increase public trust and help build a stronger, more resilient and sovereign Armenia aligned with EU standards and values.

### ➤ **Support Armenia to resolve its conflicts with its neighbours, thereby reducing Russian influence**

Armenia cannot replace Russia with the EU or the West but can diversify its security partners. Yerevan lacks the leverage to challenge Russia directly but can change the terms of the relationship. The EU should increase support for Armenia's security, including support for military reform and military training, and grant access to dual-use and military technology, which will increase Armenia's security and self-sufficiency.

Western powers should also put more political and diplomatic pressure on Azerbaijan to finalize the peace agreement, which would open diplomatic relations not only with Azerbaijan but also with its ally, Türkiye. Armenia would then be able to maintain control of its borders with Türkiye and Iran, and to fully replace the Russian FSB border troops there. Normalization of relations between Armenia and Türkiye would also make the Russian 102nd military base in Gyumri unnecessary. If Russian border troops and the 102nd military base were removed, Russian influence in Armenia and the region would be significantly reduced.

### ➤ **Assist with CEPA implementation through targeted efforts in specific areas**

Armenia's pursuit of European integration requires robust support to ensure the effective implementation of the CEPA. Through capacity-building, infrastructure development, enhanced political dialogue and support for institutional reform, the EU could significantly assist Armenia's path towards integration. However, Armenia's line ministries have limited capacity and understanding of the EU acquis, and one of the biggest challenges for Armenia's government is prioritizing issues. Given the low absorption capacity, instead of drawing up unrealistic maximized roadmaps, the EU should help Armenia to identify and then focus on implementation in a few critical areas.

Individual EU member states should take responsibility for supporting Armenia in specific areas with the potential to have a large impact. One such area is the construction of sanitary and phytosanitary labs, which are critical for Armenia's trade diversification and for meeting EU standards on environmental health – and which also are crucial for areas such as drinking water quality and air pollution. Another is roads and road safety, which will have immediate, tangible benefits for the population, not least through reduced mortality rates. EU support here would be impactful and visible to the public.

### ➤ **Promote the visa dialogue process and improve EU member states' visa handling capacities**

A critical milestone for Armenia's integration efforts is the ongoing EU visa dialogue, which is a priority area for the Armenian public. With its track record of effective readmission and visa facilitation, Armenia already meets many of the technical prerequisites. Securing political support from EU capitals is key to advancing this dialogue. This would not only benefit Armenian citizens directly but also strengthen Armenia's ties with the EU.

The limited infrastructure and capacities of EU member state embassies in Yerevan mean that ordinary Armenians face significant hurdles with visa application processes. This causes

frustration and anti-EU sentiment. Mitigating these issues would be a concrete benefit for Armenians and boost perceptions of the EU.

➤ **Offer concrete economic carrots to incentivize progress with reform and bolster Armenia's popular opinion of the EU**

Given that the EU does not yet play a large economic or security role for Armenia, it is not strange that the EU lags behind other international actors in popularity among Armenians. To revitalize the reform progress vis-à-vis the Armenian government and bolster the EU's power of attraction vis-à-vis the Armenian population, the EU should be creative in offering concrete carrots along the way to a potential Association Agreement and DCFTA. These could include strategic investments in key Armenian industries, autonomous interim trade measures to increase exports of key Armenian products to EU markets and investment in Armenian connectivity and transport infrastructure in line with Armenia's "Crossroads of Peace" initiative.

➤ **Learn lessons from Ukraine and Moldova on EU approximation**

Armenia's approximation efforts could be accelerated through the exchange of experiences with Ukraine and Moldova, which share Armenia's aspirations and challenges on EU alignment but are many years ahead. Learning from these countries' best practices, particularly in areas such as legislative planning, sectoral reform and civil society engagement, could streamline Armenia's reform process. EU member states could facilitate platforms for Armenia to exchange insights with the two countries, thereby enhancing Armenia's reform trajectory and integration potential.

➤ **Avoid the EU's mistakes of the past**

Importantly, the EU should avoid making the same mistakes in its approach to Armenia as it made with previous Eastern neighbours, such as Georgia. The reform process must be supported conditionally in such a way that progress is clearly rewarded with financial and political carrots that ideally benefit the population, while reform stagnation or backsliding is highlighted and potentially punished. This will require strategic public communication from the EU that highlights both progress and failure. Vague, soft and inadequate EU communication engenders unreasonable expectations in the Armenian population and makes the Armenian government more relaxed in its approach to reform.

➤ **Ensure a pluralistic political system and strong civil society**

Putting Armenia's reform process back on a positive track will require the ability to hold the government accountable for its failures, which in turn will require a legitimate and credible opposition, a strong and critical civil society, and a vibrant and independent media. All of these are currently mostly absent in Armenia. Strengthening these should be a long-term goal of the EU, perhaps by looking at examples from Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova where civil society and media have been fundamental to pushing government towards reform.

Importantly, the capacity of Armenia's civil society and media to hold the government accountable is weakened by their polarization, lacking independence and the partial co-opting of many organisations by the government since the Velvet revolution. To enhance the credibility and effectiveness of civil society and media, the EU should prioritize support for new and emerging actors rather than the usual large, established ones, with a particular focus on empowering youth and fostering a necessary generational change.

➤ **Promote civil society involvement in developing, implementing and monitoring reforms and EU acquis approximation**

As in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, Armenia's civil society will be crucial for both keeping pressure on and assisting the government to deliver reforms, and ensuring the continuous and sustainable long-term success of reforms. Civil society has a central role in developing clear reform benchmarks and precise indicators of EU acquis harmonization.

Moreover, Armenia's civil society will be key to helping domestic and foreign audiences follow and understand the reform process by developing joint monitoring platforms with regular updates. In Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, civil society reporting on reform progress has been far more lucid and accessible than the EU's. The EU should therefore encourage stronger dialogue between Armenia's government and civil society, and assist civil society to develop networks of joint monitoring and of readily available, digitally accessible reporting.

➤ **Improve the EU knowledge of the Armenian population while managing expectations**

The EU has done a lot for Armenia and can do a lot more in terms of democratic reform, economic development and strengthening resilience. However, the level of EU knowledge among Armenians is low and despite a significant increase in support, the EU is ranked far below other international partners. EU integration is a difficult and complicated long-term process, but one that can bring massive benefits to Armenia. Strengthening understanding and knowledge of this by bolstering visibility and strategic communication with both Armenia's government and its population will be vital, not least to create realistic expectations and prevent a public backlash.

Figure 1

**Armenia and Azerbaijan**







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