

Armenia in focus

Navigating the Eastern Partnership, Regional Security and European Integration

On 12 November 2024, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) organised the event “Armenia in Focus: Navigating the Eastern Partnership, Regional Security, and European Integration” which took place at the EaP CSF premises in Brussels under the series of events “30 in 2030?” of the Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung European Office.

This event represented an opportunity for Armenian civil society representatives, the Armenian government, EU stakeholders and think tanks to discuss current challenges and opportunities for Armenia’s EU integration. The discussion, moderated by the Secretariat of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, was articulated in two panels.

The panel **‘Armenia’s European Horizon: Pathways to European Integration’** examined the role of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) framework in shaping Armenia’s foreign policy alignment towards the EU and in enhancing EU-Armenia economic, social and political ties. Participants also discussed how Armenia navigates the balance between deeper EU integration and its relationships with other regional powers, such as Iran, Turkey and Russia.

H.E. Tigran Balayan, Ambassador of the Republic of Armenia to the Kingdom of Belgium, Head of Mission of Armenia to the European Union, emphasised that 2024 marked significant achievements in EU-Armenia relations, notably, the launch of the EU-Armenia Partnership Agenda, which established ambitious joint EU-Armenia priorities for cooperation across all dimensions. Other milestones in the EU-Armenia relations include the EU announcement of the Resilience and Growth Plan for Armenia, the visa liberalisation dialogue and the support to Armenia from the European Peace Facility. Last year’s ratification of the Rome Statute, which entered into force in February 2024, reflects Armenia’s commitment to international legal standards.

Ambassador Balayan highlighted the critical role played by the EU in Armenia's security through the deployment of the EU's civilian mission along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, which reduced border incidents by 95%. Therefore, he emphasised the importance of extending the mission's mandate to continue contributing to stability in the South Caucasus region.

Ambassador Balayan stressed the challenges in the peace agreement negotiations with Azerbaijan, mentioning delays and threats to the finalisation of the agreement, and highlighted the need to promote Armenia's independence and democracy. In this regard, civil society has a key role to play vis-a-vis the Armenian authorities to shape the country's priorities.

Concerning regional cooperation, the Ambassador mentioned Armenia's Crossroads of Peace project, which sees Armenia as a hub of transportation and communication with its neighbours and international partners and expressed the country's ambition to include the project in the Global Gateway Initiative.

The Ambassador recalled significant steps to reduce the country's dependencies on Russia, including the entering of Western companies, notably Shell, into the Armenian market and investments in renewables and nuclear power plants.

Dorota Dlouchy-Suliga, Head of Division, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, European External Action Service, highlighted Armenia's need to implement challenging reforms in the framework of the new EU-Armenia Partnership Agenda which require the coordinated work between the Armenian government and civil society on the one hand, and between Armenia and the European Union on the other hand.

Strengthening regional cooperation remains a priority for Armenia. In this regard, Iran continues to be one of Armenia's biggest partners, while the opening of the Armenia-Turkey border would be an important step towards the normalisation of the relations between the two countries.

Dlouchy-Suliga emphasised the importance of strengthening Armenia's connectivity, in particular with Georgia, which serves as a gateway to the Black Sea, and of diversifying its economy as the country remains heavily dependent on Russian energy. Considering Armenia's geographical limitations, Dlouchy-Suliga further stressed that a more effective cooperation between the EU and Armenia should pass through intensified EU relations with Georgia.

Lousineh Hakobyan, Co-Chair of the EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform, EaP CSF delegate, outlined the role of the EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform in raising public awareness about the benefits of stronger EU-Armenia relations and in monitoring the implementation of the European Union-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Hakobyan expressed dissatisfaction with the state of CEPA implementation and urged Armenian authorities to establish an interagency commission to oversee the implementation of the partnership agreement. The government's current strategy is not efficient enough to bring concrete results.

In the framework of CEPA implementation, Hakobyan added that the Armenian government should take more into consideration civil society's policy recommendations and advisory opinions on democratic reforms, particularly on anti-corruption, human rights, the rule of law and energy diversification. Moreover, she expressed civil society's wish for a clearer formulation of the government's European ambitions. If, on the one hand, Armenian Prime Minister expressed his wish for Armenia's EU Membership in 2024, on the other hand, there is still no unanimous opinion within the Armenian ruling party.

Hakobyan further stressed the importance of the strategic role played by the EU monitoring mission in Armenia: it contributes to human security in conflict-affected areas and fosters confidence building between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Pavel Havlicek, Research Fellow, Association for International Affairs (AMO), stressed that the weakening of Russian military presence in Armenia is due to the mobilisation of their military resources to continue the war of aggression and full-scale invasion of Ukraine. He further added that Armenia remains exposed to instability in the South with Iran supporting Russia and the increasingly instable Middle East region.

Havlicek stated that the failure of Russian peacekeeping forces in Nagorno-Karabakh generated disappointment in Armenia and shed light on the 'null and void' partnership with Russia, especially within the CSTO dimension. Havlicek remarked that Armenia is going in the right direction as its national interest increasingly coincides with the EU, yet the path is long and challenging and requires a joint work from both EU and Armenian sides.

Furthermore, Armenia's interconnection with the EU has some objective limits reflected in the geography of the country, the infrastructure and the closed border with Turkey. Therefore, he called on increasing connectivity between EU and Armenia, people-to-people dialogue, energy diversification, green initiatives and security cooperation. In this regard, a revised Eastern Partnership could serve as a pivotal tool to deliver tangible benefits to the Armenian people and for the entire region.

The panel '**Enhancing Human Security and Building Resilient Societies in Armenia**' highlighted the importance of a broader aspect of security and the role of civil society in bolstering socio-economic resilience and improving human security in Armenia. The EU's engagement with Armenia has been targeted towards building the resilience of its societies, both through EU's bilateral engagement with the country and through the Eastern Partnership initiative. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan and its aftermath have required Armenia to develop expertise in different areas, such as managing displaced populations, ensuring basic human rights, and maintaining civil stability. Civil society has been working actively in this sphere, for example providing shelter, food security, and psychological support to the over 120.000 forcibly displaced Armenians.

David Cullen, Deputy Director, Head of Unit, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus & Eastern Partnership Coordination (NEAR.C.2), DG NEAR, European Commission, highlighted that the recent launch of a Resilience and Growth Plan goes in the direction to strengthen ties between the EU and Armenia, with a 270 million package that represents a 50% increase in the EU annual allocation to Armenia.

Armenia has progressed in several reform areas, such as education, justice, good governance, anti-corruption, strengthening democratic institutions. He added that trade diversification from Russia is a process that requires the support from the population as it has a strong impact in the short term.

Armenia's role as a key partner in the Eastern Partnership remains vital. Strengthening security in the framework of EU-Armenia relations is a step towards a more resilient Eastern Partnership region and part of EU's efforts to strengthen the security aspect within the EaP policy. However, since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Eastern Partnership is a framework in transition that requires the EU and EaP countries to adapt to the current political turmoil and geopolitical complexity. Cullen highlighted that the situation in Ukraine and the pre-accession process of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine will affect the future of the Eastern Partnership and further stressed the importance of a broader security perspective in addressing hybrid threats, reinforcing the rule of law and combating foreign interference and disinformation. Civil society in Armenia has an important role in countering the latter; the EU will continue to promote a regular dialogue with Armenian civil society and public institutions.

Anna Skiba, Delegate for Working Party on Eastern Europe and Central Asia (COEST) of the Council of the EU, Permanent Representation of Poland to the European Union, highlighted that the upcoming Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union will support deeper EU-Armenia relations across political, economic and societal dimensions.

Skiba acknowledged Armenia's determination in taking bold steps in the context of new geopolitical dynamics and emphasised Poland's commitment to strengthen Armenia's human security within a broader regional framework. She mentioned that security is an overarching priority for Poland, encompassing both defence and internal security. Skiba highlighted the shared challenges faced by the EaP countries, such as hybrid threats and disinformation, noting that Russia and its proxies continue to act as instigators in the region. In this regard, societal resilience is a fundamental aspect in strengthening the country's security and rule of law. The EaP remains a relevant and valuable tool, particularly for Armenia and its civil society, evolving alongside the EU enlargement process.

Edgar Khachatryan, National Facilitator, Armenian National Platform, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, emphasised the importance of human rights and security sector reforms in Armenia, adding that the country's Soviet structure was unprepared for dialogue with civil society actors and institutional transition. Key wake-up moments between 2018 and 2022 led to the collapse of Armenian society's confidence in Russia. However, despite 58% of Armenian population being in favour

of EU membership, EU-Armenia relations are still vulnerable to Russian influence. Khachatryan stressed that learning from the experiences of other EaP countries, such as Moldova and Ukraine, which share a post-Soviet legacy with Armenia, could provide valuable insights for the country, considering the internal reform process the two countries are implementing following the official opening of EU accession negotiations. In this regard, civil society's mission is to explain Armenian society how the new partnership with the EU can be developed and how civil society can support Armenian government to foster fundamental reforms. He therefore highlighted the critical role of civil society in monitoring government policies, providing recommendations and cooperating with state institutions. In the framework of fundamental reforms, efforts in the vetting of judiciary should be pursued to break away dependence and prevent capture of key institutions from Russian interference.

Simon Papuashvili, Programme Director, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, International Partnership for Human Rights, warned that Azerbaijan's threat of further aggression against Armenia persists and must be addressed by reinforcing its defence capabilities. Moreover, Armenia continues to face security challenges from Russia, which maintains deep political, economic and cultural ties that could undermine the country's European aspirations. In this regard, Papuashvili suggested increasing civil society engagement in countering Russian influence, which is spread via disinformation campaigns.

Finally, he stressed that both EU and Armenia's political will is needed to implement already existing tools and mechanisms to sanction Azerbaijan, such as the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, and lamented that EU efforts in this regard have not been sufficient so far, especially following the 2023 developments in Nagorno Karabakh.

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EASTERN PARTNERSHIP
CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM



Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
Avenue de Cortenbergh 120
1000 Brussels
Belgium

www.eap-csf.eu
info@eap-csf.eu