



Armenia: Where the European Political Space Ends and Begins

Sergey Minasyan

KAS Policy Paper
Yerevan – Brussels
April 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Armenia occupies a critical position for the European Union's (EU) political and democratic promotion interests in the South Caucasus – geographically peripheral, yet strategically central to the EU's geopolitical and normative agenda and interests. The May 2026 European Political Community (EPC) Summit and inaugural EU-Armenia bilateral summit set for Yerevan represent a historic opportunity to both consolidate Armenia's European trajectory and demonstrate the EU's credibility as a security actor and normative power in contested regions.

Current Integration Status: Armenia has achieved an unprecedented deep EU partnership for a non-candidate country through the implementation of its Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), the deployment of the EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA), the unfolding deployment of the EU Partnership Mission in Armenia (EUPMA), the European Peace Facility's (EPF) provision of non-lethal military assistance, and the Resilience and Growth Plan, among other measures. Armenia's March 2025 EU Integration Act and the December 2025 Strategic Agenda formalized frameworks prioritizing political partnership, security cooperation, economic diversification, and trans-regional connectivity.

Strategic Value Proposition for the EU: Armenia addresses four core EU interests: (1) as the sole democratic partner in the South Caucasus at this stage, demonstrating sustained reform momentum and ready to shoulder greater responsibility alongside the EU; (2) as a gateway for the Middle Corridor and U.S.-backed TRIPP connectivity linking Europe to Central Asia, despite ongoing regional military and geopolitical risks and challenges; (3) a test case for the integration of values-based with geography-based EU expansion; (4) and as a counterweight to competing geopolitical actors' influence in the contested South Caucasus region with a focus on advanced technological development and economic interests.

Strategic Value Proposition for Armenia: deepening engagement with the EU addresses Armenia national interests through: (1) the acceleration of democratic consolidation and institutional reform, and strengthening rule of law and governance resilience; (2) economic diversification and reduced structural dependencies through access to EU markets, investments, and regulatory alignment; (3) enhanced geopolitical resilience, including political and technical support in security, border management, and countering hybrid threats; (4) the integration with EU-backed (Middle Corridor) and USA-backed (TRIPP) connectivity initiatives, thereby positioning Armenia as a peaceful transit hub.

Policy Constraints: Structural barriers include Armenia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU), which precludes Armenia's deeper economic integration with the EU through a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), the country's relative geographic isolation limiting infrastructure connectivity, credibility gaps regarding EU security guarantees versus political commitments, unresolved Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization risks, and a location within a complex neighborhood with conflict-prone Turkey and conflict-involved Iran.

Policy Recommendations: Expedite visa liberalization, augment financial assistance mechanisms beyond current allocations, accelerate sectoral integration (SEPA, EU Roaming, Digital Single Market), enhance security cooperation frameworks, including support for Armenia's strategic communication tools and capabilities and measures combating hybrid threats, and the use of the formal EU-U.S. dialogue focused on TRIPP's prospects to protect European connectivity investments and interests in currently complex geopolitical and regional security frameworks.

Success validates the EU capacity to support democratic partners in geopolitically contested regions; failure undermines EU normative and political credibility and empowers authoritarian alternatives for Armenia and other neighboring countries throughout the broader geographic space.

INTRODUCTION

On September 17, 2019, U.S. Ambassador Lynne M. Tracy and Armenian officials celebrated the completion of a \$510,000 cultural preservation project in Meghri, Armenia's southernmost city – at the time, the largest U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation grant in Armenia. The three-year initiative preserved critically endangered sections of the late-medieval St. Hovhannes Church and restored its rare 17th-century Persian-Armenian style frescoes. The restoration of this Armenian church in Meghri, Syunik province, located directly on the Iranian border, proved symbolically prescient. It foreshadowed the strategic significance that this part of Armenia – and indeed the entire small South Caucasus nation – would later assume across two dimensions: the large-scale geopolitical transformations reshaping the South Caucasus and adjacent regions, and ambitious infrastructure projects like the U.S.-promoted Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) and EU-sponsored Middle Corridor that position Armenia at the crossroads of emerging trans-regional connectivity and, potentially, regional peace and stability.

Syunik, Armenia's southernmost province, stretches along the Arax River, directly bordering Iran. This narrow transport and communication route constricting to merely 44 kilometers near Meghri – is squeezed between Azerbaijan to the east and its Nakhchivan exclave to the west. Here, as throughout Armenia, politics and history, security imperatives and geographic realities, and the constraints on regional connectivity are inextricably intertwined. Syunik embodies these contradictions: ancient Christian heritage expressed through medieval churches perched in mountain valleys; transport and energy corridors through its narrow territory, long blocked but now emerging as vital prospects; Russian border guards still manning the Iranian frontier since Soviet times; and stringent export controls at Armenian customs points with Iran – currently locked in conflict with the U.S. and its allies – upgraded through American and European technical support. Since February 2023, the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) has monitored Syunik's borders and along the broader Armenian-Azerbaijani frontier, contributing to a notable de-escalation and normalization despite resistance from certain external actors.

It is precisely here, at the extreme southeastern edge of Armenia and the entire South Caucasus, that the paradox between geography and geopolitics becomes vividly apparent: this is where the European political space geographically ends – yet also where it begins anew, especially in its cultural, normative, economic, social, and political dimensions.

Armenia's growing importance within the European political space transcends mere geopolitics, geography, or infrastructure attractiveness. Multiple reinforcing factors drive this significance: intensifying European aspirations among Armenia's political elite and society; the country's democratic achievements and human rights progress; dynamic domestic political reform and institutional development; and flourishing digital and technology advanced sectors within Armenia's economy. Equally important are the emerging prospects for Armenia-Azerbaijan peace – actively supported by the EU in coordination with recent U.S. initiatives – and Armenia's broader political reorientation toward proactive European integration. Ultimately, meaningful political support and institutional engagement with Armenia offer the EU an opportunity to demonstrate its credibility as a trustworthy global actor through tangible results in a strategically contested region of South Caucasus.

This significance becomes particularly acute in the context of two historical summits in Yerevan. On May 4-5, 2026, for the first time since independence, Armenia's capital will host one of the most representative international gathering in its history, as European leaders convene to discuss Europe's future development and the boundaries of European political space during the 8th EPC summit and second, the inaugural EU-Armenia bilateral summit. This historic moment crystallizes Armenia's unique paradox: a nation simultaneously at Europe's geographical periphery yet also situated at the normative center of the European project's current success story, embodying both the terminus and the potential expansion of European values, institutions, and influence.

Both summits will offer an important opportunity to showcase the momentum of institutional cooperation with the EU while acknowledging the political and structural constraints that limit Armenia's European integration at this stage and efforts to address them.

Institutional Framework and Partnership Dynamics

Armenia occupies a distinctive position within European institutional frameworks, demonstrating its complex partial integration. It is a full member of the Council of Europe (CoE) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and since 2022 has also been a founding participant in the EPC, yet its EU relations operate through the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) that entered into force in 2021, rather than candidate status or DCFTA membership.

Defense and security cooperation with the EU is remarkably robust yet constrained: deployment of the civilian CSDP monitoring mission (EUMA), substantial non-lethal military assistance through the European Peace Facility (EPF), structured Political and Security Dialogues, growing CFSP alignment, and participation in EU crisis management missions. Cooperation with NATO, still Europe's principal military and security organization, remains limited to Partnership for Peace (PfP) programs and enhanced political dialogue.

This pattern reveals Armenia's institutional paradox, which is also relevant for Moldova and Western Balkans EU partner countries: broad inclusion in pan-European security, cultural, and political dialogues, yet persistent exclusion from core integration political, military and mobility institutions (EU membership, the NATO alliance, the Schengen zone, etc.).

Thus, Armenia exists at the European institutional boundary – actively engaged in European political space and discourse while remaining outside the deepest circles of integration.

However, the pace and scope of political dialogue and cooperation between Armenia and the EU have accelerated significantly in recent years. On March 26, 2025, Armenia's parliament adopted the EU Integration Act, officially endorsing Armenia's EU accession trajectory and formally embedding European integration into Armenian legislation with strong domestic public support inside the country. In this regard European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated, "Europe stands shoulder to shoulder with Armenia. European and Armenian relations are now closer than ever before."¹ In June 2025, the EU and Armenia reached political agreement on a new partnership agenda establishing more ambitious joint priorities spanning all cooperation dimensions.

On December 2, 2025, both parties adopted the Strategic Agenda for the EU-Armenia Partnership, superseding the 2017 Partnership Priorities and marking a significant deepening of political, economic, and sectoral cooperation. [The Strategic Agenda for the EU-Armenia Partnership based on three building blocks: 1\) reinforced security and defense cooperation; 2\) increased sectoral cooperation supporting economic diversification and further regulatory alignment in key sectors; and 3\) renewed investments under the Global Gateway.](#)²

The elevation of "reinforced security and defense cooperation" to the first pillar of the Strategic Agenda signals the strategic priority that both sides assign to the security dimension of partnership. By now, Armenia's security cooperation with the EU – including EUMA deployment, prospective military cooperation (including bilateral ties with some active EU member-states), crisis management participation, and other security frameworks – demonstrates that Armenia has achieved a level of engagement typically associated only with EU candidate countries or NATO members. This unprecedented partnership reflects both Armenia's strategic significance for the EU and its compelling democratic credentials as well as deliverables for Armenia in areas of key interest.

In September 2024, the EU launched a visa liberalization dialogue with Armenia. On November 5, 2025, the EU presented the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP), marking a key milestone toward visa-free travel. Armenia committed to reintroducing biometric passports by late 2026, with some officials estimating a period of about three years to complete the full process. However, given the EU's evolving priorities and the accelerating depth of EU-Armenia cooperation, favorable circumstances could enable Armenia to achieve visa-free status more rapidly than other post-Soviet countries that are now EU candidates. Moreover, this is demonstrated by the fact that Armenia on the current stage is the only partner country with whom EU negotiating on the visa liberalization issue.

¹Ursula von der Leyen, European Commission President, Statement at Joint Press Conference with European Council President António Costa and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Brussels, 14 July 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_25_1824

²<https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/%D5%80%D5%80-%D4%B5%D5%84/Strategic%20Agenda%20for%20the%20EU-Armenia%20Partnership.pdf>

The 3rd high-level EU-Armenia Political and Security Dialogue took place on February 3, 2026 in Yerevan, reaffirming both the strategic ambition of the EU-Armenia partnership and the shared commitment to advance cooperation and alignment in foreign, security, and defense policy. These structured exchanges represent an important pillar of CEPA and facilitate Armenia's gradual alignment with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy positions.

On April 21, 2026, the Council of the European Union established the EU Partnership Mission in Armenia (EUPM Armenia) under CSDP to strengthen Armenia's democratic resilience and crisis management capabilities. The EUPMA will address threats including foreign information manipulation, cyber-attacks, and illicit financial flows by providing strategic advice and capacity building to ministries and national institutions, supporting a whole-of-government policy approach.

Ahead of the May 2026 summits in Yerevan, high-level exchanges between Armenian and European officials have intensified considerably. These preparatory visits aim to ensure effective summit organization while showcasing the accelerating momentum, concrete achievements, and expanding horizons of EU-Armenia cooperation.

Political Priorities, Regional Security and Structural Challenges

Armenia is the only country in the South Caucasus simultaneously pursuing democratic reforms while facing external – even almost existential – security threats, hybrid pressure, and structural economic dependence. This unique position makes Armenia an important example of democratic resilience but also a crucial test case for the EU's ability to support democratic consolidation in contested geopolitical spaces. The EU has positioned itself as an important mediator in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, fully supporting normalization based on the mutual recognition of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and border inviolability in line with the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration. A stable, democratically-oriented Armenia contributes to broader regional security and reduces the risk of renewed conflict that could destabilize the entire South Caucasus.

One of the most significant elements of the EU's political presence in the South Caucasus has been the deployment of EUMA in Armenia since February 2023. This civilian mission serves dual purposes: as a political deterrence element against potential Azerbaijani military aggression and, from Brussels' perspective, as a confidence-building measure demonstrating the EU's commitment to regional stability. **The deployment's strategic significance extends beyond security considerations – EUMA's presence in a country that is not yet an EU candidate, where a Russian military base remains and Russian border guards still patrol external frontiers with Iran and Turkey, clearly demonstrates that Armenia has become an integral part of European political space.**

However, it should be noted that Armenia's integration into the European political space, particularly in the security sphere, extends well beyond bilateral cooperation between Armenia and the EU. The EPC's inaugural Prague summit in 2022 facilitated landmark talks between Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, resulting in mutual recognition of territorial integrity. The EPC has thus emerged as an important venue for Armenia to address regional conflicts within a European framework.

The EU's institutional capacity for political and security cooperation, however, offers Armenia far broader prospects. On July 22, 2024, the European Council reached an unprecedented decision to provide €30 million in assistance to Armenia through the European Peace Facility (2024-2026), aimed at enhancing the logistical capacity of the Armenian armed forces, supporting defense reform and improving civilian protection during crises and emergencies. This marks the first time the EU has provided such substantial security sector assistance to a non-candidate, non-NATO country (other than Ukraine) – reflecting both Armenia's strategic importance and Brussels' innovative approach to the region.

However, both sides still face significant political and structural constraints regarding comprehensive cooperation and Armenia's deeper EU integration. Despite Armenia's European aspirations and democratic credentials, for example, substantial barriers limit just how far integration can proceed at this stage:

- **Eurasian Economic Union Membership:** Although Armenia has reduced its security dependence on Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), it remains structurally bound to the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU) through trade, labor migration, and energy ties – limiting its ability to fully align with EU economic standards. Russia retains considerable leverage through energy supplies, economic dependencies, diaspora influence, and hybrid capabilities, creating persistent pressure that constrains Armenia's ability to distance itself from Moscow's orbit. Critically, Armenia's EaEU membership precludes the possibility of any Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU – the transformative economic integration pathway that fundamentally reshaped Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia's relationships with Europe. Without a DCFTA, Armenia cannot achieve the deep market integration that makes the European economic space tangible and beneficial for its citizens, consumers and businesses. However, a pragmatic partial workaround may consist of incremental sectoral integration and regulatory alignment under CEPA, coupled with selective access to elements of the EU Single Market and enhanced connectivity-based economic integration.

- **Geographic Isolation and Geopolitical Constraints:** Armenia's landlocked position – bordered by antagonistic Azerbaijan, a closed Turkish border, friendly but economically struggling with almost frozen EU candidate country status Georgia, and Iran, embroiled in regional armed conflicts – creates a degree of geographic isolation that severely limits Armenian connectivity to European networks. Unlike Ukraine or Moldova, Armenia cannot directly integrate into the European transport, energy, or infrastructure systems without traversing multiple borders and navigating extraordinarily complex geopolitics. This geographic reality and geopolitical frameworks impose hard physical constraints on integration that goodwill alone cannot overcome.

- **The Credibility Gap:** Inside some circles of Armenian society, deep resentment remains over the EU's measured response to Azerbaijan's 2023 military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh and its failure to impose meaningful sanctions or political consequences on Baku – a stance widely perceived as enabling Azerbaijan to legitimize the forced displacement of the region's Armenian population through military aggression. This credibility gap creates a structural tension: while Armenia is aligning with European values and institutions, EU support in moments of acute security concern remains largely political and falls short of providing hard security guarantees. At the same time, the gap is reciprocal, shaped by Armenia's past policy reversals – notably Yerevan's European U-turn in 2013 (abandoning its Association Agreement with the EU to join the EaEU instead) – and by broader regional dynamics, including the EU's increasingly strained current relations with Georgia. Together, these factors reinforce a cautious, conditional approach on both sides, limiting the depth of further Armenian-EU integration.

Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan has candidly acknowledged the fundamental choice Armenia will ultimately face. Speaking to reporters on August 28, 2025, he stated that “Armenia fully understands the incompatibility of being a member of both the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union. It is impossible to hold dual membership. When the moment comes, when the choice becomes final and unavoidable, we will make the appropriate decision.”³ Given the complex structural and geopolitical challenges confronting Armenia at this critical juncture, the EU must support Armenia's gradual transition while recognizing the delicate balancing act the government must maintain – and providing sufficient and comprehensive tangible support to make the European choice politically sustainable.

Connectivity and Infrastructure Development

Armenia's “Crossroads of Peace” initiative aligns with EU connectivity objectives in the region and adjacent areas. Brussels and Yerevan have reiterated their commitment to this framework for enhancing cross- and inter-regional connections in line with the EU's Global Gateway agenda, with discussions focusing on potential EU political and economic support for Armenia's initiative and its integration into wider trans-regional connectivity plans. The Strategic Agenda emphasizes strategic investments under the Global Gateway and support for initiatives such as “Crossroads of Peace” to improve regional interconnections, boost economic resilience, and open new opportunities for trade and mobility.

Beyond existing or developing transport and communication routes where Armenia already plays a significant role in advancing EU connectivity interests – such as the reconstructed North-South highway from the Iranian to the Georgian border – Armenia's

³Nikol Pashinyan, Prime Minister of Armenia, statement to reporters, ²⁸ August 2025. Cited in Siranush Ghazanchyan, “Armenia understands EU and EAEU memberships are incompatible – Pashinyan,” Public Radio of Armenia, ²⁸ August 2025, <https://en.armradio.am/2025/08/28/armenia-understands-eu-and-eaeu-memberships-are-incompatible-pashinyan/>

active integration with both the European-backed Middle Corridor and Trans-Caspian routes, and the U.S.-promoted TRIPP project through Armenia's southernmost Syunik region, could prove transformative.

The Middle Corridor – stretching from Central Asia through the Caspian Sea and South Caucasus to Europe via Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey – has become central to EU connectivity strategy. Since the Northern Corridor's disruption following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor has gained critical importance, positioning Azerbaijan and Georgia as essential transit hubs.

The TRIPP project aims to strengthen prosperity and security in both Armenia and Azerbaijan while advancing American commercial interests by expanding regional trade and connectivity, and creating new transit opportunities linking Central Asia and the Caspian to Europe. The initiative seeks to establish unimpeded, multimodal transit connectivity across Armenian territory, contributing to regional peace, stability, and integration based on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and state jurisdiction, while connecting mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave and forging a vital Trans-Caspian Trade Route link. The political significance of TRIPP's implementation has increased substantially following U.S. Vice President JD Vance's visit to the region in February 2026 – the highest-ranking American official to visit Armenia since independence.⁴ *Despite being U.S.-led and current complex geopolitical and even regional military risks and challenges, TRIPP's success or failure will profoundly impact EU connectivity objectives, regional stability, and European economic security throughout the wider Caucasus-Caspian region.*

TRIPP could fill a critical gap in the Middle Corridor by providing direct connectivity between Azerbaijan and Turkey through Armenia, eliminating the need to reroute and bypass traffic exclusively through Georgia or Iran. This redundancy enhances route reliability and capacity – essential for the EU's connectivity strategy. EU Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos outlined an ambitious timeline for the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, stating it has the potential to triple traffic volume by 2030, cut transit times in half, and deliver significant annual cost savings.⁵ TRIPP's implementation would be instrumental in achieving these targets by reducing potential bottlenecks in the South Caucasus segment of the route if complex regional and geopolitical frameworks allow.

An operational TRIPP route through Armenia's Syunik region would bind Central Asia more tightly to European markets and networks, increasing the South Caucasus's strategic weight and converting the Middle Corridor into a durable rail and digital link. The planned route has an initial annual freight capacity of approximately 15 million metric tons. Without TRIPP or an equivalent Syunik route, the Middle Corridor faces structural bottlenecks that limit capacity and reliability, potentially undermining the EU's entire trans-Caspian connectivity investment strategy. Although increased geopolitical risks for the project's further implementation are also evident, particularly in connection with the recent military campaign against neighboring Iran. Beyond transport, TRIPP encompasses energy infrastructure facilitating natural gas transit from Central Asia and Azerbaijan to Europe,

⁴Florian Binder, Marlon Husman, Jakob Wollenstein, Vance in Armenia – A Tailwind for Armenia? Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Country Report, ^{02/2026}, <https://www.kas.de/en/country-reports/detail/-/content/vance-in-armenia-a-tailwind-for-yerevan>

⁵Marta Kos, EU Commissioner for Enlargement, opening speech at Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor and Connectivity Investors Forum, Tashkent, ^{27 November 2025}, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/trans-caspian-transport-corridor-and-connectivity-investors-forum-eu-advances-cross-regional-2025_11_27_en

along with electricity grid connections that align with EU energy security and diversification priorities.⁶

TRIPP-Middle Corridor synergy could also improve access to and transportation of critical minerals from Central Asia and South Caucasus. Syunik holds significant industrial value for Armenia due to numerous Soviet-era mines, now predominantly foreign-owned with monopolistic dependence. The Implementation Framework explicitly states TRIPP will bring “raw materials, critical minerals, and rare earth metals to American markets”⁷ – infrastructure that would equally facilitate European access to these strategic resources.

Another promising EU synergy opportunity involves coordinating TRIPP with the North-South corridor road – Armenia’s trucking backbone connecting the Iranian border through Georgia to Black Sea ports – financed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), EBRD and Eurasian Development Bank. Construction of the southern Syunik segment began in 2024 with projected completion by 2031. Optimizing both routes would significantly enhance connectivity and resilience in this strategically vital Armenian region.

Finally, linking TRIPP to the EU Global Gateway offers a compelling avenue for coordinating transatlantic infrastructure investments in the South Caucasus. The EU could position Global Gateway investments as complementary to TRIPP through digital infrastructure (fiber optics alongside physical rail), border crossing facilities and logistics hubs, energy connections and efficiency improvements, and sustainable development and environmental standards throughout the Armenia’s Syunik region.

However, the ambitious TRIPP project and its synchronization with the European Middle Corridor and Global Gateway initiatives face substantial strategic, geopolitical, and structural risks during both implementation and subsequent operation:

- **Exclusion from Leadership and Governance:** According the TRIPP Implementation Framework, that still should be implemented in practice, the TRIPP project allocates 74 percent ownership and control to the United States and 26 percent to Armenia for the initial 49 years, with Armenia’s stake potentially rising to 49 percent thereafter. Washington is expected to provide the bulk of financing while Armenia's contribution consists primarily of land access and development rights. The EU has invested billions in the Middle Corridor infrastructure yet has no formal role in TRIPP governance, potentially marginalizing European interests despite the corridor serving European trade objectives. This structural imbalance necessitates establishing formal EU-U.S. dialogue mechanisms to ensure European interests are adequately represented within the TRIPP framework.

- **Implementation Uncertainty:** Despite the TRIPP Implementation Framework, numerous critical questions and operational details remain unresolved while technical and regulatory challenges persist. These include the absence of exact route specifications and technical standards; unclear management structure and participating companies; unresolved border control and customs arrangements; ambiguous reciprocity mechanisms for Armenian trade and transit via Nakhchivan; and various other operational parameters requiring urgent clarification before meaningful progress can occur.

⁶United States Energy Association, “The United States and Energy Connectivity in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Agreements,” 2026, <https://usea.org/sites/default/files/The%20United%20States%20and%20Energy%20Connectivity%20in%20the%20Armenia%E2%80%93Azerbaijan%20Agreements.pdf>

⁷“Armenia-U.S. Implementation Framework for the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP),” January 13, 2026, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/TRIPP-Implementation-Framework.pdf>

- **Third-Party Countermeasures and Hybrid Threats:** Armenia’s railway network, including the approximately 44-kilometer segment through southern Syunik critical to TRIPP, has operated under a 30-year concession (extendable by 10 years) to the South Caucasus Railway concern – a wholly owned Russian Railways subsidiary – since 2008. The Russian company retains operational control and maintenance responsibility across the network. Under certain circumstances, Russia could delay or obstruct railway restoration required for TRIPP, leveraging the concession as political pressure and creating implementation bottlenecks. Broader hybrid threats could include deliberate destabilization efforts targeting connectivity infrastructure and energy sectors, particularly Azerbaijani-linked oil and gas facilities, alongside extensive economic and social leverage through trade dependencies, energy supplies, migrant labor flows, and diaspora networks affecting regional countries involved in the project.

- **Geopolitical Challenges:** Against the backdrop of ongoing military confrontation between Iran and the United States and its regional partners, Iran’s strategic concerns regarding U.S.-backed infrastructure projects along its borders – including Armenia’s southern regions – constitute a significant complicating factor requiring careful diplomatic consideration. Various scenarios of U.S.-Iranian relations present both substantial challenges and potential opportunities for TRIPP’s implementation and development, depending critically on how regional military and security dynamics evolve.

Paradoxically, the current military instability and risks surrounding Iran – and the potential closure of key transport routes through and around its territory – may actually strengthen TRIPP’s political and logistical case as an indispensable alternative connectivity solution for the region. Realizing this potential, however, demands comprehensive multilateral arrangements among key regional and global actors to establish robust guarantees for TRIPP’s secure implementation and effective coordination with the EU-backed Middle Corridor project.

The Economic and Financial Dimensions

Armenia’s Strategic Agenda with the European Union explicitly prioritizes trade diversification as a means of reducing the country’s structural economic dependencies. This reorientation simultaneously reinforces Armenian sovereignty and creates new market opportunities for European businesses in both Armenian and broader regional markets. The centerpiece of the EU’s financial commitment is the €270 million Resilience and Growth Plan (RGP) for 2024–2027, announced in April 2024.⁸ The Plan comprises €200 million in grant assistance to support socio-economic reform and deeper sectoral cooperation, and €70 million in investment grants targeting connectivity, energy, transport, and the private sector — representing a 50 percent increase in EU funding to Armenia compared to previous cycles.⁹

⁸European Commission, “EU announces new €270 million Resilience and Growth package for Armenia,” 5 April 2024, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/eu-announces-new-e270-million-resilience-and-growth-package-for-armenia/>

⁹European Council and European Commission, “Joint press release: EU and Armenia reaffirm and advance their partnership during a Leaders’ meeting,” 14 July 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/07/14/joint-press-release-eu-and-armenia-reaffirm-and-advance-their-partnership-during-a-leaders-meeting/>

Since its adoption, the EU-Armenia joint investment portfolio under the Global Gateway strategy has grown substantially, with expected mobilized investments now exceeding €2.5 billion – a figure equivalent to approximately 10 percent of Armenia’s 2024 GDP.¹⁰ These investments are channeled into SME development, transport infrastructure, education, energy efficiency, and water management, with the explicit aim of integrating Armenia into European economic networks while reducing its structural vulnerabilities. Armenia’s economy is modest in absolute terms – GDP stood at approximately \$25.8 billion in 2024 – yet its strategic significance to the EU far exceeds its economic scale.¹¹ The EU is Armenia’s fourth-biggest trading partner overall and its fifth-biggest export market, with a 4.7 percent share of Armenia’s total exports in 2024.¹²

Armenia’s importance to the EU is magnified by four structural factors: its geopolitical positioning in the South Caucasus; its democratic governance, rare in the post-Soviet space; its gateway potential to Central Asia via the Middle Corridor and the TRIPP project; and its value as a test case for the EU’s capacity to support partners in contested regions. The trade data illustrates a relationship of rapid growth but structural asymmetry. EU exports to Armenia rose from €757 million in 2021 to €1,886 million in 2022 – a sizable 149 percent increase – and reached €2,004 million in 2024, representing an impressive cumulative 164 percent growth over three years. EU imports from Armenia, meanwhile, totaled €456 million in 2021, peaked at €719 million in 2023, but declined to €410 million in 2024, leaving the EU with a bilateral trade surplus of approximately €1.6 billion.¹³

Armenia’s primary exports to the EU consist of manufactured goods (notably apparel), raw materials, beverages, and tobacco; since March 2025, the EU has also opened its market to Armenian aquaculture products, including caviar and fish roe.¹⁴ The economic relationship is, therefore, best understood not through the lens of commercial scale, but through the logic of strategic investment. EU financial engagement with Armenia is transformative in Armenian terms - €270 million in direct assistance and €2.5 billion in mobilized investments represent a substantial share of GDP for a small economy – while remaining fiscally negligible for grander EU budgets. This asymmetry defines the partnership’s underlying logic: modest EU expenditure yields disproportionate political returns in a geopolitically critical location. The EU reaffirmed its commitment to supporting Armenia’s resilience and long-term development through substantial financial and technical assistance, with investments under the Global Gateway strategy aimed at fostering inclusive growth and connectivity.¹⁵

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, “Armenia - Market Overview,” 2025, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/armenia-market-overview>

¹²European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade, “EU trade relations with Armenia,” 2025, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/armenia_en

¹³European Commission, “European Union, Trade in goods with Armenia,” Eurostat Comext data, 2025, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_armenia_en.pdf

¹⁴European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade, “EU trade relations with Armenia,” 2025, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/armenia_en.

¹⁵European Council and European Commission, “Joint press release: EU and Armenia reaffirm and advance their partnership during a Leaders’ meeting,” 14 July 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/07/14/joint-press-release-eu-and-armenia-reaffirm-and-advance-their-partnership-during-a-leaders-meeting/>

Three distinct but interconnected rationales underpin this logic. Commercially, bilateral trade of approximately €2.4 billion remains modest, and Armenia is neither a major EU market nor a significant supplier. Strategically, however, EU financial instruments – direct grants combined with mobilized investments – provide meaningful political leverage and support democratic consolidation at reasonable cost in a region where authoritarian consolidation remains the prevailing trend. In the longer term, positioning Armenia as a European-aligned hub in the South Caucasus could generate future economic returns through energy transit, regional connectivity, and the stabilizing effects of institutional reform. In this context, the EU and Armenia have confirmed their intention to continue working together in line with Armenia’s “Crossroads of Peace” initiative, the US-led TRIPP route, and the EU’s Cross-Regional Connectivity Agenda, linking Europe with Central Asia via the South Caucasus.

In sum, the economic and financial dimensions of EU-Armenia partnership reflect a strategic investment calculus driven primarily by foreign policy objectives rather than commercial calculation – one in which the expected returns are measured in political stability, democratic resilience, human rights respect and long-term regional influence on the South Caucasus rather than trade volumes alone. Thus, Armenia’s significance within the European political space carries real economic and financial weight – yet these dimensions remain ultimately subordinate to the country’s political, connectivity, and normative role as the EU’s most promising democratic partner in the South Caucasus.

Public Support and Democratic Values

Public support for European integration remains strong despite Armenia’s challenging geopolitical environment. According to the International Republican Institute’s (IRI) February 2026 nationwide survey, 72 percent of Armenians support possible EU membership, including 33 percent who strongly support and 39 percent who somewhat support the idea. In a hypothetical referendum on EU membership, 51 percent would vote in favor, 13 percent against, and 32 percent would not participate.¹⁶ These figures are likely to increase as tangible deliverables begin to materialize and the long-term prospects of Armenia-EU integration gain greater credibility among broader segments of Armenian society.

The recent IRI survey indicates that the EU-related positive agenda demonstrates a modest increase from the 2025 EU NEIGHBOURS east survey, which found that 69 percent of Armenians trusted the European Union – the highest among all international actors and seven points higher than the previous year – while 79 percent viewed EU-Armenia relations positively. Nearly half (47 percent) held a positive image of the EU, compared to just 9 percent with a negative view.¹⁷

¹⁶<https://www.iri.org/news/iri-survey-shows-armenians-perceive-progress-on-peace-and-stability-prioritize-economic-progress/>

¹⁷<https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/opinion-polls/opinion-poll-shows-rising-trust-for-the-european-union-in-armenia-3/>

The February 2026 IRI poll also revealed shifting public priorities: security and border concerns, cited as the top issue by 44 percent in June 2025, dropped to 21 percent by February 2026, suggesting improved perceptions of stability following recent diplomatic developments. However, political trust remains fragmented, with 48 percent of respondents not trusting any political party or candidate ahead of the June 2026 parliamentary elections.¹⁸

The EU supports the Armenian civil society with a focus on democratic governance and policy dialogue through the Country Roadmap for Engagement 2021-2027, providing over €3 million annually, with €9 million allocated for 2025-2027.¹⁹ In 2024, the bilateral and regional civil society portfolios comprised 37 ongoing grants amounting to €50 million, with 28 ongoing projects implementing subgrants totaling more than €15 million allocated for grassroots organizations and other local beneficiaries.²⁰

It can be argued that in Armenia, as in a number of other EU partner countries – including Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, and the Western Balkans – civil society actors, together with affiliated expert, political, and media circles and networks, constitute the principal drivers in the promotion of European norms and values. These actors play a critical role in shaping public understanding of the opportunities, constraints, and even geopolitical risks associated with European integration, thereby, contributing to a more informed domestic and also professional discourse. Moreover, they function as important intermediaries between Armenian society and the state, exerting both direct and indirect influence on national policymaking processes, particularly regarding the promotion, adaptation, and acceleration of European integration.

Both the EU and Armenia reiterated their commitment to human rights, the rule of law, and democratic values, with the EU reaffirming its steadfast support for Armenia's comprehensive political and economic reform agenda and Armenia's efforts to counter hybrid threats. *The alignment of democratic values further distinguishes Armenia from other regional actors in and around the South Caucasus and makes it a more natural partner for the EU's normative agenda.*

Armenia's importance for the EU extends beyond bilateral political, security, and economic relations. Progress in EU-Armenia integration would demonstrate the European Union's ability – together with its partners – to support democratic transitions and project stability in contested regions, while failure could undermine its credibility and normative influence. At the same time, this process is inherently a joint rather than one-directional effort: Armenia's trajectory is increasingly observed across the wider region, particularly in terms of Europe's Eastern Neighborhood, as a potential reference point and a rare example of a shared success story – for both the EU and Armenia, as well as for other European partner countries and societies. Armenia's ability and possible success to advance EU approximation despite persistent structural dependencies on external actors – particularly

¹⁸<https://www.iri.org/news/iri-survey-shows-armenians-perceive-progress-on-peace-and-stability-prioritize-economic-progress/>

¹⁹EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in Armenia 2021-2027, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025/documents/EU-CSO%20Roadmap%20Armenia%20UPDATED%20June%202025.pdf>

²⁰ EEAS – The European Union and Armenia: eeas.europa.eu/armenia/european-union-and-armenia_en

in the areas of security, energy, and the trade and economy – may serve as a practical model of adaptive, incremental integration under complex geopolitical constraints for other EU partner countries. Conversely, any failure to adequately support Armenia could undermine EU credibility and normative power and only encourage those opposed to European values and integration.

Conclusion

Despite persistent acute regional security threats of near-existential character and substantial challenges to domestic political and economic development, Armenia has demonstrated tangible and measurable progress in democratic consolidation in recent years, codifying its European ambitions within domestic legislative frameworks. Given the EU's normative and values-based commitments to its partner countries – and the rapidly evolving unprecedented global and regional political dynamics demanding timely and coherent EU responses – **Armenia qualifies for the same breadth of institutional support and policy openness that the EU and its member states extend to the most active Eastern Partnership members and to the EU's post-Soviet associated partners Moldova and Ukraine.** Moreover, Armenia deserves, at minimum, parity with neighboring Georgia's current cooperation relationship – notwithstanding official Tbilisi's troubled trajectory with Brussels – with the sole exception of candidate status, which Armenia has strategically chosen to approach with deliberate “strategic patience” in recognition of particular geopolitical and security constraints.

Within the context of accelerating external political processes and the imperative of maintaining consistent standards among all EU institutional partners within the Eastern Partnership framework, and contingent upon Armenia's demonstrated consistency of reform, the EU could prioritize several concrete policy measures:

- **Visa Liberalization:** Expedited implementation of Visa Liberalization Action Plan benchmarks to achieve visa-free Schengen access for Armenian citizens within 2-3 years, consistent with the timeline achieved by other Eastern Partnership countries and reflecting the political imperative of delivering tangible benefits to a population supporting democratic transformation, and enhancing mobility and people-to-people contacts, including expanded educational programs and students' exchange.

- **Enhanced Financial Assistance:** Augmentation of the Armenia-EU Resilience and Growth Plan beyond the current €270 million allocation, provision of additional macro-financial assistance loans on concessional terms, and establishment of Armenia-specific financial instruments analogous to Moldova's Growth Facility, thereby creating proportionate support mechanisms commensurate with Armenia's strategic importance and reform trajectory.

- **Sectoral Integration and Connectivity Initiatives Expansion:** Progressive integration into key EU frameworks including SEPA (Single Euro Payments Area) following the Moldova precedent, the EU Roaming Area consistent with Moldova’s January 2026 accession, the EU Digital Single Market with enhanced digital services participation, and comprehensive integration into all regional EU-led connectivity and infrastructure initiatives across multiple operational formats.

- **Security and Defense Cooperation:** Expanded EPF support could be substantially increased in subsequent periods, the EUMA could be expanded in duration, personnel strength, geographic scope, and operational capabilities to provide more robust border monitoring and confidence-building. Building upon existing defense cooperation frameworks with the EU member states such as France and Greece, Armenia could gain expanded access to European defense procurement and technology. Armenia’s participation in EU crisis management missions could extend to collaborative training exercises, enhancing interoperability and operational readiness with European forces.

- **Strategic Communication and Combating Hybrid Threats:** Ad hoc intelligence-sharing mechanisms should be formalized through institutional frameworks addressing hybrid threats, terrorism, information warfare, and regional security coordination. In parallel, strengthening strategic communication capacities is essential to ensure transparent communication of the objectives, benefits, and limitations of Armenia-EU cooperation, thereby mitigating misinformation, managing expectations, and reinforcing public support. The recent decision to deploy a second European monitoring mission in Armenia (EUPMA), focused on addressing non-kinetic and hybrid threats, constitutes an important step forward and creates additional opportunities for expanding cooperation in this domain.

However, it is essential to emphasize that, given Armenia’s established position within the European political space, the normative case for deeper engagement extends beyond mere institutional and political logic to encompass civilizational affinity. **Shared historical trajectories, Christian heritage, and sustained cultural exchange have forged bonds between Armenia and Europe that transcend formal institutional boundaries.** At the current stage, Armenia occupies a unique and consequential liminal position – simultaneously inside and outside the European political space, standing precisely at the boundary where that space both ends and begins.

It is precisely through the complex interplay of institutional, political, cultural, and values-based factors that the real parameters emerge for understanding why Armenia represents both the end and the beginning of European political space:

Where European Political Space Ends:

- Geographic periphery positioned along or beyond Europe’s conventional territorial boundaries;
- Exclusion from core EU institutions, deep economic integration frameworks (DCFTA), and comprehensive mobility regimes (Schengen);
- Structural constraints imposed by regional geopolitics, multidimensional security challenges, and persistent third-party influence and interference;

- Limited EU institutional capacity to provide comprehensive security guarantees to Armenia beyond civilian border monitoring (EUMA) and combating non-kinetic and hybrid threats (EUPMA) missions, and constrained non-lethal military assistance through EPF;
- Indeterminate membership trajectory despite robust democratic credentials and progressive institutional transformation.

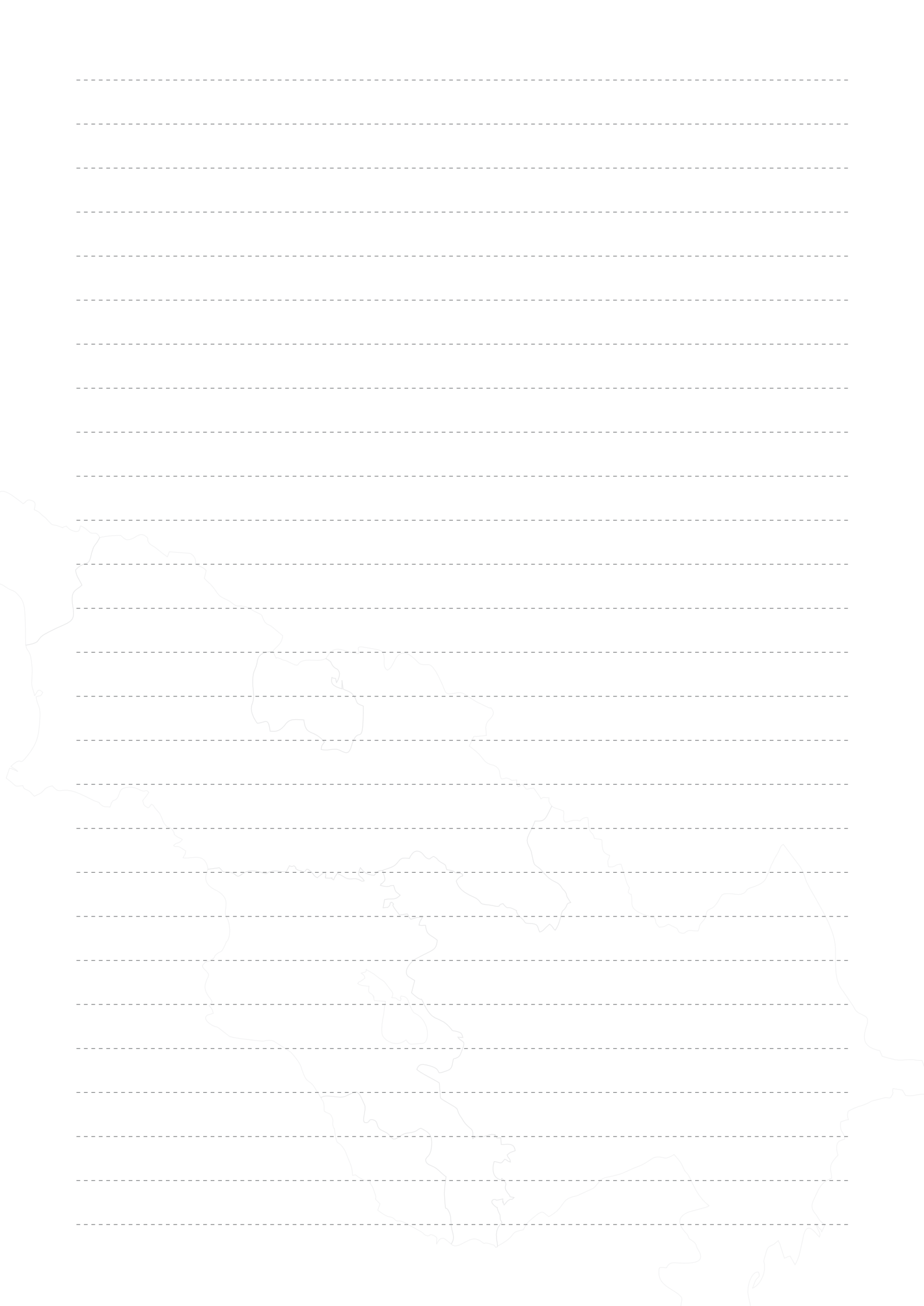
Where European Political Space Begins:

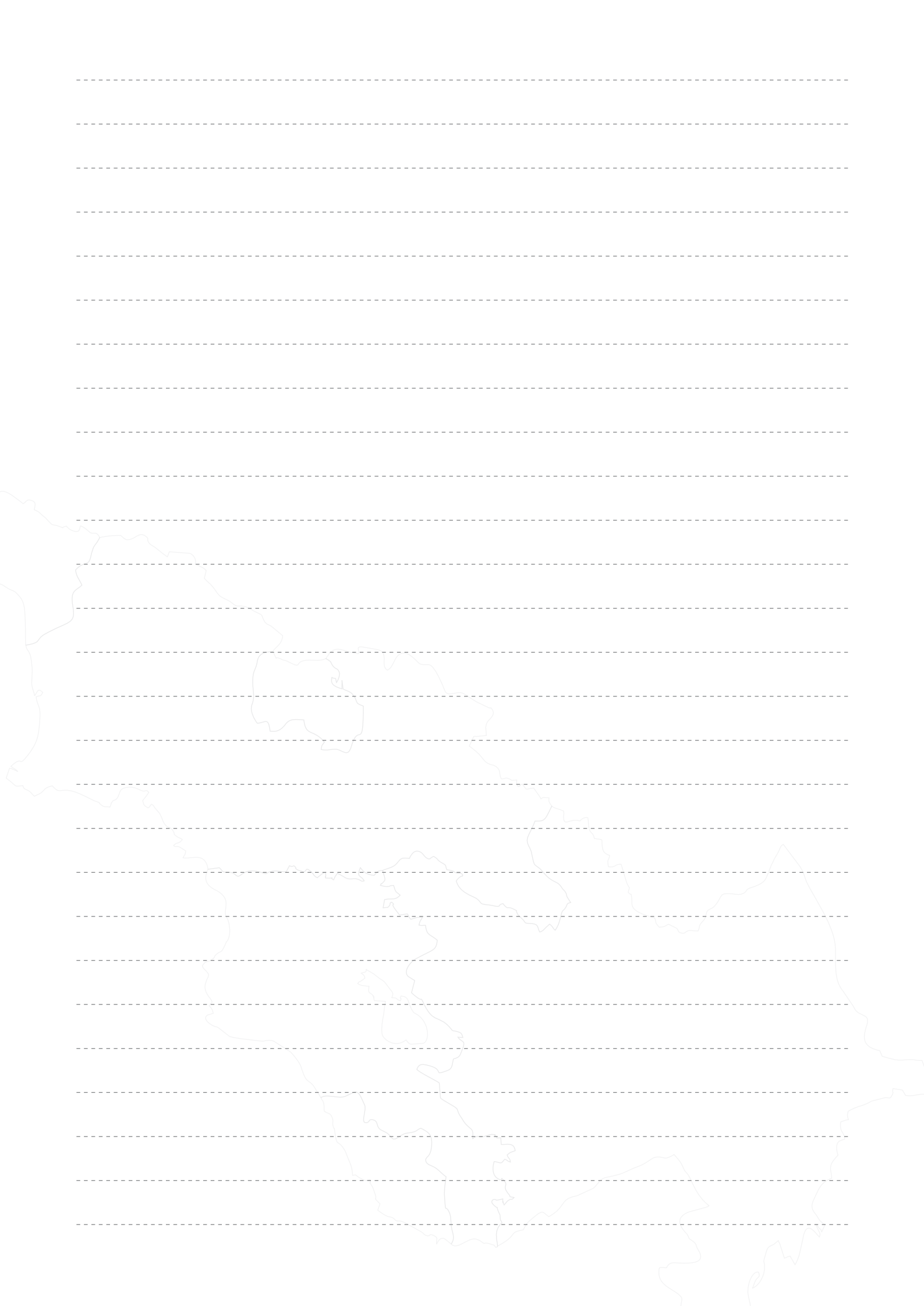
- Strong public opinion for further EU integration;
- Deep cultural heritage and identity, common system of values;
- Political decisions taken by the democratically elected government;
- Integration into expanded pan-European political forums (EPC, CoE, OSCE);
- Emergence as a potential “Crossroads of Peace” for prospective regional infrastructure and connectivity projects linking Europe with strategically vital regions and markets;
 - Accelerating sectoral and institutional approximation toward European regulatory standards and frameworks;
 - Normative alignment with foundational European values (democracy, rule of law, fundamental human rights);
 - Empirical test case for whether European political space can transcend contested geographic boundaries through values-based integration;
 - Potential model for values-driven rather than geography-determined European identity construction;
 - Unprecedented symbolic recognition through hosting European leaders to deliberate Europe’s future trajectory (May 2026 summits).

This framework suggests that Armenia’s political trajectory will determine not merely one country’s relationship with European institutions but will establish precedents for how the EU conceptualizes and operationalizes the boundaries of European political space itself in an era of global and regional geopolitical contestation and normative competition.

About the Author

Dr. Sergey Minasyan is Deputy Director of the Caucasus Institute and a KAS Invited Fellow, as well as a former diplomat and expert on foreign and security policy. He holds a PhD in Military History from the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia and a Doctor of Political Sciences in International Relations from the National Defense Research Institute of the Ministry of Defence of Armenia. He served as Ambassador of the Republic of Armenia to Romania (2017–2023) and holds the diplomatic rank of Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary.







Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation
Program “Political Dialogue South Caucasus”

<https://www.kas.de/en/web/suedkaukasus/>

