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GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS



Current dynamics in Armenia-EU relations amid regional reconfiguration: Possible ground for Armenia and Georgia to cooperate in EU rapprochement?

Franziska Smolnik



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2023 13 Aleksandr Pushkin St,
0107 Tbilisi, Georgia
Tel: +995 599 99 02 12
Email: info@gip.ge
For more information, please visit: www.gip.ge

A faint outline map of Europe and the Mediterranean region is visible in the background. The map shows the coastlines of Europe, the Mediterranean Sea, and parts of North Africa and the Middle East. The countries of Armenia and Georgia are highlighted in red and orange respectively.

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About Author

Franziska Smolnik is a senior fellow in the research division Eastern Europe and Eurasia at the Berlin-based German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), where her research is focussed on contemporary political and socio-economic developments in the South Caucasus. Franziska holds a PhD from the University of Bremen and an MA in East European Studies from Freie Universität Berlin. From 2013 to 2015, she was a post-doctoral researcher in the EU-funded project “Intra- and Inter Societal Sources of Instability in the Caucasus and EU Opportunities to Respond”.

Executive Summary

Amid recent regional reconfiguration, the Armenian government has signalled interest in strengthening its country’s relations with the European Union as part of its efforts at foreign policy diversification. With neighbouring Georgia having advanced to EU candidacy in December 2023 and being perceived in Armenia as a gateway to the Euro-Atlantic space, potential ground for the two countries to cooperate in strengthening ties with the EU have come into focus. With the adoption of the controversial law on transparency of foreign influence, however, EU-Georgia relations face an uncertain future, as by extension do prospects of joint Armenia-Georgia efforts with regards to the EU. Potentially, at least, there are a variety of ways in which collaboration, bilateral exchange, and a sharing of experiences might prove beneficial, even though Georgia and Armenia, despite geographic proximity and shared traits, are not partners ‘by default’. But beyond more direct Armenia-Georgia endeavors with regard to the EU, too, there are lessons to be learned from the Georgian example for the current efforts at EU-Armenian rapprochement.

Key words: South Caucasus, Armenia, Georgia, European Union, EU rapprochement

Introduction

In the recent past and continuing to this day, the South Caucasus has been re-shaped by processes of fundamental reconfiguration. The 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh and developments in its wake, most notably Azerbaijan retaking full control of the region in September 2023 and the exodus of Karabakh Armenians, have significantly changed the regional geopolitical landscape (Neset et al. 2023; Kakabadze 2024). Beyond the South Caucasus, but with implications for the region, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has heralded a breakdown of the European security order in place since the breakup of the Soviet Union, with a resultant extensive and largely disruptive geopoliticization as well as securitization (Scott 2022). For many countries in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, this has meant heightened vulnerabilities (German 2024). For the EU's part, the invasion has triggered a substantial rethink, both as regards the Union's relations with Moscow and its policies vis-à-vis the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. As a key element of the latter, the EU has opened up its enlargement track for countries in the Eastern neighbourhood, with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia now enjoying the status of EU candidate countries (Nizhnikau and Moshes 2024). Attempting to adjust to this shifting geopolitical landscape, Yerevan has sought with new impetus to diversify its foreign policy, including strengthening its ties with the European Union. Georgia, in turn, though having received EU candidate status, has recently entered a period of uncertainty in its relations with the EU, arising in particular from the contentious adoption of the law on transparency of foreign influence and controversial implications of Tbilisi's approach to navigating a challenging geopolitical environment (Kakachia et al. 2024). Notwithstanding these uncertainties, with reference to a shared vector, even if not necessarily the same objective of EU rapprochement, potential for Armenia and Georgia to team up has come into view and entered policy discussions.

The present paper intends to explore and assess the scope for common efforts. To this end, it sketches Armenia's and Georgia's positioning in a highly volatile environment and outlines recent dynamics in EU-Armenia relations. Based on this, the paper explores whether and in which regard there is common ground between the two states to collaborate on EU rapprochement. Alongside making use of a variety of primary and secondary data sources, including academic literature, official statements, and a broad range of media sources, this analysis draws in particular on over twenty qualitative interviews and informal conversations conducted with different stakeholders to provide background information. The present analysis is complicated by a variety of factors, ranging from the broader geopolitical context and insecurity linked to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, to intra-regional developments and levels of stability, to the domestic sustainability of pro-European outlooks and policy trajectories in both countries, and open questions as regards the EU's strategic vision for the region. These uncertainties are reflected in the findings: while the paper identifies avenues for sharing experiences and possible ways for Armenia and Georgia to cooperate with regard to EU rapprochement, prospects of harnessing this potential depends not least on political will in both Yerevan and Tbilisi. With Georgia-EU-relations currently being put to the test, the prospects of achieving collaboration seem, at present, unclear. Yet there still may be more general lessons to be gleaned with a view to the development of EU-Armenia ties.

Armenia and Georgia in a shifting regional geopolitics

In the South Caucasus, regional fracture and patterns of alignment for both hedging and band-wagoning have generally arisen from protracted ethno-territorial conflict (Broers 2018; Abushov 2023). Alongside a historically-anchored understanding of Russia's influence in the Caucasus among Armenians (Ter-Matevosyan 2023), this holds true not least for the Russia-Armenia relationship, with Moscow having been attributed in Armenia the role of security provider in view of its conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan (Tatikyan 2024). This perception of Russia has, however, undergone profound change. While a longer emancipatory process (Atenasyan, Reynolds and Mkrtichyan 2023), it was the Armenians' evaluation of Russia's performance in the 2020 war and in subsequent developments in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict that have made these latent processes culminate in a profound reordering of Armenians' perception of and trust in Russia. December 2023 survey results from the International Republican Institute (2024) show that assessment of Armenia's relations with Russia as (somewhat or very) good was shared by only 31% of those surveyed, down from 93% in October 2019. Acute changes in perception of Russia correlate with accelerated shifts in Armenian foreign policy. Yerevan has started a process of curtailing Armenian involvement in Russia-led initiatives, in particular the CSTO, and even a cautious reduction of Russian involvement within Armenia, such as the announcement that Russian border guards are to leave Yerevan international airport and areas bordering Azerbaijan (Ekho Kavkaza 2024). Given heightened distrust in the reliability of Moscow as security patron and in Russia-dominated institutions like the CSTO, Yerevan has moreover reinforced efforts at foreign policy diversification. This includes reaching out to India, China, Middle Eastern states, and strengthening relations with Western countries such as France and the United States. By foregrounding its democratic credentials and trajectory (Nikaghosyan and Ter-Matevosyan 2023), Armenia also aims at forging closer ties with the European Union. This recalibration of foreign policy is embraced by Armenia's populace: in the IRI poll of December 2023, the "shift to multi-vector foreign policy" topped the list when asked about government successes of the past half year. While relations with the European Union are rated as somewhat or very good by a solid 87% of those surveyed, the EU is not without its critics in Armenia. From an Armenian perspective, the Union's performance in the 2020 war and in September 2023 have tarnished its image, with the EU criticized as a mere bystander rather than an actor in conflict resolution (Ghazaryan 2023). The positive ratings of the EU might therefore be viewed in relation to the even more dramatic loss of trust in Russia, with "more questions than answers in relation to Armenia's ongoing and forthcoming foreign policy changes" (Tatikyan 2024, 85).

As far as Georgia is concerned, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and related geopolitical polarization in the wider neighbourhood have had ambivalent implications for the country, accentuating Georgia's geopolitical precariousness, yielding new opportunities with regard to EU integration, and feeding into the country's domestic crisis, including fears of an authoritarian turn. In Ukraine's footsteps, Georgia filed an application for EU membership in March 2022, was granted a European perspective in June that year and ultimately received – even if linked to specific reform requirements – EU candidate country status in December 2023 (Council of the European Union 2024).

Thus, the European Union, in its declared pursuit of strengthened geopolitical actorness, has at least potentially outlined a way for Georgia to leave the space of geopolitical liminality, which EU member states' lack of a shared understanding of European integration's ultimate objective has long perpetuated (German 2024; Kakabadze 2024). However, the process of European integration has been overshadowed by a slew of steps of Georgia's ruling party that have unsettled its Euro-Atlantic partners - above all the reintroduction of the controversial law on foreign influence in April 2024 and its adoption a few weeks later. Within Georgia, this has sparked massive protests, and opposition to the law has united broad segments of Georgian society (Chatham House 2024). Georgia's Euro-Atlantic and international partners, among them EU institutions and member states, the US, UN, and the Council of Europe, have assessed the law as detrimental to Georgia's further Euro-Atlantic integration and as posing risks to fundamental rights (cf. Council of Europe Venice Commission 2024; European Commission 2024). In response, Washington has subjected dozens of Georgian officials to travel bans (Lee 2024). The law is mired in intense discourse, with its proponents suggesting that Georgia's Euro-Atlantic partners might have malicious intentions and attempt to infringe on the country's sovereignty, while its critics, and increasingly the aforementioned partners, view it as heralding a possible departure from the European path. To say the least, the current situation presents Georgia with a "crossroads", as EU Commission President Von der Leyen declared (European Commission 2024a).

Current dynamics of EU-Armenia relations: Offers, expectations, limitations

Yerevan's recently declared intention to strengthen relations with the EU have been reciprocated by Brussels, which has announced readiness to upgrade bilateral ties. This might add a new chapter to an eventful history between the two that includes substantive EU regulatory alignment and successful negotiation of an Association Agreement (AA) alongside Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, as well as a sudden U-turn in September 2013, just weeks before the scheduled initialling of that agreement, denouncing the AA and ultimately joining the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) instead. After a pause for soul-searching, largely at Brussels' request, both parties negotiated a new "Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement" (CEPA). CEPA is tailored to Armenia's altered conditions and went fully into effect in March 2021 (Khvorostiankina 2023). While current overtures towards the EU are therefore not without antecedents, and Armenia's previous foreign policy is not exhaustively described by pointing to the country's alliance relations with Russia, it is against the backdrop of this volatile experience that any current efforts at further rapprochement are taking place. Despite a broadly amenable stance in Brussels and the announcement of a new and "ambitious" EU-Armenia Partnership Agenda (Council of the European Union 2024a), some are taking a more wait-and-see approach.

In February 2024, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell sketched out three areas for closer cooperation, following up on the request “to present options on how best to strengthen EU-Armenia relations in all their dimensions” (European Council 2023, 10). These areas include strengthening resilience and contributing to economic diversification through expanding cooperation and investments in the fields of trade, connectivity, and energy, sounding out options for visa liberalization – with view to enhancing people-to-people contacts but also providing additional leverage to support the reform trajectory – and security cooperation through a reinforced EU Monitoring Mission to Armenia (EUMA) and making use of further instruments, such as possible delivery of non-lethal equipment via the European Peace Facility (European External Action Service 2024). Even though these areas offer opportunities and prospects of closer ties, at the same time they hark back to persistent challenges in the EU’s external engagement in its Eastern neighbourhood.

While emphasizing the political will to draw closer, Borrell acknowledged structural constraints which “cannot be overcome overnight” (European External Action Service 2024). Brussels, in fact, cautions against acting in haste, which has the potential to jeopardize Armenian sovereignty. Structural constraints refer to Armenia’s dependencies on Russia in key economic domains (Terzian 2023), such as natural gas imports, with Russia having provided close to 88% of supplies in 2021 and through a Gazprom subsidiary basically controlling the sector (International Energy Agency 2023, 4; Sosa 2024). Moreover, in 2023, (January-December), about 40% of Armenia’s exports went to Russia, by far the most important market for Armenian goods, with exports to the EU amounting to just over 8% (Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia 2024). Due to the fact that most of Armenia’s external trade relies on one overland route to Russia through Georgia, given closed borders with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, Russia possesses potentially significant levers that it can use against Armenia to counter the latter’s pro-European overtures (Mgdesyan 2023). Efforts at economic diversification and increasing EU-Armenia trade are complicated by Armenia’s membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, which provides a favorable environment for trade within the bloc. In particular Russia’s predominant role in Armenian trade gives Armenian business little incentive to improve quality and adjust to EU standards in order to compete more effectively. Moreover, even though Armenia’s graduation from GSP+, an instrument Brussels has applied to support developing countries, seems not to have negatively affected Armenian exports to the EU (European Commission 2023), Armenia’s small market size and lack of scalability constitute a drawback for private European investors. Supporting Armenia in diversifying its economic relations is thus a long-term task, which, as voices in Brussels acknowledge, could be expedited by a peace agreement between Yerevan and Baku and normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan and Armenia and Türkiye.

The EU’s policy vis-à-vis its Eastern neighbourhood, with its fragile and highly volatile security environment, has for long faced criticism for what has been described as a discrepancy of time-horizons: those between the EU’s long-term approach of external governance aimed at modernizing and bringing partners closer to the Union by exporting its norms and large parts of the *acquis* on the one side, and the partners’ short-term security and stability needs on the other (Wolczuk et al. 2023; Nizhnikau and Moshes 2024). The issue of security has seen an upgrade, both in the Eastern Partnership, which has undergone adaptation after Russia’s invasion of 2022, and in the EU’s bilateral ties with Armenia, most visibly in the form of the EUMA.

Considerations to include Armenia as partner in the European Peace Facility, as well as reports of Hungary signalling its veto against this, reveal that structural constraints not only act on the partner country but also within the EU, for example regarding unanimity in decisions on issues that pertain to security and defence. For Armenians, matters of security are in particular linked to the country's conflicted relations with neighbouring Azerbaijan, itself a member of the Eastern Partnership and bilateral partner of individual EU countries. Given differing national-level interests, decisions in the security dimension thus often rather reflect the lowest common denominator among EU member states (Wolczuk et al. 2023, Bendiek, Ålander and Bochtler 2020). This may deviate significantly from what Armenians expect and has in the past contributed to disappointment in the EU (Schiffers and Smolnik 2022). A multiplicity of (attributed) EU role conceptions, moreover, as a normative, geopolitical, mediating, realpolitik or nascent security actor, have further contributed to ambiguity in policy and expectations. Conversely, from the perspective of the EU, despite Armenia's demonstrated distancing from Russia, the country is formally still a member of the CSTO and host to Russian bases at Gyumri and Erebuni, both part of Russia's Southern Military District, and to Russian border guards who assist the country in securing its international borders. Brussels pays heed to Armenia's continuing security ties to Russia, which translates into a certain vigilance and further limits the range of activities toward security cooperation. In view of this, Wolczuk et al. (2024) aptly point out that the EU's foreign policy actorness is shaped by both internal and external opportunity (or often, effectively, inhibiting) structures.

Current dynamics in the Armenia-EU relationship are linked to Armenia's democratizing trajectory (Gevorgyan and Antonyan 2024). From Brussels' perspective, attributing primacy to democratic principles, good governance, and the rule of law, and therefore the implementation of CEPA, is also a stabilizing and, by bolstering resilience, ultimately a security-enhancing factor (Lebanidze, Aleksanyan, and Gonashvili 2022). Armenia has made considerable progress in this regard, as evinced by respective indices such as the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI Transformation Index 2024) or Freedom House's Freedom in the World (Freedom House 2024). But reform since the "Velvet Revolution" of 2018 has been uneven and in parts stagnating, inhibited by the geopolitical and socio-economic challenges of the past years, but also by lack of administrative capacities and of political will, especially where sensitive reforms are concerned. Outstanding reforms have been highlighted, for instance, in the realms of the judiciary, anti-corruption, good governance, and anti-discrimination (Delcour and Ghazaryan 2024; CEPA Progress Monitoring 2024; OECD 2024). With regard to the implementation of sensitive reforms, beyond its primary objective of facilitating increased people-to-people contacts, the prospect of visa liberalization may constitute a strong incentive, as alluded to by Borrell. An example of this is Georgia and its adoption of anti-discrimination legislation in order to advance towards visa liberalization. Yet the Georgian example also shows that once this occurs, equally powerful inducements for reform may be more difficult to find. In any case, political will is paramount, given not even the prospect of membership might induce policy change, as current dynamics in Georgia demonstrate. More generally, despite its proclaimed more geopolitical approach, Brussels seems as yet somewhat ill-equipped to engage in a significantly geopoliticized and securitized environment. While in certain respects limited by its decision-making structure, the EU also appears to continue to act on the assumption of the EU's normative appeal, where partner countries are expected to "becom[ing] EU-like", without, however, (at least in the near or medium term) becoming part of the EU (Horký-Hluchán and Kratochvíl 2014, 256; see also Williams 2022, 2023).

Exploring the potential for Georgian-Armenian cooperation in EU rapprochement

With Armenia's albeit fragile democratization and its declared intention of strengthening ties with the EU, Armenian-Georgian ties have received renewed attention. Already previously, ideas have been circulated about what has been dubbed a "Trio+ Strategy", that is, the three associated countries Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, plus post-revolutionary Armenia (Williams 2022). Such ideas, however, have not gained traction, probably also reflecting limited appetite on part of the EU to accommodate additional mini-lateral formats into the multilateral EaP. There was likewise a demand from among the EaP partners themselves for the EU to adopt a more individual and tailor-made approach. Given Yerevan's reinforced ambitions of closer ties with the EU, Georgia being granted EU-candidate country status was very positively received in Armenia (Tatikyan 2024). For Prime Minister Pashinyan, it "will have a direct impact not only on our region, but also on Armenia-Georgia bilateral relations" (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia 2024). Georgian officials, conversely, have offered to share with their Armenian counterparts their expertise based on past experiences of drawing closer to the EU (Factor 2024). Already before Georgia's candidate country status, relations with Georgia were considered as Armenia's entry point towards the Euro-Atlantic space (Poghosyan 2018), with Armenians apprehensive about their country's possible further isolation.

Common challenges, lessons to be learned, transnational activities

Provided Yerevan and Tbilisi have a similar outlook on getting closer to the EU going forward, even if not necessarily the same objectives with regard to EU rapprochement, there are several areas in which lessons may be learned, experiences may be shared or where cooperation toward overcoming common challenges would prove beneficial. A key domain is the implementation of political reforms. These are not only central for Georgia to advance in its candidacy, but also form a key part of CEPA. In both countries, reform of the judiciary, for instance, is an outstanding challenge as relevant indices and monitoring reports show (Melis et al. 2023, Coalition for an Independent and Transparent Judiciary 2023; Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum 2024). Public opinion polls, moreover, regularly demonstrate that trust in political institutions, a key component of a functioning and resilient democracy, in both countries shows room for improvement (compare IRI polls). The EU, as argued above, has put emphasis on strengthening resilience of partner countries. Though acknowledged and tackled, including with support of the EU, disinformation, limited media literacy, and hate speech, all detrimental to (societal) resilience have been identified, albeit to varying degrees, in both Armenia and Georgia (Avedissian 2023; Tsetskhladze 2023; Basilaia and Danelia 2022; Vardanyan and Zolyan 2024). These challenges, more broadly to be subsumed under the notion of hybrid threats, are not only shared by Armenia and Georgia, but are also present in the EU member states. Recent developments in Georgia have underlined the expediency of involving civil society in reforms, for strengthening civil oversight, monitoring, and accountability. A broad notion of civil society, which includes both its more institutionalised segments and more grassroots types, contributes to ensuring comprehensive political participation (Luciani 2021). A greater involvement of civil society has also been called for as regards EU-Armenia relations (Delcour and Ghazaryan 2024).

In addition to political reforms, EU rapprochement requires complex regulatory alignment. Georgia, despite recent ratings showing a decline in this area (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum 2024), has gained ample experience in dealing with EU norm adoption through extensive sectoral alignment in implementing the Association Agreement and DCFTA. Both in Armenia and Brussels the necessity of having adequate administrative and personnel capacity have been highlighted. The latter enables partner countries to effectively deal with requirements of adopting or approximating EU legislation, deal with the EU's functioning, and make best use of the EU's offers and opportunities by knowing how to navigate EU bureaucracy. Visa liberalization has been singled out as a process that is particularly demanding, with high benchmarks to be met and where experience-sharing may be critical. Given Yerevan's interest in, and the announced EU support to, Armenia's economic diversification, sharing expertise may also be expedient as regards businesses adapting to higher quality demands and EU standards to facilitate exports to the European market - for example, as regards meeting phytosanitary and laboratory requirements. While there is certainly scope for cooperation, Armenia being a member in the EEU and Georgia enjoying a DCFTA with the EU also puts limits on sharing experiences, however (Delcour and Ghazarian 2024). What is more, despite the DCFTA, the Georgian case rather highlights the challenges of diversifying exports by way of selling on the European market.

In early 2024, Yerevan and Tbilisi announced an upgrade of their relationship to that of strategic partners, mentioning cooperation in the areas of transport, economy and culture, among others (JAMnews 2024; JAMnews 2024a). While it has so far stayed rather elusive what this would entail concretely, the areas mentioned would also hold for cooperation in strengthening ties with the EU, for example through a closer coordination of infrastructure investments and related activities in Armenia and Georgia under the economic and investment pillar. Interlocutors have suggested it might be beneficial to consider expanding the transnational component of these. Georgia, due to its geographical position and given Armenia's status as a landlocked country with two of its four borders currently closed, is a natural partner for Armenia in this respect. Armenian officials, moreover, have expressed the desire for Armenia to be included in regional connectivity projects. This is also endorsed by the EU. Here, too the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, respectively Armenia and Türkiye could be an important facilitating factor.

Partners by default?

While on the leadership level mutual interest in closer collaboration has been expressed, and interstate relations throughout the years have overall been good (Tarkhan-Mouravi 2017), this seems to find only partial reflection at the level of public perception. According to IRI (2024) survey data, 82% of Armenians polled in December 2023 assessed relations with Georgia as either somewhat good or very good, which reflects a robust upward trend but is essentially an approximation to the status-quo ante, after perceptions of relations markedly deteriorated during the Armenian-Azerbaijani war of 2020.

Asked to name the most important political partners as well as the most important economic partners of Armenia, for 27% and 33% of polled Armenians respectively, these include also Georgia. Conversely, in Georgia, according to IRI survey data from September-October last year (2023), Armenia was seen as being among the country's most important political partners by only 9% and as being among the most important economic partners by a mere 8% of those surveyed, Armenia being on par with Russia as regards Georgia's political partners. Such data indicate an imbalance in mutual perception, which certainly also reflects Georgia's currently disproportionately greater significance for Armenia in economic terms, in particular as a transit country. Beyond that, a strictly bilateral perspective may only provide part of the picture, since 19% and 24% of Georgian respondents, respectively, or twice and three times as many, identified Azerbaijan as among Georgia's most important political partners and economic partners. Azerbaijan ranked third and fourth, respectively, after the EU, USA, and for economic partners additionally Türkiye. Armenian and Georgian experts have held out the prospect of Armenian-Georgian ties developing in a more sui generis fashion, that is, reducing Russia and Azerbaijan as intervening variables in the bilateral relationship (JAMnews 2024a). Yet, from the side of Georgian public perception, these factors may not be discounted, and on the political level, too, Tbilisi pays attention to the nuances of intra-regional balances and their possible impact on relations with Azerbaijan. Even though Armenia and Georgia are direct neighbours and have historically been closely entangled, and demonstrate similar regime-type characteristics, at the societal level mutual stereotyping, discrepant narratives, and lack of knowledge of each other, indicate a certain distance between the two (Tarkhan-Mouravi 2017). Georgia, moreover, has for years tried to actively dissociate itself from its geographical moorings in an effort to promote and anchor itself as part of Europe (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2024). It has accordingly not espoused a South Caucasus identity but tried to group together with Ukraine and Moldova as an "Associated Trio" on its path to European integration (Delcour and Panchulidze 2023).

Uncertain prospects

The potential avenues notwithstanding, prospects for Armenian-Georgian cooperation with regard to EU rapprochement are dependent on a variety of interrelated factors. These include developments in the wider region, dependent first and foremost on the trajectory of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its impact on Russian power projection, and regional South Caucasus stability, linked in particular to Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. Moreover, prospects have become uncertain in the context of aggravating tensions between Georgia's ruling party and the country's Euro-Atlantic partners. Not least in light of the changing geopolitics in the wider region, in Armenia developments in Georgia are followed with concern and Armenian civil society has demonstrated solidarity with its Georgian counterpart (Solidarity with Georgian Civil Society 2024). If Georgia were indeed to substantially reconsider its relations with the European Union and its transformational path, this might raise a number of issues for Armenia-EU rapprochement, from logistical questions to democratization at home, and more generally a narrowed space for the EU's regional South Caucasus engagement – and possibly reduced such interest by Brussels itself. These concerns reflect an understanding among Armenians that Georgia qualifying as a partner to their country in strengthening relations with the EU is not predicated on geography alone, but also on a common trajectory of democratic transformation.

At the same time, Armenia's recently declared interest in strengthening ties with the EU, too, could be hampered by domestic and regional developments. And possibilities for Armenia and Georgia to collaborate on EU rapprochement are embedded in the EU's own approaches towards both countries and the region. In the case of Georgia, at least in theory, since December 2023 its relations with Brussels are prescribed by the enlargement track. This is despite the fact that prospects are currently in the air and the EU would itself need to make far-reaching adaptations in order to be able to accommodate new members (Blockmans 2024). The many challenges attached to enlargement notwithstanding, there appears to be still less strategic vision and clarity regarding the EU's ambitions for the region, including relations with Armenia, both with and without inclusion of developments in Georgia. Current debates within the EU on how to reconcile Brussels' stated intention to act more geopolitically in a highly volatile and securitized environment with the needs of partner countries, the EU's meritocratic and bureaucratic approach to rapprochement, and the interests of EU member states are also relevant to the EU's approach to the South Caucasus. Uncertainty may therefore also stem from the lack of a credible EU strategy towards the region, which may, in turn, influence the partner countries' interest in pursuing closer ties.



Conclusions & Recommendations

In spite of some fluctuations in relations, Yerevan and Tbilisi have displayed a capacity to manage bilateral ties. There are in theory a variety of possible areas where Armenia and Georgia could find common ground for cooperation with a view to enhancing relations with the EU. To this end, the present study's recommendations will be found below. Possible areas include those of political reform, administrative capacity building, transnational economic cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges. To what extent these can be realized, if at all, depend on political developments in the region and beyond, and on domestic developments in both countries. In the South Caucasus, developments in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict have had repercussions for regional stability. Russia's war on Ukraine, moreover, and the ensuing geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West, has aggravated vulnerabilities and the liminality of countries in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. The geopolitical context and related processes might strengthen support for EU rapprochement as well as EU engagement but it might also serve to discourage partner countries from pursuing closer ties with the EU as well as the EU itself from assuming a more prominent role in the region. While exaggerated expectations would do a disservice to the EU's regional engagement, for example as regards EU engagement in (hard) security, expectations management, though certainly important, does not make a strategy. The EU's approach to its Eastern neighbourhood, including as a stabilizing factor, long assumed the EU's normative and economic appeal to be a sufficient centripetal force to maintain the partners' interest in closer ties with the EU. The case of Georgia, namely its political leadership, currently seems to prove otherwise. The present uncertainties in EU-Georgia relations, compounded by but not limited to the adoption of the controversial law on transparency of foreign influence, will likely affect opportunities for cooperation between Armenia and Georgia with regard to EU rapprochement. If continued, these may well become an "elephant in the room" in Armenian-Georgian conversations. To conclude, Georgia's political trajectory, both domestically and as regards its external relations, holds significant implications also for Armenia and its relations with the EU. Should Georgia fail to sustain its democratic and European integration trajectory, this would imperil prospects of joint Armenian-Georgian efforts with regard to EU rapprochement, and may herald detrimental implications for Armenia's prospects of closer ties with the EU more broadly.

Recommendations (given aforementioned reservations) to Armenia, Georgia, and the EU:

Armenia and Georgia could seek common ground in EU rapprochement and identify activities for mutually beneficial collaboration, such as in the areas of political reform, administrative capacity building, addressing shared challenges, transnational cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges. For instance, dialogue and joint activities in matters of mutual concern or with regard to common challenges could pertain to strengthening resilience and trust in democratic institutions, in particular through reforms in the judiciary. Other areas for (enhanced) cooperation and experience sharing are countering hybrid threats, including combating disinformation and hate speech, improving media literacy, and safeguarding media freedom.

(Independent) civil society, including more grass-roots actors, should be afforded an important role in designing, carrying out, and monitoring related activities for inclusive and accountable processes.

Both countries' administrations might engage in sharing expertise with regard to adopting or approximating to EU legislation and on how to effectively make use of EU offers and programs. This could contribute to building the necessary administrative capacity and human resources to successfully engage with often complex EU structures.

Where expedient and if feasible, activities could include Azerbaijan, advancing a more South Caucasus platform. This might counter the reproach that the EU is creating new dividing lines in the region and it might meet Georgia's concern for its intra-regional relations in the South Caucasus.

to the EU and its member states:

It would be beneficial for the EU to pay special attention to the salience of societal support for EU rapprochement in both countries and provide opportunities for enhanced people-to-people exchanges in order to reach and involve wide segments of the populace. Addressing questions of improving living conditions and livelihoods by providing tangible benefits would contribute to the credibility of EU engagement.

Brussels should clearly communicate the (long-term) benefits of engagement and often complex and demanding reform efforts. At the same time, it should also explain the limits of EU engagement, i.e., what the EU cannot deliver. Efforts to explain how the EU functions and what EU rapprochement means precisely may be beneficial.

On a more general note, geopolitical uncertainties in the wider region, which the EU's partners in its Eastern neighbourhood are forced to navigate, have been critically exacerbated by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The EU and its member states need to develop a credible strategy for the Eastern neighbourhood, including the South Caucasus, that takes into account the different dimensions and needs of engagement and would contribute to enhancing the EU's actorness in the region.

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Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)

📍 13 Alexander Pushkin Str.
0107 Tbilisi, Georgia

☎ +995 599 99 02 12

✉ info@gip.ge 🌐 www.gip.ge