

LEADERSHIP ACADEMY ALUMNI:

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**TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP PROGRAM
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**UNARMED BUT NOT UNNOTICED: THE EU’S CIVILIAN MISSION TO ARMENIA.
IMPLICATIONS AFTER THE WASHINGTON SUMMIT**

Mariam Anastasyan

Introduction

The deployment of the EU Monitoring Mission to Armenia (EUMA) in February 2023 represented more than simply a technical border observation. Rather, it marked a strategic innovation, signaling Europe’s intervention in a volatile environment in which Moscow’s credibility as Armenia’s traditional security guarantor was rapidly eroding. Following the 2020 War in Nagorno-Karabakh and its aftermath, Armenia’s confidence in its long-standing security ally, Russia, was significantly damaged. The Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), despite Armenia’s status as a founding member since 1992,¹ further discredited itself through its limited and ineffective response to Azerbaijani aggression and attacks against Armenia. This erosion of trust created space for the European Union to reconsider its role and expand its capacity in providing security within a region that has historically been dominated by other powers.

Despite being comprised of unarmed personnel with a non-combatant mandate, the EUMA mission conveys substantial political weight. More specifically, the deployment marks the *maturation* in the EU’s foreign policy, positioning the Union as a geopolitical actor capable of

¹ Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Collective Security Treaty Organization.”
<https://www.mfa.am/en/international-organisations/1>

influencing security dynamics in its “*contested neighborhood*,”² in addition to being a normative power³ advocating for peace, democracy, rule of law, and human rights.

Nevertheless, reality tempers ambition. The EU’s vulnerability is exposed by its narrow mandate and lack of enforcement authority, underscoring the gap between its operational capabilities and geopolitical aspirations. After an initial two-years deployment and an additional two-year extension,⁴ the mission now coincides with the newly heightened diplomatic engagement of the United States in the region. It is symbolized by the August 2025 Washington Summit between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan hosted by the American president that resulted in the initialing of the bilateral Armenia-Azerbaijan peace treaty and the signing of the new Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP). This raises a critical question, however: *will the American initiative complement the EU’s mission in Armenia or lead to its fragmentation?*

Legal and Political Foundations of the EUMA

The European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMA) was established following Armenia’s formal invitation⁵ to the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The initiative came in the wake of Azerbaijan’s offensive⁶ against Armenia in September 2022 and was further anchored to the October 2022 *European Political Community* meeting⁷ in Prague, where Armenia and Azerbaijan reiterated their commitment to mutually recognize

² Ademmer, Esther, Laure Delcour, and Kataryna Wolczuk. 2016. “Beyond Geopolitics: Exploring the Impact of the EU and Russia in the ‘Contested Neighborhood.’” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57 (1): 1–18.

³ Ian Manners, “Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 235–258

⁴ Council of the European Union. Decision (CFSP) 2025/319 of 11 February 2025, extending the mandate of the Head of Mission of the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA). OJ L 2025/319, February 12, 2025. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2025/319/oj/eng>

⁵ Council of the European Union. Armenia: EU establishes a civilian mission to contribute to stability in border areas. Press release, January 23, 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/01/23/armenia-eu-sets-up-a-civilian-mission-to-ensure-security-in-conflict-affected-and-border-areas/>

⁶ Mirzoyan, Ararat, “Statement by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia at the OSCE Ministerial Council,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, December 1, 2022, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20221201193945/https://www.mfa.am/en/speeches/2022/12/01/am_obse_sp/11753

⁷ Council of the European Union. Meeting of the European Political Community, October 6, 2022. Press release, October 6, 2022. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/10/06/>

each other’s “territorial integrity and sovereignty in line with the UN Charter and the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration.”⁸

Through the Council Decision (CFSP) 2023/162,⁹ the European Union established a civilian mission in Armenia under the framework of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP).¹⁰ Its mandate is to act as an “impartial and credible actor,”¹¹ helping to create a safe and stable environment in Armenia’s conflict-prone areas by strengthening “human security, reducing the number of incidents in border and conflict-affected areas,”¹² diminishing “risk levels for local populations,”¹³ and eventually creating conditions conducive to the “normalization of Armenia and Azerbaijan relations,”¹⁴ thereby paving the way for potential progress towards a lasting peace.

With five field stations in Armenia’s vulnerable border regions¹⁵ and a liaison office in Yerevan, the mission has 225¹⁶ staff members drawn from EU member states and third-country contributors like Canada¹⁷ and is based in Yeghegnadzor in southeastern Armenia. To date, the EUMA has carried out 5000 patrol operations through its “routine patrolling and systematic reporting.”¹⁸ Monitoring is only conducted on Armenian territory, with Azerbaijani authorities being notified, since Baku had consistently rejected and disapproved of any EU

⁸ Council of the European Union. Statement following quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron and President Michel, 6 October 2022. Press release, October 7, 2022. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/10/07/statement-following-quadrilateral-meeting-between-president-aliyev-prime-minister-pashinyan-president-macron-and-president-michel-6-october-2022/>

⁹ Council of the European Union. Council Decision (CFSP) 2023/162 of 23 January 2023 on a European Union mission in Armenia (EUMA). Official Journal of the European Union, L 22, 24 January 2023, pp. 29–35. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2023/162/oj/eng>

¹⁰ Andersson, Jan Joel and Malena Britz. 2025. “The European Union’s Role in European Defense Industry Policy.” *Defense Studies* 25 (2): 322–41.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The border regions that have been affected by Azerbaijani aggression are Jermuk, Martuni, Kapan, Goris, and Ijevan

¹⁶ European External Action Service (EEAS), *About European Union Mission in Armenia*, accessed September 22, 2025. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/about-european-union-mission-armenia_en?s=410283

¹⁷ Council of the European Union, Political and Security Committee Decision (CFSP) 2023/1513 of 19 July 2023 on the Acceptance of a Third State’s Contribution to the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) (EUMA/2/2023), Official Journal of the European Union, July 19, 2023. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2023/1513/oj>

¹⁸ European Union Neighbours East. *European Union Mission in Armenia Reaches 5,000 Patrols Milestone*. Press release, April 9, 2025. <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/european-union-mission-in-armenia-reaches-5000-patrols-milestone/>

presence on its territory, despite the fact that the mission was initially intended to have a degree of parity, with a presence on both sides of the border. Simultaneously, the mission has been repeatedly targeted by Azerbaijani anti-narrative propaganda and Russian disinformation campaigns¹⁹ aimed at undermining its importance, intentions, and credibility. However, despite Baku’s objections, Armenia retains complete authority as the host state, allowing the mission to operate within its sovereign territory and reinforcing both deterrence and visibility.

Deterioration of relations with Russia

Russia’s limited response to Armenia’s security concerns has been perceived in Yerevan as a “dereliction of duty”²⁰ towards a partner state during a time of critical crisis. This failure is particularly striking given Armenia’s extensive bilateral and multilateral relations with Moscow, which include membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union, and the presence of Russia’s 102nd military base²¹ in Armenia, among others.

Not only did Russia fail to uphold its commitments to defend Armenia from Azerbaijani aggression after the Nagorno-Karabakh war, but it also disregarded Yerevan’s repeated requests to invoke Article 4 of the CSTO agreement²² when Azerbaijani forces invaded Armenia’s sovereign territory in 2022. This absence of support prompted²³ Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to suspend Armenia’s participation in CSTO, with the prospect of potential Armenian withdrawal from the security alliance in the future. This decision²⁴ not only underscored the bloc’s inability to honor its commitments and security obligations but also

¹⁹ Pambukhchyan, Anna, “Russia and Azerbaijan Take Aim at EU’s Mission in Armenia,” *Euractiv*, September 26, 2024. <https://www.euractiv.com/news/russia-and-azerbaijan-take-aim-at-eus-mission-in-armenia/>

²⁰ de Waal, Thomas, *Armenia Navigates a Path Away From Russia*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 11, 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/armenia-navigates-a-path-away-from-russia?lang=en>

²¹ Lavrov, Sergey, “Russian Military Base Is an Important Component of Ensuring Armenia’s Security Interests,” *ARKA News Agency*, May 21, 2025. <https://arka.am/en/news/politics/lavrov-russian-military-base-is-an-important-component-of-ensuring-armenia-s-security-interests/>

²² Collective Security Treaty Organization. *Collective Security Treaty*, May 15, 1992. Accessed September 22, 2025.

https://en.odkb-csto.org/documents/documents/dogovor_o_kollektivnoy_bezopasnosti/#loaded

²³ Armenpress. “Likely Armenia Will Withdraw from CSTO, Says Pashinyan.” *Armenpress*, July 16, 2025. <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1224984>

²⁴ Ibid.

signaled Yerevan’s reorientation towards alternative partnerships and new security architects.²⁵

This vacuum left by Russia in Armenia’s security has, in turn, provided the EU with an opportunity to consolidate its influence in the region. Through the deployment of EUMA, the EU is offering not only normative support but also positioning itself as a geopolitical player capable of counterbalancing Russia’s influence. Although the EUMA is largely responsible for monitoring rather than enforcement, its significance stems from its “representation of soft power”²⁶ and its presence as a deterrent to renewed hostilities or attacks from Azerbaijan.

It provides Armenia with a form of reassurance through its on-the-ground presence, leveraging political influence and deterrent implications. While the mission’s authority does not allow direct intervention, it does supply Brussels with real-time, reliable data, thereby amplifying the Union’s role in regional accountability and credibility. In this regard, the EUMA serves to enhance EU diplomacy by proving that, in the absence of military action, the EU can still function as a crisis-response instrument²⁷ and an operational model for future civilian missions.

Comparative Perspective: EUMA Armenia and EUMM Georgia

A parallel can be drawn with the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM),²⁸ established in 2008 following the Russian invasion of Georgia. Prior to the establishment of the EU Civilian Mission in Armenia (EUMA), a two-month EU Monitoring Capacity in Armenia (EUMCAP)²⁹ was deployed, with 40 observers reassigned from the EUMM Georgia on a temporary basis.

²⁵ EVN Report. “How Armenia Diversified Its Security Landscape in 2024.” December 26, 2024. <https://evnreport.com/politics/armenia-security-diversification-2024/>

²⁶ Nielsen, Kristian, “EU Soft Power and the Capability-Expectations Gap,” *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 9, No. 5 (2013), Pp. 725–74. www.researchgate.net/publication/290557510_EU_Soft_Power_and_the_Capability-Expectations_Gap

²⁷ Tatikyan, Sossi, “The EU’s Role in Preventing a New Conflict and Ensuring Sustainable Peace Between Armenia and Azerbaijan,” *European Policy Review* 6, no. 1 (July 2023):

²⁸ Council of the European Union. Council Joint Action 2008/736/CFSP of September 15, 2008 on the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM Georgia). Official Journal of the European Union, L 248, September 17, 2008. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/joint_action/2008/736/oj/eng

²⁹ European External Action Service (EEAS). EU Monitoring Capacity to Armenia. Press release, October 20, 2022. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-monitoring-capacity-armenia_en

While the EUMM Georgia was primarily tasked with post-war stabilization and confidence-building, the EUMA Armenia operates in an active conflict theater, facing ongoing Azerbaijani threats against Armenia’s sovereign territory. Despite these contextual differences, both missions share a set of core objectives that include “monitoring, reporting, tension reduction, contributing to stabilization, supporting the normalization of relations.”³⁰ Neither mission is equipped with enforcement mechanisms, yet both hold considerable tactical importance while projecting the EU’s presence on the ground.

Notwithstanding the European Union’s broader commitment to “fostering democracy, good governance, and institutional strengthening as key drivers for security and stability”³¹ within its Eastern Partnership periphery, the EU’s efforts in addressing the immediate security needs of states like Armenia and Georgia have historically been limited in scope.³² Therefore, with the establishment of these missions, the EU demonstrated tangible progress in closing this gap, displaying an evolving strategy oriented toward crisis-responsive civilian missions for conflict management in the region.

Some argue³³ that the EU’s intervention in Russia’s “*near-abroad*” yields limited outcomes. While such criticism is not without merit, it risks overlooking or downplaying important developments. The continued presence of Russian forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia since 2008 is structurally comparable to Armenia, where Russia maintains its 102nd Army Base.³⁴ Although the political context differs, whereas Russia’s 7th Military Base in Abkhazia is an outcome of “coercion,” while Armenia’s decision to host the 102nd base was voluntary, both cases of Russia’s military presence can potentially be used for Moscow’s force projection, thereby turning into a destabilizing factor in the region.

³⁰ Council of the European Union. Council Joint Action 2008/736/CFSP of September 15, 2008 on the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia, EUMM Georgia. Official Journal of the European Union, L 248, 17 September 2008, 26–31. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/joint_action/2008/736/oj/eng

³¹ Ianciară, A. K. “Stability, Security, Democracy: Explaining Shifts in the Narrative of the European Neighbourhood Policy.” *Journal of European Integration* 39, no. 1 (2016): 49–62

³² Deen, Bob and Wouter Zweers. *The EU in the South Caucasus: Navigating a Geopolitical Labyrinth in Turmoil*. The Hague: Clingendael Institute, March 30, 2023. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/eu-south-caucasus>

³³ Kochinyan, Areg. “EU Mission in Armenia and Russia.” *Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom*, October 2, 2023. <https://www.freiheit.org/south-caucasus/eu-mission-armenia-and-russia>

³⁴ Araratyan, Aram. “Key: Russian Base in Armenia.” *Mediamax*, February 4, 2015. <https://mediamax.am/en/news/parzabanum/13078/#:~:text=%2DThe%20military%20base%20was%20established,Russia%20to%20Armenia%20Vladimir%20Stupishin>

Yet, both cases demonstrate a common dynamic: despite the presence of a hard power actor, EU civilian missions have been successfully operating *alongside* the Russian military forces. These missions function within particularly fragile conflict-affected environments and, oftentimes, under pressure from Moscow’s provocative rhetoric.³⁵ Nevertheless, this *coexistence* itself characterizes a major development: two opposing blocks operating simultaneously within the same territory.

Despite the challenges posed by Russia,³⁶ the missions’ presence illustrates the EU’s consistent willingness to continue acting in Russia-influenced regions in a heightened manner via its civilian interventions. Notably, the rapid secondment³⁷ of personnel from the EUMM Georgia to Armenia, ahead of the EUMA’s official launch, highlights the EU’s adaptability and speed in mission planning. Building on this precedent, one could argue that the EUMA holds the potential to evolve further, moving from a small-scale, temporary monitoring presence into a longer-term stabilization instrument,³⁸ thereby reinforcing the EU’s credibility as an effective security actor in the South Caucasus.

Challenges and Implications

The EUMA is not exempt from challenges and limitations, however. One of the more commonly cited constraints is attributed to the EUMA’s lack of an enforcement mechanism. As a result, it relies on soft power to exert influence while attempting to strike a balance between its normative agenda³⁹ and its geopolitical ambitions, running the risk of losing credibility whenever expectations exceed its operational capacity. This raises the likelihood of unrealistic expectations within Armenian society. While the EUMA simply provides visibility and transparent reporting, it is often regarded as a *de facto* security guarantor. To avoid

³⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation on the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. Press release, October 20, 2023. https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1849816/

³⁶ Teslova, Elena, “Exclusively Geopolitical Motives Behind New EU Mission in Armenia: Russia.” *Anadolu Agency*, February 21, 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/exclusively-geopolitical-motives-behind-new-eu-mission-in-armenia-russia/2826576>

³⁷ Council of the European Union. *Armenia: EU Monitoring Capacity completes its mandate, new planning team launched*. Press release, December 19, 2022. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/12/19/armenia-eu-monitoring-capacity-completes-its-mandate-new-planning-team-launched/>

³⁸ Calcara, A., “Short-term readiness, long-term innovation: the European defense market and the trade-off between demand and supply,” *Defense and Peace Economics* 34, no. 1 (2023): 1–20

³⁹ Deen, Bob Wouter Zweers, and Camille Linder, *The EU in the South Caucasus: Navigating a Geopolitical Labyrinth in Turmoil* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, March 2023)

eroding trust in both the EU and the mission, it is essential to mitigate unrealistic expectations and clearly communicate the civilian and observational, rather than protective, nature of the mandate to the Armenian population.

Second, there is no access to Azerbaijani areas; the mission is geopolitically limited to Armenian territory.⁴⁰ This asymmetry can potentially undermine the mission’s credibility and stabilizing mechanisms by giving the impression of bias or partiality because of inadequate or limited information gathering and monitoring. And a third constraint stems from internal divisions and diverging interests within the EU itself. The lack of unity among EU member states, for example, continues to pose challenges to the efficacy and sustainability of EU engagement. This is most evident in the case of EU member state Hungary,⁴¹ which has traditionally closer ties with Azerbaijan and has blocked the formation of the EUMA, illustrating how “interest-driven”⁴² choices can influence and impede the necessity for consensus and agreement inside the European Union.

The Implications of the Washington Summit TRIPP Agreement for the EUMA Mission

In August 2025, under the auspices of U.S. President Donald Trump, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev signed a joint declaration at the White House. The accords, widely referred to as the *Washington Summit*, were declared historic, marking the “closure of nearly four decades of enmity between two nations”⁴³ and “resolutely rejecting any attempt of revenge, now and in the future.”⁴⁴

The declaration, which underscores a shared commitment to progressing a new era of reconciliation in the South Caucasus, places particular emphasis on regional integration through multi-dimensional connectivity. The initiative known as the Trump Corridor for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) envisions the “opening of communications in international transportation and trade routes,”⁴⁵ including “unimpeded connectivity”⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Cutler, Robert, “What Europe Can Contribute to Armenia–Azerbaijan Peace,” *Strategy International*, September 3, 2025. <https://strategyinternational.org/2025/09/03/publication199/>

⁴¹ Azatutyun, “Armenia Still Hopes for EU Military Aid,” May 14, 2024. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32947028.html>

⁴² Deen, Bob, Wouter Zweers, and Camille Linder, *The EU in the South Caucasus: Navigating a Geopolitical Labyrinth in Turmoil* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, March 2023)

⁴³ Armenpress. “Full Text of US-Brokered Armenia-Azerbaijan Joint Declaration.” Armenian News Agency, August 9, 2025. <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1226785>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

between Azerbaijan and its exclave, Nakhichevan, via Armenian territory, a development that will have direct implications for Iran and Turkey, both of which share borders with Armenia.

The provision leasing 43 km of Armenian land to the United States for the period of 99 years is arguably the most crucial aspect of the deal,⁴⁷ as it becomes a part of a larger commerce route and transit network linking Central Asia through Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey to global markets.⁴⁸ If fully implemented, these arrangements have the potential to fundamentally alter the security and economic architecture of the South Caucasus, integrating Armenia into broader regional connectivity networks⁴⁹.

The intended territory for the lease traverses Armenia’s southern Syunik region, a territory that holds exceptional strategic significance. Following the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Azerbaijan repeatedly challenged Armenia’s sovereignty, issuing multiple threats regarding possible military action in Syunik to force a direct connection to its Nakhichevan exclave via the so-called “Zangezur Corridor” - now called the TRIPP, without Armenian customs or security controls - directly compromising Armenia’s sovereignty.

For Armenia, Syunik not only serves as a major conduit to Iran but is also crucial to the country’s national security. The rhetoric used by Azerbaijan in relation to Syunik reveals ambitions that extend beyond the establishment of trade and connectivity routes; they seem to be driven by a more comprehensive strategic vision on the creation of the Pan-Turkic geopolitical objectives. The corridor project has been strongly backed by Azerbaijan’s long-standing partner, Turkey⁵⁰, as well as Russia, which viewed the route as a potential means to bypass Western sanctions by putting it under its Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) forces, referencing the Armenia-Russia-Azerbaijan trilateral statement⁵¹ of

⁴⁷ Yildiz, Guney. “America’s High Stakes Bet on Zangezur: How a US-Led Corridor Could Slash Europe’s Energy Costs and Counter Russia.” *Forbes*, July 18, 2025. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/guneyyildiz/2025/07/18/americas-high-stakes-bet-on-zangezur-how-a-us-led-corridor-could-slash-europes-energy-costs-and-counter-russia/>

⁴⁸ O’Brien, Jim, “Peace in the Caucasus: Ensuring Europe Plays a Role After Trump’s Ceremony,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, August 14, 2025. <https://ecfr.eu/article/peace-in-the-caucasus-ensuring-europe-plays-a-role-after-trumps-ceremony/>

⁴⁹ Valansi, Karel, “Why the Middle Corridor Matters Amid a Geopolitical Resorting.” *Atlantic Council*, June 2, 2025. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/ac-turkey-defense-journal/why-the-middle-corridor-matters-amid-a-geopolitical-resorting/>

⁵⁰ Giragosian, Richard, “Armenia ‘Talks Türkiye’ in New Diplomatic Offensive.” *Agos*, June 24, 2025. <https://www.agos.com.tr/en/article/34002/armenia-talks-turkiye-in-new-diplomatic-offensive>

⁵¹ Republic of Armenia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Initialed Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Agreement Text*. Press release, August 11, 2025. <https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2025/08/11/Initialed%20Arm-Az%20Peace%20Agreement%20text/13394>

November 2020, which formally put an end to the Nagorno-Karabakh war and stationed so-called Russian peacekeepers in the region. In reality, the trilateral agreement does not imply any authority to FSB forces over transit operations in Armenia, contrary to Moscow’s interpretations.⁵²

The Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) emerging from the Washington Summit is argued to differ from the so-called “Zangezur Corridor” not only in *nomenclature* but also in its legal and operational guarantees. The Washington Declaration clearly states that the TRIPP shall operate on the “basis of respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and jurisdiction of the States,”⁵³ providing Armenia “full sovereign control over the road passing through its territory, including transit fees and border checks,”⁵⁴ without any sacrifice of sovereignty to Azerbaijan. By contrast, the earlier concept of the “Zangezur Corridor” did not provide the abovementioned security guarantees and was leveraged by Azerbaijan pushing for an “extraterritorial corridor”⁵⁵ at Armenia’s expense.

Nevertheless, the Washington Summit marks a significant step forward in formalizing the peace agreement and securing transit routes, yet its full implementation remains premature, with multiple challenges ahead. The operationalization of the route largely depends on the normalization of relations with Turkey; hence, there could be “no business without it”⁵⁶ if the border between Armenia and Turkey remains closed. Uncertainties also remain concerning constitutional changes in Armenia demanded by Azerbaijan as a key precondition, as well as operational matters⁵⁷ in managing the corridor and the involvement of regional actors such

⁵² Armenpress. “November 9 Document Does Not Imply That Russia’s FSB Must Be Present on the Ground: Pashinyan on Clause 9.” *Armenpress*, September 11, 2024.

<https://armenpress.am/en/article/1199623>

⁵³ Armenpress. “Full Text of US-Brokered Armenia-Azerbaijan Joint Declaration.” Armenian News Agency, August 9, 2025. <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1226785>

⁵⁴ Vartanyan, Olesya, “A Month After Historic Armenia-Azerbaijan Summit, Has Trump Secured a Lasting Peace?” *Carnegie Politika*, September 11, 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/09/azerbaijan-armenia-trump-deal?lang=en>

⁵⁵ Giragosian, Richard, “A Trump-Brokered Peace Deal in the South Caucasus Is Hopeful but Incomplete,” *Foreign Policy*, August 29, 2025. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/08/29/armenia-azerbaijan-trump-russia-turkey-peace/>

⁵⁶ O’Brien, Jim, “Peace in the Caucasus: Ensuring Europe Plays a Role after Trump’s Ceremony,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, August 14, 2025. <https://ecfr.eu/article/peace-in-the-caucasus-ensuring-europe-plays-a-role-after-trumps-ceremony/>

⁵⁷ Hess, Maximilian, “Armenian Transit Corridor Gets Initial Financial Infusion.” *Eurasianet*, September 12, 2025. <https://eurasianet.org/armenian-transit-corridor-gets-initial-financial-infusion>

as Iran⁵⁸ and Russia⁵⁹ that cast a shadow over the TRIPP due to their long-standing interests in the region.

In sum, while TRIPP represents a legally and politically acceptable framework for Armenia and Azerbaijan compared to previous concepts, much of its success will largely depend on several critical factors. For Armenia, this entails the capacity to uphold the agreed terms, the strengthening of diplomatic relations with regional and international stakeholders, and the careful management of regional hard power influences. For Azerbaijan, respecting the agreement, adhering to its terms and conditions, and refraining from damaging rhetoric towards Armenia and Armenians still remain valid points. Without these measures, the implementation of the Washington Accords would be highly uncertain; hence, there are no guarantors or enforcing mechanisms to ensure compliance.⁶⁰

The EU’s strategic role in the wake of Washington’s South Caucasus Diplomacy

While EU leaders have repeatedly welcomed⁶¹ the Washington Agreements, the U.S.-brokered deal presents both challenges and opportunities for further EU engagement in the South Caucasus. Foremost, it is important to distinguish between the EUMA Mission and the TRIPP framework. The EUMA represents a civilian mission - a normative mandate - to “provide human security, conduct routine patrolling, reporting, and contribute to the normalization of the relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan.” In contrast, TRIPP is transactional, centered on creating trade routes, fostering economic advantages, and reopening channels of communication. Its *Trans-Atlantic* nature and economic focus risk marginalizing the EU’s influence, despite its active role⁶² in mediation efforts since the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. At a time when the EUMA has earned trust through its sustained

⁵⁸ Wintour, Patrick, “Iran and Russia Stand to Lose from US Deal with Azerbaijan and Armenia.” *The Guardian*, August 9, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/09/iran-and-russia-stand-to-lose-from-us-deal-with-azerbaijan-and-armenia>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Giragosian, Richard, “A Trump-Brokered Peace Deal in the South Caucasus Is Hopeful but Incomplete,” *Foreign Policy*, August 29, 2025. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/08/29/armenia-azerbaijan-trump-russia-turkey-peace/>

⁶¹ Council of the European Union. *Armenia/Azerbaijan: Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the initialing of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Treaty*. Press release, August 8, 2025. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/08/08/armeniaazerbaijan-statement-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-the-initialing-of-the-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-treaty/>

⁶² *Caucasus Watch*. “EU Mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan: Prospects and Challenges.” Last modified December 24, 2023. <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/eu-mediation-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan-prospects-and-challenges.html>

physical presence, its long-standing EU-Armenia partnership⁶³ and the use of various soft power mechanisms, the Washington deal may be perceived as imposed, particularly given the arguments that Armenia’s gains remain limited.⁶⁴ Due to these contradictions, Europe is faced with asserting its relevance while preserving its reputation and mandate on the ground.

Furthermore, geopolitical tensions are likely to intensify, as both Russia and Iran regard the suggestion of a U.S. presence as an intrusion⁶⁵ and threat to their traditional sphere of influence. Meanwhile, the European Union, on the other hand, is likely to be perceived as less confrontational due to its civilian status and non-combatant mandate. This distinction enables the EU to operate in a more “accepted” and positive environment, exercising influence through normative and confidence-building processes⁶⁶ rather than Russia’s traditional reliance on pressure and coercion.

However, as noted, the EUMA faces its own set of challenges: Azerbaijan’s resistance to the mission, Russia’s persistent disinformation efforts, the potential alteration of the mandate in light of the Washington Summit, and a possible exclusion from third-party engagement,⁶⁷ all threatening to undermine the purpose of the EU mission.

On the other hand, the prospects for strategic constructive collaboration do exist. TRIPP creates new avenues where the EU can offer its technical expertise,⁶⁸ extend legitimacy, and provide civilian oversight. For example, the EUMA may adopt a neutral role by monitoring the transit route, assuring safe and transparent operations, and implementing confidence-building measures. It can function via civilian security lenses, allowing the mission to

⁶³ Anastasyan, Mariam, *What’s Next for Armenia After the Launch of the Visa Liberalisation Dialogue*. Regional Studies Center, January 25, 2025.

<https://www.kas.de/documents/269781/0/Publications.pdf/863b8dc2-e9db-52f8-0cea-846400f3d782?version=1.0&t=1743073791431>

⁶⁴ Cutler, Robert, “What Europe Can Contribute to Armenia–Azerbaijan Peace,” *Strategy International*, September 3, 2025. <https://strategyinternational.org/2025/09/03/publication199/>

⁶⁵ Azatutyun. “Russia’s Lavrov Cites ‘Skepticism’ Over Armenian Azeri Agreements.” September 8, 2025. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33524794.html>

⁶⁶ International Crisis Group. *Armenia and Azerbaijan: Getting the Peace Agreement across the Finish Line*. Report, May 22, 2025. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/armenian-azerbaijani-conflict/armenia-and-azerbaijan-getting-peace-agreement-across-finish-line>

⁶⁷ Joint Declaration by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, and the President of the United States of America on the outcomes of their meeting in Washington

⁶⁸ Ibid.

complement the route’s socio-economic and environmental consequences that U.S frameworks may overlook or underestimate. As noted by the US Ambassador to Armenia,

*“As Europe continues to deepen its ties with Armenia, we look forward to partnering to advance the multiple lines of effort that will make the vision of a Middle Corridor from Central Asia to Western Europe a reality.”*⁶⁹

Last, but not least, the EU has already invested in the region through the ongoing resilience Syunik project,⁷⁰ which aims to improve local infrastructure and promote socio-economic stability. Given the provision for “third-party engagement”⁷¹ in the Armenia-Azerbaijan joint declaration, the EU is well positioned to act as an “implementing arm,”⁷² thus bridging Washington’s leverage with Brussels’ institutional presence.

Conclusion

The European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMA) underscores Europe’s growing political engagement in Armenia, despite its limited civilian mandate and the inherent operational challenges. To strengthen its operational effectiveness and strategic impact, the EU should consider revising the EUMA mandate by introducing frameworks for possible technical assistance, integrated border management, and clearly defined mechanisms for security cooperation with Armenia.

At the same time, the TRIPP framework presents a strategic opportunity for Armenia to address its longstanding bottlenecks and regional isolation by directly engaging in

⁶⁹ U.S. Embassy in Armenia. “Ambassador *Kviens*” Remarks at the 108th NATO Rose-Roth Seminar (Transcript).” U.S. Embassy in Armenia press release/transcript, September 23, .2025.

<https://am.usembassy.gov/ambassador-kviens-remarks-at-108th-nato-rose-roth-seminar-transcript/>
⁷⁰ European Investment Bank. *Armenia - Resilient Syunik Program*. Project number 20220193. Last modified July 16, 2025. <https://www.eib.org/en/projects/pipelines/all/20220193>

⁷¹ Joint Declaration by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, and the President of the United States of America on the outcomes of their meeting in Washington D.C., United States of America. Press release, August 9, 2025. <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2025/08/09/Nikol-Pashinyan-visit-US-declaration/>

⁷² International Crisis Group. *Armenia and Azerbaijan: Getting the Peace Agreement across the Finish Line*. Report, May 22, 2025. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/armenian-azerbaijani-conflict/armenia-and-azerbaijan-getting-peace-agreement-across-finish-line>

connectivity projects in transport, rail, and infrastructure. While implementation terms and roadmaps remain pending and many details are yet to be clarified, close coordination between the EU and the United States on a complementary basis has the potential to advance shared objectives of regional stability and connectivity. Furthermore, the European Union’s considerable expertise in the financial, technical, and administrative domains is likely to play an even more crucial role in the initiative’s success, particularly given its alignment with the EU’s Global Gateway strategy and its overarching vision of sustainable connectivity.

On a broader level, since Russia invaded Ukraine, the security dimension has become an integral part of the EU’s Eastern Partnership (EaP) program. Connectivity schemes have also emerged not only as prospects for cooperation but also as new battlegrounds for security. In response to these shifting realities, the EU may need to look past its traditional reliance on soft power and economic incentives and instead transform into a credible security actor. Such a transition holds significance not only for regional stability and resilience but also for reinforcing the EU’s credibility as a proactive proponent of democratic principles and promoter of a rules-based international order.

The EU’s presence - unarmed but not unnoticed - represents its consistent graduation from a mere monitoring mission into a strategically engaged actor in the South Caucasus. As the dynamics in the region continue to evolve, maintaining this role will require sustained political will, institutional alignment, and, above all, agile engagement - one that complements rather than fragments the American initiative.



Note

This publication is a product of the mentorship element of a project in partnership with the Eduardo Frei Foundation and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Regional Programme Political Dialogue South Caucasus. Implemented by the Regional Studies Center (RSC) from August 2024-January 2025, this certificate-based professional training and development project was specifically tailored to the alumni from the KAS “Leadership Academy” program.



TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP PROGRAM FOR “LEADERSHIP ACADEMY” ALUMNI

EU EXPANSION: ROMANIA, BULGARIA AND THE CASE FOR BALKANS-CAUCASUS INTEGRATION

Haykaz Shahnazaryan

Abstract

The European Union’s (EU) expansion in the 1990s and early 2000s, and particularly the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007,¹ marked a transformative phase in the EU’s integration of post-communist states. This article assesses the impact of Bulgarian and Romanian accession on the European Union’s strength, analyzing the economic, political, and geopolitical dimensions with particular attention to political reforms and growth trajectories. It explores the economic development of both countries before and after their 2007 accession, comparing their progress to Germany—the EU’s economic powerhouse—and to broader EU trends. The analysis extends to key areas such as anti-corruption efforts and trade integration, presenting data-driven evidence that their inclusion has ultimately reinforced the EU. While developmental challenges persist, Bulgaria and Romania have contributed to enhancing the EU’s strategic posture. The article argues that further EU enlargement into the Balkans and Caucasus is essential to bolstering the EU’s long-term stability and global influence.

Introduction

Romania and Bulgaria applied for EU membership in 1995² amid post-communist transitions to democracy and market economies. Their accession process, governed by

¹ https://europa.eu/50/news/theme/070105_en.htm

² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_06_1900

the Copenhagen Criteria, required democratic stability, a functioning market economy, and alignment with the EU’s *acquis communautaire*. After signing Europe Agreements in 1993, becoming candidates in 1997, and starting negotiations in 2000, on January 1, 2007,³ Bulgaria and Romania officially joined the European Union, marking the bloc’s fifth enlargement wave and its most ambitious integration of post-communist states to date.

The accession of Bulgaria and Romania brought in two nations with a combined population of over 28 million, rich histories, and strategic Black Sea positions, but also economies scarred by decades of authoritarian rule and transition shocks, as well as lingering corruption. At the time, skeptics warned of dilution: could absorbing these “laggards” weaken the EU’s economic cohesion, strain its budget, and expose vulnerabilities in governance? Nearly two decades later, the evidence points to the opposite. Accession catalyzed robust growth in both countries, enhanced the EU’s geopolitical footprint, and demonstrated enlargement’s transformative power. Yet, challenges like persistent corruption and the impact of a brain drain remind us that integration is no panacea for fundamental challenges and structural problems.

Emerging from Soviet-era command economies, Bulgaria and Romania grappled with hyperinflation, privatization chaos, and output collapses in the 1990s. Bulgaria’s 1996–1997 banking crisis led to a 14.1% GDP contraction and an average annual decline of 2.9% between 1991 and 1999.⁴ Romania’s 1990s reforms, hindered by political instability, resulted in a 4.8% GDP contraction in 1997 and an average annual decline of 1.5% over the same period.⁵ Nominal GDP also hovered low: Bulgaria’s stood at \$20.6 billion in 1990 and \$13.2 billion in 2000, while Romania’s was \$38.2 billion in 1990 and \$37.2 billion in 2000 (Figure 1).

³ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_06_1900

⁴ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=BG>

⁵ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=RO>

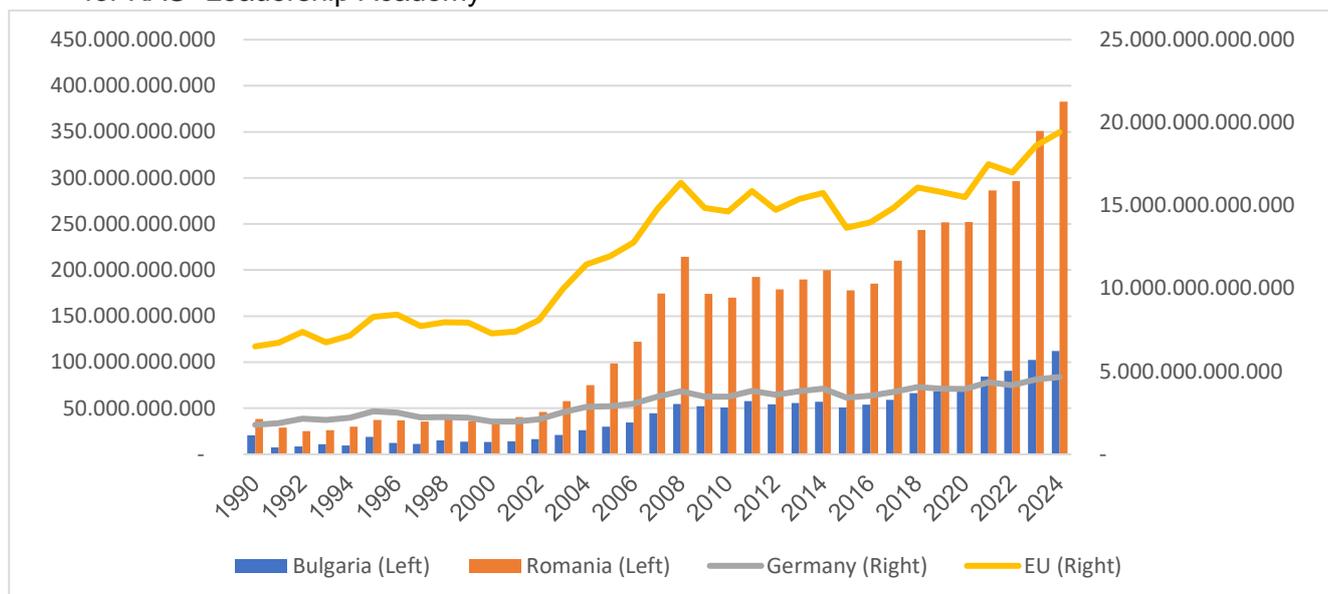


Figure 1. Bulgaria, Romania, Germany and EU⁶ Nominal GDP in USD, 1990–2024⁷

As per Table 1. Bulgaria and Romania's lines starting low and flat in the 1990s, then steepening post-2007—Bulgaria's from ~\$44B to over \$112B, Romania's from ~\$174B tripling to ~\$383B—while Germany's curve rises steadily to \$4.6T and the EU's to \$19.4T. The duo's addition nudges the EU line upward by ~2–3% annually post-accession, evidence of net strengthening.

Table 1. Bulgaria, Romania, Germany and EU⁸ Nominal GDP in USD, 1990–2024⁹

Date	Bulgaria Nominal GDP in USD	Romania Nominal GDP in USD	Germany Nominal GDP in USD	EU Nominal GDP in USD
1990	20,632,090,909	38,247,882,300	1,778,162,195,860	6,505,698,343,166
1995	18,991,484,420	37,430,162,103	2,593,053,091,306	8,298,355,169,645
2000	13,245,990,274	37,253,739,511	1,966,980,701,145	7,288,482,686,163
2005	29,868,657,858	98,454,380,120	2,893,393,187,362	11,954,351,248,970
2006	34,380,536,496	122,023,735,993	3,046,308,753,671	12,768,365,760,447
2007	44,431,257,129	174,588,782,939	3,484,056,680,855	14,789,481,701,232
2010	50,689,051,382	170,064,350,672	3,468,154,343,000	14,643,095,807,339
2015	50,765,918,159	177,885,131,240	3,423,568,450,957	13,655,113,751,883

⁶ <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/data/NYGDPMKTPCDEUU>

⁷ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2024&start=1960>

⁸ <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/data/NYGDPMKTPCDEUU>

⁹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2024&start=1960>

2020	70,550,652,467	252,033,792,712	3,940,142,541,354	15,505,708,717,749
2021	84,414,122,840	286,578,196,368	4,348,297,440,388	17,498,522,970,845
2022	90,509,236,929	296,354,358,293	4,163,596,357,879	16,996,087,955,140
2023	102,396,840,296	350,775,856,415	4,525,703,903,628	18,602,672,971,722
2024	112,211,952,704	382,767,571,329	4,659,929,336,891	19,423,319,451,330

The early 1990s were a period of economic upheaval for Bulgaria and Romania as they dismantled socialist structures. Hyperinflation, rapid privatization, and the collapse of traditional industries led to sharp GDP declines and rising unemployment. For instance, Bulgaria's GDP per capita plummeted from \$2,367 in 1990 to a low of \$1,148 in 1994, reflecting banking crises and structural adjustments. Romania fared slightly better with more stable but still minimal growth, starting at \$1,648 and hovering around \$1,600 by 1999 (Figure 2).

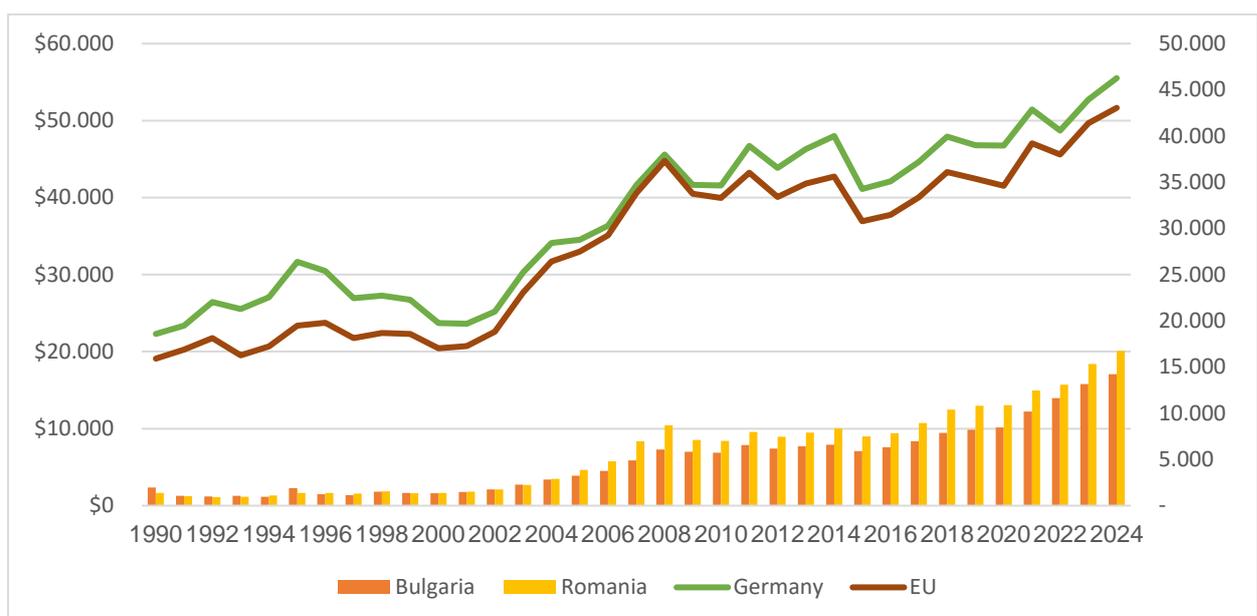


Figure 2. Bulgaria, Romania, Germany and EU¹⁰ GDP Per Capita in USD, 1990–2024¹¹

In contrast, Germany—fresh from reunification in 1990—and the EU average experienced modest growth amid global recovery. Germany's GDP per capita rose from

¹⁰ <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/profile/EU>

¹¹ <https://statisticstimes.com/economy/country-statistics.php>

\$22,304 to \$23,695, while the EU's increased from \$15,913 to \$17,024. This disparity underscores the "transition costs" for Eastern Europe: Bulgaria and Romania's GDP as a percentage of the EU average fell from about 15% and 10% to 9.5% and 9.8%, respectively, indicating divergence rather than convergence (Figure 2).

Unemployment data (starting 1991) paints a similar picture of labor market strain. Bulgaria's rate averaged 13.5%, peaking at 16.4% in 1993 due to factory closures, with positive annual changes (+0.5% on average) signaling worsening conditions. Romania's lower average of 7.2% showed less volatility, with slight declines (-0.1% annual delta), possibly due to slower reforms preserving some jobs. Overall, this era was characterized by economic contraction, high uncertainty, and little progress toward meeting EU levels (Figure 3).

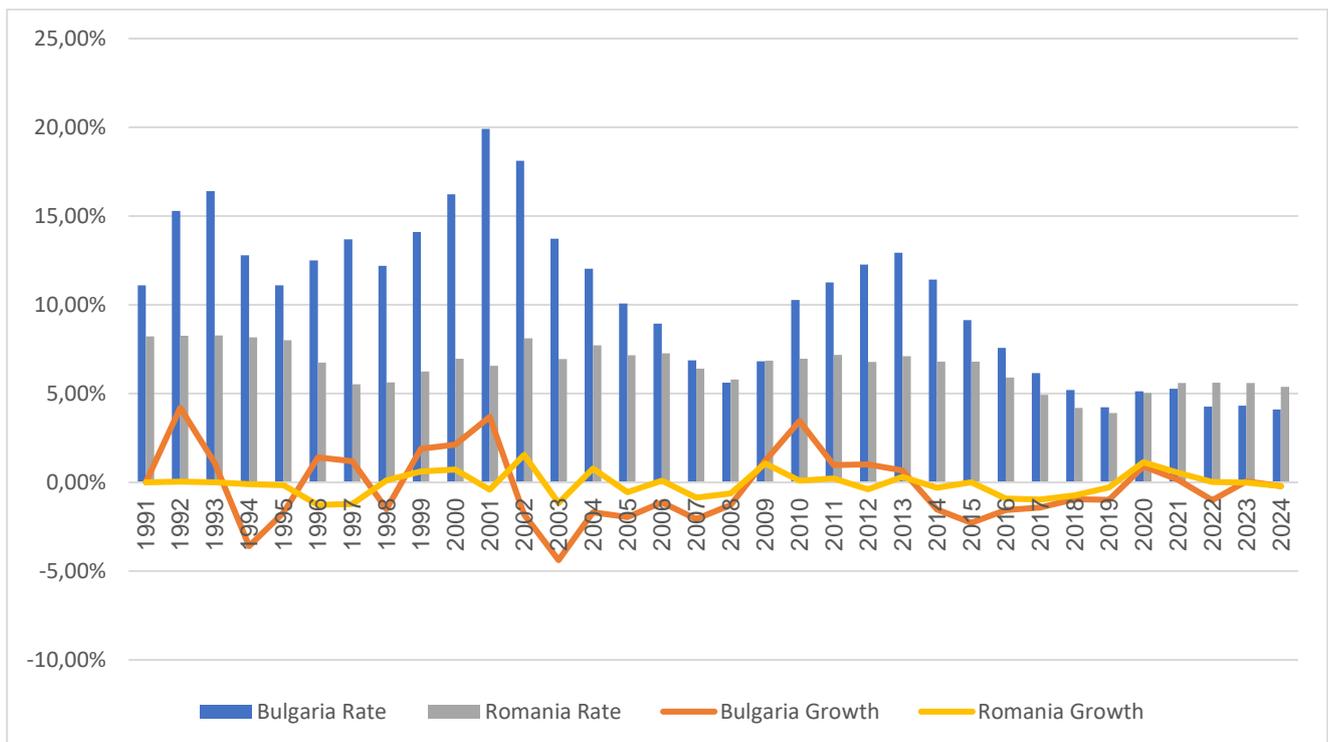


Figure 3. Bulgaria¹² and Romania¹³ Unemployment Rate and Growth, 1991–2024¹⁴

¹² <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/profile/EU>

¹³ <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/rou/romania/unemployment-rate>

¹⁴ <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/bgr/bulgaria/unemployment-rate>

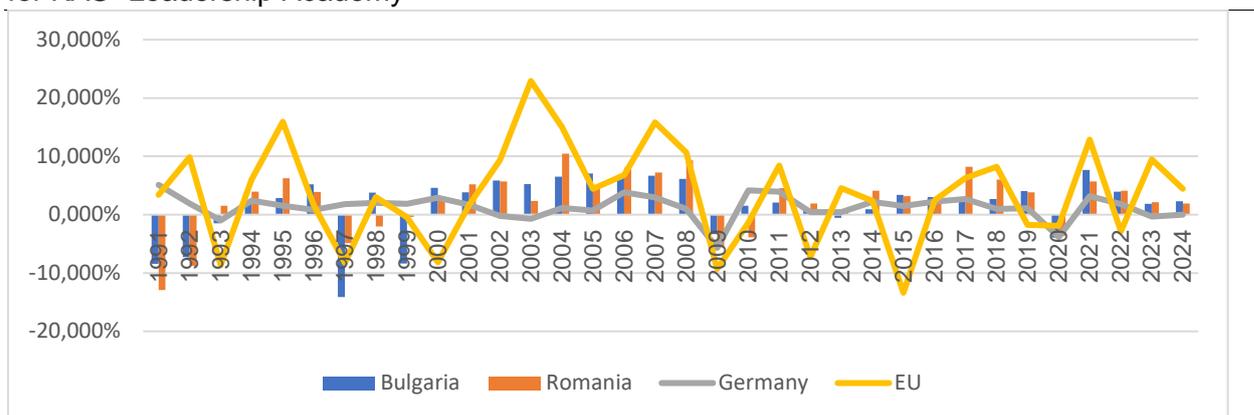


Figure 4. Bulgaria, Romania, Germany and EU¹⁵ Annual Economic Growth Rates (%), 1990–2024¹⁶

As EU accession negotiations intensified, both countries implemented structural reforms, attracting foreign investment and boosting exports. This "anticipation effect" spurred rapid GDP growth: Bulgaria's rose from \$1,621 in 2000 to \$4,523 in 2006 (CAGR 18.7%), while Romania's surged from \$1,660 to \$5,758 (CAGR 23.0%). Factors like EU pre-accession funds, legal harmonization, and improved business environments drove this boom (Figure 2 and Figure 4).

Germany and the EU also grew, but at slower rates (CAGR 7.4% and 9.5%), benefiting from global expansion. Convergence accelerated: Bulgaria's share of EU GDP per capita climbed to 15.4%, Romania's to 19.7% (Figure 2). However, unemployment remained elevated, with Bulgaria averaging 14.2% and showing high volatility (e.g., 19.9% in 2001 amid lingering transition issues), though trending downward (-0.7% annual change) as growth created jobs. Romania's stable 7.3% rate saw minor increases (+0.1%), reflecting a more balanced labor market (Figure 3 and Figure 4). This period demonstrated the power of EU-oriented reforms in reversing earlier declines, setting the stage for membership.

EU membership unlocked single market access, structural funds, and labor mobility, fostering sustained convergence despite setbacks like the 2008 crisis and 2020 pandemic. Bulgaria's GDP per capita grew from \$5,889 to \$17,069 (CAGR 6.5%), Romania's from \$8,360 to \$20,089 (CAGR 5.3%), outpacing Germany's 1.7% and EU's

¹⁵ <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/profile/EU>

¹⁶ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=EU>

1.4%. By 2024, Bulgaria reached 39.6% of EU average, Romania 46.7%—a testament to EU integration's role in narrowing gaps (Figure 2).

Unemployment declined markedly: Bulgaria averaged 7.4% with a downward trend (-0.3% annual change), Romania 5.9% (-0.1%). Volatility persisted, with spikes during crises (e.g., Bulgaria's rate rose to 12.9% in 2013), but overall stability improved, aided by EU-funded programs and emigration reducing domestic pressure (Figure 3).

The 2008 recession caused GDP dips (Bulgaria -3.8% in 2009), but recoveries were swift. COVID-19 led to 2020 increases in unemployment (Bulgaria to 5.1%, Romania 5.0%), yet post-pandemic rebounds were strong, with 2021 GDP jumps (Bulgaria +20%) (Figure 2). Bulgaria and Romania's paths illustrate the transformative impact of EU integration. From 1990s struggles to post-2007 convergence, the graphs reveal resilience and progress, though full parity with Germany or EU averages remains distant. Continued reforms, investment in human capital, and leveraging EU funds will be key to sustaining these gains. Romania has often shown greater stability and faster convergence, offering lessons for Bulgaria in labor market policies.

Table 2. Romania and Bulgaria Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines (% of population)¹⁷

Year	Romania	Bulgaria
2006	24.6	Data not available
2007	23.6	
2008	22.1	
2009	21.6	
2010	22.3	
2011	22.9	
2012	23	
2013	25.1	
2014	25.4	
2015	25.3	
2016	23.6	23.4

¹⁷ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC>

2017	23.5	22
2018	23.8	22.6
2019	23.4	23.8
2020	22.5	22.1
2021	21.2	22.9
2022	21.1	20.6

Poverty headcount ratios at national poverty lines (% of population) for Bulgaria and Romania from 2006 to 2022, sourced from World Bank national survey data, reveal significant pre- and post-EU accession trends. In 2006, Romania’s poverty rate was 24.6%, reflecting post-communist challenges like rural disparities and Roma marginalization (~70% poverty). Bulgaria’s pre-2015 data is absent, but estimates suggest rates above 20%, driven by privatization delays and austerity, far exceeding the EU average (~15–18%). Post-2007 accession, Romania’s rate fell from 23.6% to 21.1% by 2022 (mean: 22.9%, SD: 1.3%), with peaks during the 2008–2009 crisis (25.4% in 2014). Bulgaria’s rate, recorded from 2015, dropped from 22.9% to 20.6% (mean: 22.3%, SD: 0.9%). EU funds, social transfers, and labor mobility drove declines, with poverty inversely correlated with GDP growth ($r \approx -0.42$ Romania, -0.38 Bulgaria). Bulgaria’s pre-2015 data gaps stem from irregular surveys and delayed EU-SILC alignment, not inaccuracies. Provisional 2023 estimates show Romania at ~20.5% and Bulgaria at ~19.8%, with 2025 projections stabilizing at 19–20%. Enhanced survey standardization and targeted policies for vulnerable groups are critical for sustained convergence with EU socioeconomic norms (Table 2)

EU conditionality via the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM, 2007–2023) drove reforms, lifting both nations' Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) scores. Bulgaria's rose from 3.5/10 in 2000¹⁸ to 4.3/10 in 2007¹⁹ and 46/100²⁰ by 2024; Romania's from 2.9/10²¹, to 3.7/10²² then 43/100²³. Prosecutions increased in Romania post-2012²⁴, per

¹⁸ <https://www.transparency.org/en/press/transparency-international-releases-the-year-2000-corruption-perceptions-in>

¹⁹ https://files.transparencycdn.org/images/2007_CPI_SourcesByCountry.pdf

²⁰ <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024>

²¹ <https://www.transparency.org/en/press/transparency-international-releases-the-year-2000-corruption-perceptions-in>

²² https://files.transparencycdn.org/images/2007_CPI_SourcesByCountry.pdf

²³ <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024>

²⁴ https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/52_1_52630_coun_chap_romania_en.pdf

EU reports. Yet, scores lag the EU average (62 in 2023)²⁵ and Germany's 75,²⁶ with oligarch influence and judicial delays persisting—negatives that strained EU trust and delayed Schengen entry until 2024.²⁷

As NATO members since 2004, Bulgaria and Romania anchor the Black Sea strategy against Russian aggression. Post-2022 Ukraine invasion, NATO deployed battlegroups in both (e.g., U.S. F-16s in Romania), enhancing deterrence. Their EU roles amplify hybrid threat monitoring (e.g., disinformation) and energy diversification (e.g., Romania's Neptun gas field). This fortifies the EU's southeastern buffer, countering China's Belt and Road inroads.²⁸

Intra-EU trade share for Bulgaria's exports rose from 55% in 2000 to 64% in 2023 (Germany as top partner at 13.6%)²⁹; Romania's from 60% to 70%³⁰, with EU imports fueling 75%³¹ of its machinery sector. Total bilateral trade with the EU hit €100 billion annually by 2023, up 300% from 2006, integrating them into value chains and reducing reliance on Russia (energy imports down 90% post-2022). However, overdependence exposes them to EU slowdowns, as in 2009.³²

Other aspects include labor mobility (3 million Romanians/Bulgarians in EU, remitting €10B yearly) and Romania is set to receive €2.14 billion and Bulgaria €1.2 billion from the EU's Just Transition Fund, totaling over €3.3 billion for green transitions in coal-dependent regions,³³ but negatives like skilled emigration (brain drain of 20% of youth) erode domestic innovation.³⁴

²⁵ <https://www.transparency.org/en/press/2023-corruption-perceptions-index-weak-checks-balances-undermining-anti-corruption-efforts-in-western-europe-eu>

²⁶ <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024>

²⁷ <https://emerging-europe.com/analysis/bulgaria-and-romania-are-finally-rid-of-the-cvm-but-schengen-membership-remains-elusive>

²⁸ <https://www.gmfus.org/news/eus-new-black-sea-security-strategy-right-goals-unclear-means>

²⁹ <https://tradingeconomics.com/bulgaria/intra-eu-trade-share-of-exports-by-member-state-eurostat-data.html>

³⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Intra-EU_trade_in_goods_-_main_features

³¹ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Intra-EU_trade_in_goods_-_main_features

³² https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Intra-EU_trade_in_goods_-_main_features

³³ <https://www.crossbordertalks.eu/2025/03/30/just-transition-mission-impossible-bulgaria-romania>

³⁴ <https://blog.balkaninvest.eu/labor-migration-in-the-eu-bulgaria-between-brain-drain-and-brain-gain>

Conclusion: A Stronger EU, with Room for More

The accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 has demonstrably strengthened the European Union, despite initial skepticism. Economically, both nations transitioned from post-communist struggles to robust growth, with Romania’s GDP tripling to \$383 billion and Bulgaria’s rising to \$112 billion by 2024. Their convergence toward EU averages—Romania at 46.7% and Bulgaria at 39.6% of EU GDP per capita—reflects the transformative power of single market access and EU funds. Politically, EU-driven reforms via the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism improved governance, with Corruption Perceptions Index scores rising, though challenges like judicial delays persist.

Geopolitically, their Black Sea positions have bolstered NATO and EU resilience against Russian aggression and Chinese influence, enhancing energy security and hybrid threat monitoring. Trade integration, with intra-EU exports reaching 64% for Bulgaria and 70% for Romania, underscores their role in strengthening EU value chains. Despite issues like brain drain and economic vulnerabilities, their inclusion has fortified the EU’s cohesion and strategic depth.

The case for continued EU expansion into the Balkans and Caucasus, particularly Armenia and Georgia, is compelling. These regions offer strategic buffers against geopolitical rivals and access to critical energy routes. Armenia and Georgia, with their pro-EU aspirations and ongoing democratic reforms, mirror the transformative potential seen in Bulgaria and Romania. Their inclusion could enhance EU influence in the Caucasus, counterbalancing Russian and Chinese ambitions. However, lessons from past enlargements highlight the need for robust pre-accession reforms, anti-corruption measures, and economic support to mitigate risks like governance gaps. By embracing further enlargement, the EU can solidify its global influence and foster stability, leveraging the proven benefits of integration.



Note

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TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP PROGRAM FOR “LEADERSHIP ACADEMY” ALUMNI

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES OF ARMENIA-EU RELATIONS

Lilit Sofyan

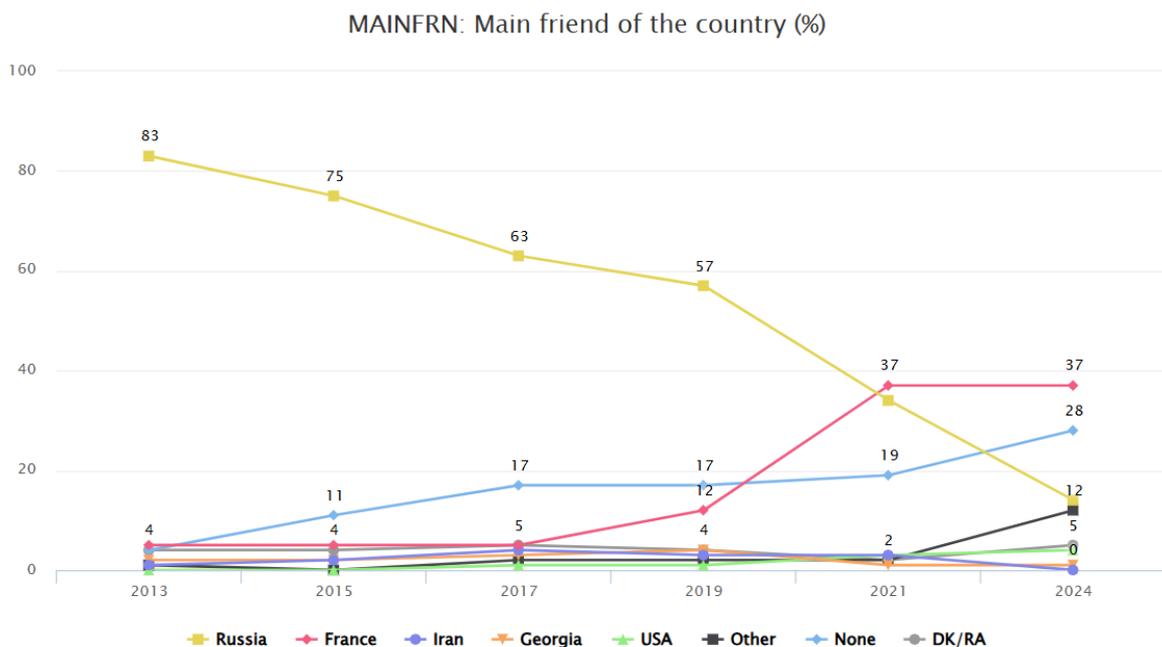
Abstract

This paper examines how young Armenians perceive their country’s deepening relationship with the European Union (EU). Drawing upon desk research, survey data, and qualitative insights, it explores both the opportunities and challenges shaping youth attitudes toward EU–Armenia cooperation. Recent findings reveal that Armenian youth generally appreciate the EU’s contribution to education, governance, and mobility, yet remain divided due to geopolitical concerns, political polarization, and limited or ineffective communication about tangible EU impacts. Placing these perceptions within broader frameworks of Europeanization and soft power, the study argues that youth engagement and inclusive communication are essential for advancing Armenia’s European trajectory.

Introduction

Since Armenia’s independence in 1991, relations with the European Union (EU) have evolved from initial technical cooperation to a more complex political and economic partnership. The 2017 Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) marked a significant turning point, establishing a framework for reforms in governance, economy, justice, and the social development of Armenia. Despite the setback of Armenia’s sacrifice of its Association Agreement in 2013, the CEPA reaffirmed Armenia’s intention to pursue Western-style modernization and closer ties with the EU while maintaining its multi-vector geopolitical partnership.

Over the past three years, Armenia’s geopolitical interests have undergone a notable transformation. Once widely perceived as the country’s “strategic ally,” Russia’s role as a security provider and partner has been increasingly challenged following its lack of support during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and in response to Azerbaijan’s military attacks on Armenia’s sovereign territory in 2022. This shift has resulted in Armenia’s growing aspiration to move closer to the EU both politically and economically despite being significantly dependent on Russia and Russia-led alliances in terms of security and economy. Moreover, the deployment of the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) in 2023, aimed at monitoring and providing stability along the vulnerable border areas between Armenia and Azerbaijan, symbolized a new phase of trust and security cooperation between Yerevan and Brussels. However, the path toward this goal remains complex and, at times, contentious.



Source: Caucasus Barometer

The EU remains Armenia’s largest donor, investing over €65 million annually in sectors such as education, innovation, and good governance. Youth development policy, a longstanding EU priority, occupies a central role in this relationship. Across the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region, the EU has committed €340 million in support for youth development, employability, and participation.¹ For many young Armenians, programs

¹ Annual Survey 2024 – Armenia. Perception of the European Union, EU regional Communication Programme for the Eastern Neighbourhood (EU NEIGHBOURS East), 1 November 2024. <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/annual-survey-2024-armenia/>

such as Erasmus+, EU4Youth, and the European Solidarity Corps have been transformative — providing access to quality education, civic engagement, and intercultural mobility.

While the Armenian government pursues a strategic policy “to be as close to the European Union as the EU considers possible,” public opinion — particularly among young people — remains divided. According to recent surveys, despite the visible benefits of EU cooperation, Armenian youth demonstrate neither unequivocal support nor outright opposition to EU integration. This ambivalence reflects a combination of political disillusionment, information asymmetry, and geopolitical uncertainty.

Numerous studies have addressed public attitudes toward the EU in Armenia, while youth-specific perspectives remain underexplored, however. Given that nearly 30 percent of Armenia’s population is under the age of 35,² this study therefore seeks to understand how young Armenians perceive their country’s deepening engagement with the EU. Thus, the main research questions include:

- What are Armenian young people’s perceptions of the opportunities and challenges arising from the country’s partnership with the EU?
- Which factors — such as exposure to EU programs, media consumption, political views, or geographical background — influence these attitudes?

Desk research was conducted, bolstered by the use of public opinion data from other sources, including the Caucasus Barometer survey (2024), the International Republican Institute (IRI survey, 2025), and EU communication reports. These documents and reports were analyzed to contextualize youth sentiment within broader national trends and find answers to these questions.

What do the youth think in Armenia?

As Armenia reassesses its foreign policy priorities following regional crises starting with the 2020 war, understanding how young people interpret these dynamics becomes crucial to evaluate the sustainability of EU–Armenia relations. Survey data reveal that

² Armenian State Statistical Committee Report, 2025. <https://armstat.am/en/?nid=157>

Armenian youth, in particular, are not uniformly pro-European, in contrast to other Eastern Partner countries such as Georgia or Moldova. While many Armenians associate the EU with democracy, the rule of law, developed infrastructure, and modern technologies, others express a degree of Euroscepticism or disengagement regarding the EU’s role and influence in the region. For example, the IRI survey 2025 shows that 73 percent of the overall Armenian population evaluates the current state of relations between Armenia and EU as “good,” while only 14 percent of youth aged 18-35 identify themselves as “only pro-European,” as the share of those who are pro-Western, but also reflects their opinion of maintaining relations with Russia, which is comparably larger, at 32 percent.³

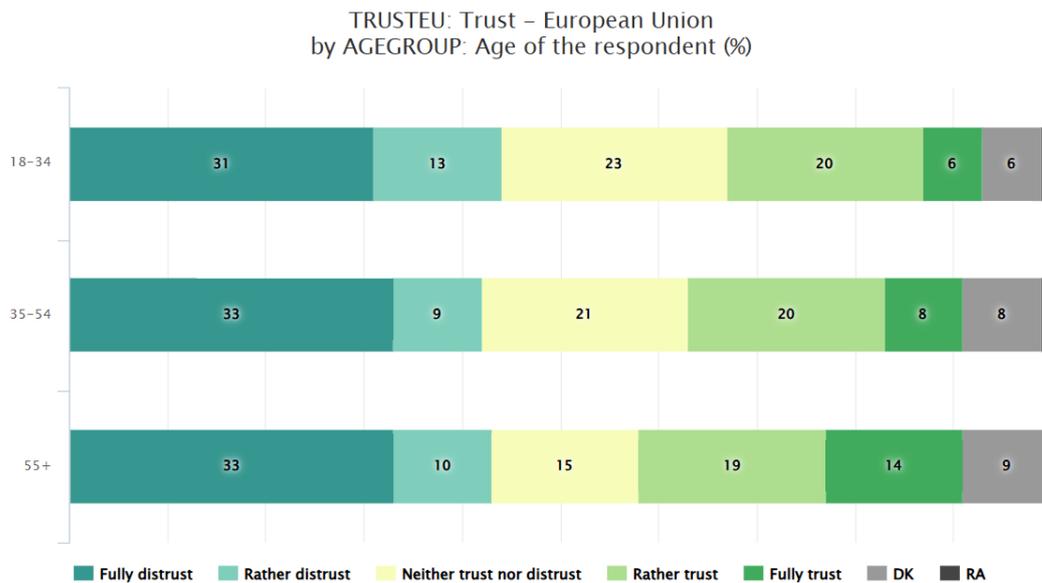
According to the Caucasus Barometer survey, conducted from July to October of 2024, only 30 percent of respondents reported trust in the European Union, while 42 percent did not, with no significant difference observed between younger and older demographic groups.⁴ Interestingly, as sociologist Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan noticed, there is no classic urban-rural divide, as in many other post-communist states, where young urban populations and students are usually pro-European, while the youth in the countryside is more conservative and traditionalist.⁵ As they say “it is the educated, urban youth in Yerevan who are very critical of EU accession.” In other words, the urban youth in Armenia may be more aware and informed of geopolitical issues, having access to various sources of information, but on the other hand, youth in Yerevan do not necessarily support the political course of the Pashinyan government overall, which also results in distrust towards his political stance to deepen partnership with EU.

Speaking of distrust, one of the main reasons is the notable geopolitical insecurity following the 2023 displacement of ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh and general disappointment from international actors for their late response or ignorance.

³ “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia June 2025.” International Republican Institute (IRI), 21 July 2025. <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-armenia-june-2025/>

⁴ Caucasus Barometer survey, 2024. <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/>

⁵ According to sociologist Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan, “Armenia on the Way to Europe?” ZOiS Caucasus Network, 6 May 2025. <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/events/armenia-on-the-way-to-europe>



While the trust in the EU is lower, at the same time, public opinion on potential EU membership also remains divided but relatively positive: approximately 44 percent of Armenians support the country’s future EU accession, whereas around 27 percent oppose it. Even though there is no significant divide within age groups, it is important to highlight that 24 percent of 18-35 aged young people are opposed to the EU membership, while 44 percent is in favor, in 2024. The numbers show that the young population is currently interested in deepening cooperation with the EU but there are several internal and external factors that restrains Armenia despite decisions and statement of the Armenian government, including the recent EU accession legislation adopted by the Armenian parliament.

Perceived Opportunities and challenges

Speaking of the perceived benefits of Armenia’s potential accession to the European Union, it is obvious that EU membership may strengthen democratic governance, and as an opportunity to consolidate transparency, accountability, and the rule of law within Armenia’s political system. However, only 5 percent valued strengthening democracy as a benefit of joining EU.

Respondents in the recent IRI survey also frequently highlighted aspects related to security, stability, and economic development. Primarily, according to 37 percent of respondents, closer integration with the EU is viewed as a pathway to strengthening Armenia’s national security and ensuring political and regional stability — a particular

concern in the aftermath of recent tension. In contrary, others pointed to the possibility of heightened security challenges, noting that alignment with the EU might provoke geopolitical tension in the region, particularly with Russia, which has a major presence and influence in various sectors in Armenia including the economy and trade, energy, infrastructure, the security services and intelligence, and defense.

Secondly, economic progress and the country’s overall development were also among the most commonly cited advantages, reflecting public expectations that EU membership could foster trade and investments, modernization, and job creation. However, the opposite side thinks that the EU integration may have a negative impact on domestic industries and employment, arguing that Armenia’s economy might struggle to compete within the EU’s regulatory and market framework. Additionally, respondents emphasized the importance of visa liberalization associated with enhanced educational and professional mobility for Armenian youth, but noted, however, that it can also bring migration challenges to Armenia as many skilled young people may seek long-term job opportunities in the Member states which will result in a brain drain and lack of professionals in job market.

Most surprisingly, a significant share (28 percent) of those who are against EU membership expressed concern over the erosion of traditional family values and cultural identity, fearing that closer integration with Europe could lead to cultural homogenization and weaken Armenian social norms. However, it should be highlighted that this concern is not necessarily mentioned by young people only. Thus, this combination of optimism and caution illustrates a complex and multidimensional public attitude: while many young people see the EU as a symbol of progress and reform, others remain wary of the implications for national security, and geopolitical and regional stability.

Factors shaping youth attitudes

How are these perspectives arising? Based on observation, public attitudes toward the EU in Armenia are shaped not only by socioeconomic considerations but also by the country’s complex geopolitical realities and recent unprecedented developments. As mentioned earlier, one of the most influential factors has been the inadequate international response to the 2023 mass expulsion of ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, which profoundly affected public trust in global and regional actors, including

the EU. At the same time, the establishment of the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) in early 2023 raised high expectations among many citizens, who saw it as a tangible sign of the EU’s growing presence and commitment to regional stability. However, the 2023 humanitarian and security crisis around the Nagorno-Karabakh issue fostered a sense of disappointment and disillusionment toward the EU that was perceived as passive or ineffective in preventing the tragedy. And the mission’s limited mandate and perceived lack of deterrent power have also tempered enthusiasm, reinforcing the perception that the EU’s role, while symbolically important, remains largely political rather than strategic.

Another critical factor influencing public opinion is the domestic criticism and overall political context in the country. The public polarization surrounding the Pashinyan government’s pro-European course has deepened divisions in society, with part of the population supporting reforms aligned with EU standards, while others remain skeptical. Pro-Russian sentiments, reinforced by Armenia’s long-standing economic and security dependence on Moscow, continue to shape attitudes toward external partners. Moreover, anti-European narratives disseminated through media influenced by external powers have also contributed to misperceptions about the EU’s intentions, values and priorities. There is also a significant information gap within society, and especially among youth in the regions of Armenia, regarding the ongoing support and tangible contributions of the EU. Furthermore, Armenians have limited knowledge of the EU and poor understanding of the main benefits that EU integration and membership would bring to Armenia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the EU-funded programs that promote mobility and civic participation demonstrate the EU’s ability to project soft power; however, without visible security guarantees, this influence may remain fragile. That also explains why, comparatively, Armenian youth appear more cautious than their counterparts in Georgia or Moldova, where EU membership enjoys overwhelming support. This pragmatism reflects both Armenia’s security dilemmas and limited capabilities to align with EU priorities. Together, these factors create a complex public landscape where trust in the EU is mediated by both domestic political discourse and the broader geopolitical context, leaving Armenian

society cautiously navigating between aspirations for European integration and the constraints of its regional realities.

Finally, the sustainability of EU–Armenia relations will depend not only on intergovernmental negotiations but on how effectively young Armenians perceive the EU as a partner in building a democratic, prosperous, and secure future. Integrating youth perspectives into policy dialogue is therefore essential for transforming ambivalence into a continuous and mutually beneficial partnership.



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