



Between Security and Democracy Support: The EU's Evolving Foreign Policy Engagement with Armenia

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Abstract

This paper assesses the democratic nature of EU practices in its foreign policy and security engagement with Armenia, as one of countries of the Eastern partnership. This is done to understand the EU's ability, capacity and willingness to learn new lessons and un-learn past inefficient practices.

The paper starts by providing an overview of the conceptual framework underpinning the analysis and explain how democratic nature or democratic-ness of EU foreign policy engagement is assessed through social embeddedness, social empowerment and social accountability. Next, historic turning points in EU-Armenia relations are identified, including: the failed signing of the Association Agreement in 2013, the adoption of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement in 2017, 2018 Velvet Revolution, and 2020 and 2023 wars in Nagorno Karabakh. These demonstrate how the EU evolved as a security and democracy support actor in the country by expanding its reach beyond state elites and embracing civil society actors and its local knowledge.

The analysis concludes that by 2023-2025 the EU has largely improved the democratic nature of its foreign policy action and security work in Armenia, yet with the country's security sector remaining closely connected to and affected by Russia, there is still a need for further improvement, especially in social empowerment and social accountability.

Introduction

The European Union (EU) is a unique foreign policy actor and a composite democracy (Heritier, 2003). On the surface, democratic norms and principles are key in the EU's engagement with its international partners. The EU incorporates its norms and values into its foreign policy documents. Democracy support is particularly important in the EU's relations with its immediate geographic neighbourhood. Nonetheless, the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods, which share land and sea borders with the EU, have struggled on their democratisation journeys.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), a framework document, which guides the EU's relations with its geographic neighbours, has celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2024. Following the review in 2015, the EU has shifted its policies in the Neighbourhoods more towards security and stability rather than democracy and normative principles (Blockmans, 2017).

Two regional components constitute the ENP: the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), and the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which was introduced in 2009. The Eastern Partnership focuses on the Eastern Neighbourhood: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. This paper focuses *on the EU's relations with Armenia within the framework of the Eastern Neighbourhood through the prism of its foreign policy practices and democracy support aspirations. It also takes a closer look at EU security support to the country.*

The paper aims to assess the democratic nature of EU practices in its foreign policy and security engagement with Armenia, as one of the EaP countries. Its objective is to understand the EU's ability, capacity and willingness to learn new lessons and un-learn past inefficient practices. To this end, this paper relies on the following research questions to guide the analysis:

- What are historical turning points that have affected the EU's behavioural practices in its cooperation with Armenia overall and the security component of this cooperation in particular?
- Which role does democracy as a practice play in EU engagement with Armenia's security policies, which absences and presences in terms of social embeddedness, social empowerment, social accountability can we observe?
- How can the EU learn to practice a more efficient and engaging democracy support in Armenia and its Eastern Neighbourhood?

This paper is based on both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources include policy and academic publications on EU democracy support in the Eastern Neighbourhood and, more specifically, in Armenia. Primary sources include original interviews with policy makers and civil society representatives in Armenia and relevant policy documents and official statements by EU and Armenian institutions and officials. The five interviews were conducted online and focused on the civil society's perspectives of EU democracy support and the democratic nature of EU engagement with Armenia (see list of interviews in Annex 1). The interviews were conducted in September 2024 via Zoom platform by the EaP CSF and the University of Warwick staff. All participants were informed about the purposes of the data collection and had an opportunity to read an information leaflet, as well as ask questions. For ethical considerations, all interviews are anonymised.

Some limitations of the research should be mentioned. First, the analysis focuses on the last decade, from 2013 to 2023. Some important developments took place in 2024 and early 2025, so the discussion will at times extend to a more recent timeframe. Second, this paper focuses on Armenia only. Third,

this paper concentrates on behavioural changes and patterns of the EU in Armenia, with the focus on security cooperation with the country and assessing the democratic nature of EU policies. Discursive practices are the subject of another series of research papers, also produced by SHAPEDEM-EU project teams.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, we provide an overview of the conceptual framework underpinning the analysis and explain how democratic nature or democratic-ness of EU foreign policy engagement is assessed; second, we identify and analyse historic turning points in EU-Armenia relations and study whether they had any impact on the practices of EU engagement with Armenia and its security sector, third, we identify lessons (un)learned by the EU.

1 Assessing democratic nature of EU foreign policy practices

The EU - Armenia relations are an evolving partnership defined by complex (geo)political and economic dynamics. This partnership has been developing within a broader geopolitical context shaped by Armenia's historical, security and economic ties with Russia, its historical antagonism and geographical proximity with Turkey, its conflictual relation with neighbouring Azerbaijan, and its evolving aspirations for deeper integration with the EU. These aspirations have been boosted by Armenia's recent introduction of a landmark draft bill in January 2025 to initiate the country's EU accession process, a move applauded by Brussels (Gasparyan, 2025) and mocked by Moscow (Barseghyan, 2025).

Building on the conceptual framework, designed within the SHAPEDEM-EU project, we study the evolution of EU-Armenia relations through the lens of democratic (un)learning to assess whether EU policies can be characterised by greater inclusivity and democratic accountability or whether they have remained inflexible and elite-driven (Gawrich et al., 2024). Here, the focus is on the democratic nature or democratic-ness of EU foreign policy practices in Armenia and specifically its security dimensions. To understand what is meant by democratic-ness, we use three interrelated concepts: social embeddedness, social empowerment and social accountability.

Social embeddedness is based on the idea that a core element of democracy is meaningful participation ([Achrainer and Pace, 2024](#)). EU foreign policy practices therefore should include not just governmental actors and traditional civil society organisations, but all communities, affected by the issues. This means that in the Armenian case, we are studying whether and how the EU engages with the local security context, affected by the Nagorno Karabakh wars and the peace process that followed Azerbaijan's lightning offensive in September 2023.

Social empowerment is about taking into account the local knowledge and utilising it to enhance the agency and ownership of local actors, involved in security-related cooperation with the EU. Here, the question is whether the EU creates space for non-state actors in Armenia to become active participants in joint action.

Finally, *social accountability* presupposes that those affected by EU foreign policy action, i.e. not external policymakers or experts in charge of devising this action, are given a chance to participate in its evaluation and assessment. In other words, is there an oversight and local scrutiny of EU engagement with Armenia's security sector?

Over the past decade, EU-Armenia relations have experienced important ups and downs stemming from shifting geopolitical dynamics and alliances, Armenia's internal political changes, and numerous security threats. The next section presents the key historic turning points that marked these relations, touching upon Armenia's political decisions, EU's diplomatic responses, and the actions and reactions of regional actors, namely Russia and Azerbaijan. The analysis of this dynamic tandem in EU-Armenia

relations offers insights into the broader challenges of EU foreign policy in the EaP region, especially in the context of competing security alliances and economic interests.

2 Historic turning points in the EU-Armenia relations 2013-2023 & potential moments of epiphany

2.1 Historic turning points

The EU-Armenia relations have gone through a political rollercoaster in the last decade and have demonstrated an unprecedented dynamic change. Armenia's relations with the EU and other international actors are increasingly informed by the security concerns and its long-standing conflict with the neighbouring Azerbaijan. In the hierarchy of the EU external bilateral relationships, Armenia might not take the top priority tier, but it certainly is not the last one in terms of strategic importance. Armenia is an integral part of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and a part to the Eastern Partnership (EaP) ([EEAS, 2025](#)).

This paper focuses on historic turning points, which can be defined as path-altering events and critical junctures in the history of the contemporary EU-Armenian relations. Based on an analysis of what could be defined as historic turning points of the EU's democracy-related engagement in Armenia in the last decade, this paper assesses the democratic nature of EU support in the context of security cooperation with the country.

In November 2013 at a summit in Vilnius, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine were scheduled to sign the new Association Agreement (AA) with the EU. But two months before, the Armenian government, under the leadership of the then President Serzh Sargsyan, abruptly ended talks with the EU and committed itself to join the Eurasian Economic Union, a Russia-led regional initiative. The negotiations of a new agreement, without free trade clause, have been rekindled in 2015 and completed in 2017 with signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA; more about CEPA further in the text).

Marked by some as a 'war of opportunity', the 2020 war between Azerbaijan and Armenia resulted in a geopolitical shift in South Caucasus, culminated by Azerbaijan's takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. Russia as a main security guarantor for Armenia played an insignificant role in a peace process. Many stakeholders in Armenia felt betrayed by Russia, which resulted to yet another shift in the country's foreign policy – towards the EU. Further, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Russia's failure to provide military alliance commitments under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) have weakened the credibility of its security guarantees to Armenia, and its enormous losses make it impossible for it to react to any other major contingency.

Meanwhile, the EU acknowledges the importance of security dimension as one of the top three joint priorities for cooperation, along with economic development for stabilisation, and migration and mobility. The EU's Joint Communication on the ['Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020- Reinforcing Resilience- an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all'](#) outlines the long-term policy objectives for future cooperation with Eastern Neighbourhood partners.

Below, we analyse these historical points to better understand EU-Armenia relations and the role of democratic practices within in. All these developments need to be considered against the background

of the ongoing autocratisation of the South Caucasus region and the interplay of Russian and EU interests in the region.

2.2 The 2013 turn towards the EAEU

In 2013 the European Union and Armenia were on the verge of signing an Association Agreement (AA) that included a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) at the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Vilnius Summit. After four years of intense negotiations (European Parliament 2018), the agreement was expected to pave the way for Armenia's rapprochement with the EU. However, in a surprising turn of events, now former Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan announced that Armenia would instead join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), halting the AA process.

This sudden shift, prompted by Russia's use of coercion and military-economic intimidation vis-a-vis Yerevan (Abrahamyan, 2015), was presented by the latter as a strategic decision driven largely by security concerns. As a landlocked country with a long-standing 30-year conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and complex relations with neighbouring Turkey, Armenia continued to consider Russia a critical security partner and guarantor. The country's military dependence on Russia, particularly in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, was a decisive factor in this 'U-turn'. Additionally, Armenia feared the loss of Russian security guarantees and the potential for political isolation if it moved away from Russia's orbit.

The EU was taken by surprise with this turn of events. At the time, it barely played any tangible role in Armenia's security and had a poor understanding on the country's dependence on Russia. As one of our interviewees put it, *'The EU miscalculated Armenia's dependence on Russia and what steps to take to limit this dependence so that those overnight shifts in Armenian foreign policy would not happen.'* (interview 2, 2024).

The EU therefore underestimated Armenia's deep economic and security dependence on Russia and failed to adequately address this challenge in its diplomatic approach. This was partly because the bloc *failed to use the negotiation process as a potential leverage for the promotion of democratic reforms in the country*. Instead, it largely treated the partnership as a straightforward economic and political alignment, disregarding Armenia's complex security calculus. In this circumstances, social empowerment and social accountability were glaringly omitted from the process of AA negotiation, while social embeddedness was extremely limited, with the EU focusing on Armenian political elites and a handful of large civil society organisations.

Armenia's decision to forgo the AA with the EU and instead join the Russian-led EAEU had long-term implications, both internally and externally. Domestically, Armenia's shift meant the loss of a crucial opportunity to address its democratic deficit. From a foreign policy perspective, halting the AA may have affected the relations with neighbouring Turkey. With an AA in place, the EU would have been in the position to leverage the DCFTA as a way to pressure Turkey to open the long-closed border with Armenia (Shirinyan, 2019).

2.3 From CEPA to Velvet Revolution

Following its turn towards the EAEU, Armenia's relationship with the EU entered a period of 'strategic pause'. However, in October 2014, Armenia began to re-engage with the EU, initiating a 'scoping exercise' to identify areas for future cooperation. This marked the beginning of the process that would lead to the elaboration, negotiation and signature of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2017.

CEPA, though less ambitious than the initially negotiated AA, reflected both Armenia's constraints due to its EAEU membership and *the EU's more flexible, tailored approach under the revised European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)*. The agreement emphasized cooperation in areas such as political dialogue, justice, freedom, security, and sectoral cooperation in fields like transport, energy, and agriculture. Despite the limitations imposed by Armenia's EAEU and CSTO commitments, the CEPA provided a platform for continued EU-Armenia collaboration, reinforcing the importance of maintaining ties with the EU while managing Armenia's Russian alliance (Gasparyan 2017). Still, the EU preferred to compartmentalize its approach to the country, without putting any additional pressure on its democratisation. This would have been futile as Armenia's pivot towards Russia in 2013 paved the way for consistent efforts to reach some degree of authoritarianism (Abrahamyan 2015).

The 2018 Velvet Revolution offered the opportunity for a genuine political shift within Armenia. The non-violent overthrow of Serzh Sargsyan, who tried to cling on to power after two terms as President by becoming the country's Prime Minister, and the ascent to power of opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan was a key moment in the Armenian politics (Giragosian 2017). However, unlike the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, the Velvet Revolution did not result in a drastic shift in Armenia's foreign policy orientation. Despite the strong public support for democratic reforms, endorsed by a vibrant civil society, Pashinyan's government maintained Armenia's geopolitical orientation, to some extent reassuring Russia of Armenia's loyalty and performing a balancing act in relation with the EU and Western partners. Armenia remained pushed and pulled between two normative systems, which was especially visible in the regulation of civil society: Western/EU system encouraged support of the non-governmental sector, while the Russian system promoted the so called 'foreign agents' laws', significantly limiting and impeding the civil society's role (Gilbert 2020).

Despite this continuity in foreign policy and steadiness in the Armenian-Russian relations, the EU's role in supporting Armenia's democratisation efforts grew significantly post-revolution. In this new political context, EU provided more robust support for democratic reforms, as the new government enjoyed unprecedented levels of public legitimacy and support (Shirinyan, 2019).

After entering into force in March 2021, CEPA also led to the establishment of institutional structures for cooperation, namely the EU-Armenia Partnership Council, the Parliamentary Partnership Committee and the EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform. Over time, there was a joint commitment of the EU, the Armenian government and civil society to work towards strengthening the rule of law, democracy and human rights protection (interview 3, 2024). Moreover, currently, as part of the 2021-2027 road map for EU engagement with civil society, the EU encouraged a bottom-up approach to Armenia's democratisation by engaging with civil society and including its active contribution to the reform process ([EEAS, 2023](#)).

Thus, the Velvet Revolution allowed the EU to *expand the social embeddedness of its practices* in the country. While previously the bloc was predominantly focusing on the top-down approach and engaging with the elites and a handful of CSOs, following the revolution, many more local actors, both from state and non-state sectors started actively engaging with Brussels. The government, led by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, has been a driving force behind deepening ties with the EU. Since 2018, the administration has viewed the EU as a key partner for reform and modernisation ([Pashinyan, 2023](#)).

The National Assembly, Armenia's parliament, plays a crucial role in ratifying agreements and aligning domestic legislation with CEPA's provisions. It also serves as a platform for mediating domestic political

contestations that influence foreign policy decisions. Moreover, several ministries, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Economy, and Ministry of Justice, are instrumental in implementing EU-supported reforms. For instance, the Ministry of Justice collaborates closely with EU partners to strengthen the judiciary and combat corruption, while the Ministry of Economy fosters economic partnerships with European counterparts.

Armenia has a vibrant civil society that acts as a bridge between local communities and the EU. One of the most funded sectors of EU democracy support, second only to the justice reform process ([EPD, 2019](#)), civil society organizations (CSOs) that have championed human rights, environmental protection, and democratic accountability have long cherished EU financial support. Civil society networks such as the *EU's Civil Society Facility and the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum* (including its EaP CSF Armenian National Platform) *empower the diverse civil society sector* through funding and capacity-building opportunities, ensuring that civil society remains a key stakeholder and equal interlocutor in EU-Armenia relations. This also creates opportunities for *improved social accountability* of EU foreign policy action in Armenia as more CSOs monitor its activities in the country and voice their concerns when there is disconnect between the rhetoric and action from Brussels. At the same time, the situation is much more complex in the *security sector*.

Until 2020, when the renewed outbreak of conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh eroded the basis of the Russian-Armenian security compact, the EU remained largely on the sidelines of Armenia's security policies (De Waal, 2024b). The Russian grip over Armenia's security has long history and will be very difficult to dismantle. Armenia formally agreed a military alliance with Russia in 1996, and its dependence only increased in the Putin era, with memberships in the Moscow-led military pact, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2002 and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2014 (De Waal, 2024b). Still, it was not until 2023, when Brussels got involved in brokering a peace deal that its engagement in Armenia's security became significant.

2.4 The shift in Armenian's foreign policy: pivoting towards the EU

Following the 2020 44-day war and Azerbaijan's 2023 military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh (Dumoulin and Gressel, 2023) and given Russia's increasing focus on its own security challenges, particularly in the context of the war of aggression against Ukraine, under Pashinyan's leadership several steps were taken towards the diversification of Armenia's foreign policy options. The EU, once seen as a rather peripheral player in the South Caucasus' security field, began to gain traction as a more reliable actor in peacebuilding and diplomacy ([EU Neighbours East, 2021](#)). This was first visible in the EU's engagement in the peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The fact that the leaders of these two countries accepted the EU's hand of peace, and its mediation role, is due to three factors. First, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel managed to secure their trust during his visit to the region in summer 2021; second, the timing was right – Azerbaijan Aliyev and Armenia's Pashinyan were keen to minimise the Russian role in the peace process, and this need accelerated after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022; and third, Michels' efforts were supported in Brussels by a plethora of EU actors, from the European External Action Service (EEAS) to the EU Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) (Sammut, 2023). What we observed in this moment is the EU's first steps away from the compartmentalization of security issues in Armenia and their incorporation into the wider agenda.

Ultimately, the higher degree of volatility in the regional security created *new opportunities for more assertive EU policies on both democracy support and peacebuilding*, such as the introduction of the

European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) established in January 2023, the US-EU-Armenia Joint High-Level Dialogue ([Brussels, April 2024](#)), the provision of EU military assistance to Armenia (July 2024).

2.4.1 Next steps in the EU-Armenia relations

Under Pashinyan's leadership, Armenia steadily pivoted towards the EU, but it is too early to say that it fully abandoned its security relation with Russia, although it suspended its participation in CSTO in 2024. The pivot towards the EU was welcomed by the European institutions with the European Parliament supporting a motion advocating for Armenia's EU accession and Member States agreeing to launch work on a new EU-Armenia Partnership Agenda that should lead to 'more ambitious joint priorities for cooperation across all dimensions' ([Foreign Affairs Council, 2024](#)).

In July 2024, the Council of the EU adopted an assistance measure under the European Peace Facility (EPF) in support of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia worth €10 million. It is envisioned that this measure will (1) enhance the logistical capacities of the Armenian Armed Forces, (2) contribute to improved protection of civilians in crises and emergencies and (3) enhance the resilience of Armenia and accelerate interoperability of its Armed Forces in case of possible future participation of the country in international military missions and operations, including those deployed by the EU ([Council of the EU, 2024](#)).

The EPF support alongside with the EUMA created further opportunities for expanding the *social embeddedness of EU security cooperation* with Armenia. EU support is directly aimed at the country's defence sector, yet the bloc remains cautious in its approach, taking into account the sensitivity of the area and the lingering Russian influence. This means that the focus is predominantly on technical assistance rather than improving democratic practices of the armed forces, for example through improved civilian oversight. A lot more needs to be done to rid Armenia of Russia's influence in the security sector. For instance, for decades most employees of Armenia's National Security Service were trained in Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) academies. While Pashinyan's government created a new Foreign Intelligence Service in 2023, it will take years to gain security independence from Russia (De Waal, 2024b).

It is yet too early to assess the extent to which new EU initiatives in the sphere of security have contributed to the improved *social empowerment* of local actors, engaged in Armenia's security affairs and further still Armenian population, especially communities that had to relocate from Nagorny Karabakh. Nonetheless, it is possible to expect this to change in the future if Armenia decides to pursue EU membership, while then the bloc will be able to rely on the leverage of conditionality to promote democratisation practices in the country overall and its different policy areas. The EU's *social accountability* in security practices in Armenia is also slowly shifting with civil society actors, including those funded by the EU such as EaP CSF Armenian National Platform but not only, showing more interest in scrutinising EU actions.

Going forward, the EU's role in Armenia's democratization and regional security remains a delicate balancing act. Armenia's growing disillusionment with Russia and its desire to diversify foreign policy options present both challenges and opportunities for deeper EU engagement. The evolving geopolitical landscape, particularly in the wake of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and Azerbaijan's military offensives, offers new opportunities for the EU to assert its role in the South

Caucasus. However, the EU must overcome its inconsistent approach to the region and align its economic and diplomatic efforts with its values in order to remain a credible partner for Armenia.

3 EU lessons learnt?

3.1 From AA to CEPA: A lesson of strategic adaptation

The dynamics of EU-Armenia relations starting with the 2013 watershed moment when the AA negotiations failed due to reasons explained above and continuing with Armenia's EU accession aspirations endorsed by various EU actors, are an example of policy evolution and strategic adaptation. The failure of the first AA led to a fundamental reassessment of the EU's approach towards Armenia and ultimately towards all partner countries within the EaP policy. It can be said that it triggered the development of more tailored approach, both bilaterally and multilaterally. The subsequent CEPA is a clear example of this strategic adaptation, showing the EU's capacity to balance out rather ambitious cooperation goals with the understanding of partner countries' evolving complex geopolitical needs and challenges. CEPA's rather unique structure is an example of the compromise between keeping key elements of the original AA with Armenia (i.e. political dialogue, justice, freedom, and security), while accommodating the country's other commitments towards the EAEU and CSTO. This approach has proven to be instrumental in the evolution of EU-Armenia relations mostly due to the fact it has equipped Armenia with concrete opportunities for strategic foreign policy diversification, that ultimately led to a rapprochement with the EU and Western partners.

Second, recent policy developments, including the 2024 new EU-Armenia Partnership Agenda launch and the introduction of the Resilience and Growth Plan ([EEAS, 2024](#)), show a joint steady commitment to deepening bilateral relations. Third, the initiation of visa liberalisation dialogue ([European Commission, 2025](#)) and support through the European Peace Facility ([EU Neighbours East, 2024](#)) contribute to the thesis that the EU learnt how not to lose momentum in its relation with Armenia, pursuing a rather long-term partnership agenda.

In spite of some lessons learnt stemming from CEPA, several fundamental challenges persist in the EU-Armenia relations. They require careful considerations and can be considered lessons (un)learnt (yet) or about to be learnt.

3.2 Armenia's EU ambitions: countering Russia's influence and boosting the benefits of EU accession

Armenia is steadily converging towards the EU, as recently demonstrated by the government's endorsement of the bill to start EU accession ([Paternoster, 2025](#)). However, the EU should make it clear that Armenia's path to EU membership will not be straightforward as the country is still facing several reform challenges ([APRI, 2024](#)). With the war in Ukraine, Moscow can no longer afford the same hard-power status in the South Caucasus, particularly after prioritizing a strategic alliance with Azerbaijan over its traditional ties with Armenia (De Waal, 2024a). Nevertheless, Moscow views the region as far from lost, even in countries pursuing formal EU membership (De Waal et al 2024). Russia is likely to leverage its soft power to maintain influence in Armenia, including intervening in domestic politics, potentially prior and during upcoming 2026 elections, or applying increasing economic pressure. For this reason, the EU should proceed cautiously and not underestimate Russia's influence in Armenia, particularly in the context of Armenia's ongoing energy and trade dependence on Russia (Interview 2, 2024). The cases of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine and the level of Russian interference during various moments in time shows that the Russian element cannot be underestimated. In spite

of their many differences, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia share a similar level of vulnerability exploited by Russia in different shapes and forms. Their societies remain prone to misinformation and disinformation generating from Russia. In this regard, the EU should enhance its communication strategy towards the EaP countries, both multilaterally and bilaterally. So far, in certain cases this has been insufficient in countering Russia's robust propaganda machine, and unable to convey more effectively the benefits of EU membership to ordinary citizens.

Regarding regional stability, Armenia's EU future remains uncertain. The EU should prioritize supporting the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as unresolved tensions provide Russia with opportunities to exploit the region's instability (De Waal, 2024b) and the country's vulnerabilities. Tackling Russia's tactics and threats will require the EU to balance short-term agility with sustained long-term investment in resources and engagement (De Waal, 2024b). For this to be successful, the EU needs not only to prioritise democratic reforms in the country, but also ensure its own practices are aligned with democratic principles and in equal measure ensure social embeddedness, social empowerment and social accountability.

Conclusion

The past ten years have seen an exceptional dynamic shift in the EU-Armenia relations, which could probably be characterized as a pendulum. Armenia's long-standing conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan and security concerns increasingly inform and shape Armenia's swings to and from the EU. In the last decade, five events could be noted as historic turning points, which have shaped Armenia's relations with the EU. In 2013, the failure to sign the Association Agreement with the EU signified Armenia's shift towards Russia. Being a member of Russia-led regional organizations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union, solidified this shift. However, in 2017, the EU and Armenia signed CEPA, which was a step downwards from the AA, but certainly a step forward from the previous few years of rather uneven relations. The 2018 Velvet Revolution shook Armenia's domestic political scene and triggered a slight redirection towards democratisation and diversification of foreign relations. The two security crises at Nagorno-Karabakh led to a certain disillusionment with Armenia's perceived security partners, especially Russia. This series of disappointments informed a further improvement of EU-Armenian relations, which could signify the start of a period that is encouraging for EU democracy support in Armenia.

This period has also seen the evolution of the EU as a security and democracy promoting actor in the country. In 2013, the EU's role in Armenia's security was negligible, while its foreign policy practices towards the country were lacking the democratic nature. The bloc *failed to use the AA negotiation process as a leverage for the promotion of democratic reforms in the country*, treating the partnership predominantly as a straightforward economic alignment, disregarding Armenia's complex security calculus. The missed opportunity to sign the AA and the period thereafter were characterised by the absence of social empowerment and social accountability from EU actions, while social embeddedness remained limited, with the EU focusing on Armenian political elites and a handful of large civil society organisations.

While signing CEPA marked a slight improvement in EU-Armenia relations, it was not until the Velvet Revolution of 2018 that we started observing noticeable changes in the democratic-ness of EU foreign policy action in Armenia. The Velvet Revolution allowed the EU to expand the social embeddedness of its practices in the country by engaging with a wider variety of state and non-state actors. The EU's

Civil Society Facility and the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (including its EaP CSF Armenian National Platform) work to empower the diverse civil society sector through funding and capacity-building opportunities, ensuring that civil society remains a key stakeholder and equal interlocutor in EU-Armenia relations. We also started observing the improved social accountability of EU foreign policy action in Armenia as more CSOs monitor its activities in the country. Nonetheless, the EU's role in Armenia's security policies remained peripheral until 2020-2023, when the bloc started moving away from the preferred method of compartmentalizing wars in Nagorny Karabakh as an issue of separate diplomats and started considering more strategic action. The EU played an important role in the peace talks, following Azerbaijan's offensive in 2023. It offered Armenia tangible support in the form of the EUMA and 10 million EUR from the European Peace Facility. There were signs that the EU was paying more attention to the local context and local knowledge in Armenia, yet it is too early to say how open the EU will be to the scrutiny of local actors and local communities when it comes to cooperation in the security sphere. Thus, it is possible to state that by 2023-2025, the EU has largely improved the democratic nature of its foreign policy action and security work in Armenia, yet with the country's security sector remaining closely connected to and affected by Russia, there is still a need for further improvement, especially in social empowerment and social accountability.

Against this background, two key lessons in bilateral relations were (hopefully) learnt by the EU. Based on the overview of EU-Armenia relations in the last decade, it is possible to say that the first lesson the EU learnt in the country is the importance of adaptation. An example of policy evolution and strategic adaptation can be seen in the dynamics of EU-Armenia relations, which began with the 2013 watershed moment when the AA negotiations failed for the reasons previously mentioned and continue with Armenia's EU admission aspirations supported by various EU actors. The EU's approach to Armenia and, eventually, to other partner nations under the EaP strategy was fundamentally reevaluated as a result of the first AA with an EaP nation failing. One may argue that it spurred the creation of a more specialized strategy on both a bilateral and global level. This strategic flexibility is exemplified by the succeeding CEPA, which demonstrates the EU's ability to strike a compromise between understanding partner countries' changing complicated geopolitical demands and problems and achieving relatively ambitious cooperation goals.

The second lesson for the EU is to make an effort in estimating the role of Russia in each country it deals with. In order to keep its influence in Armenia, Russia is probably going to use its soft power, which might include putting further economic pressure or getting involved in domestic politics, possibly before and during the 2026 elections. Because of this, the EU should exercise caution and not undervalue Russia's influence in Armenia, especially given the country's continued reliance on Russia for trade and energy. The Russian element cannot be understated, as demonstrated by Russian military aggression against Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine as well as the extent of Russian meddling at different points in time. Despite their numerous distinctions, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia all have a comparable degree of vulnerability that Russia takes advantage of in various ways. To varying degrees, their societies are vulnerable to false information and disinformation coming from Russia. In this sense, the EU should improve both its bilateral and multilateral communication approach with the EaP nations. This hasn't always been enough to combat Russia's powerful propaganda apparatus and better explain to the general public the advantages of EU membership. The future of Armenia in the EU is still unclear in terms of regional stability. Supporting the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan should be the EU's top priority because unresolved tensions provide Russia the chance to take advantage of the country's weaknesses and the instability of the area.

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List of interviews

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- Interview 2: Civil society representative (Yerevan-based). Online on Zoom platform on 24.09.2024.
- Interview 3: Civil society representative. Online on Zoom platform on 24.09.2024.
- Interview 4: Civil society representative. Online on Zoom platform on 27.09.2024.
- Interview 5: EU office