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THE PROSPECTS OF EU-ARMENIA COOPERATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The article explores the features of EU integration in Armenia. After the collapse of the USSR, establishing relations with the states of the South Caucasus occupied an important place in the EU agenda. During the cooperation, the EU policy underwent changes within the framework of various projects, slowing down or deepening the cooperation with Armenia. By creating a slowly developing but at the same time stable cooperation with Armenia through the programs initiated, the EU ensured its visible presence in the country. Currently, there are internal and external factors that influence the integration process. Despite the existing challenges, the parties strive to strengthen and deepen cooperation.

In this context, a number of programs initiated by the EU, such as the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements, the European Neighborhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership, and the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreements are studied. The challenges of EU integration are also analyzed, the study of which is necessary to highlight the prospects of their solution, which will lead to clarifying the prospects of integration.

In the end, it is justified, that currently, Armenia has no clear prospects for EU integration. Meanwhile being an EAEU member state and taking advantage of opportunities for deepening bilateral cooperation Armenia continues dialogue and cooperation with the EU as a member of the EaP.

Keywords: integration, cooperation, cooperation challenges, EU, Eastern Partnership, civilian mission.

Stages of EU-Armenia cooperation and development direction of relations

After establishing relations with the South Caucasus states, including Armenia, the cooperation between the parties was of an economic-technical nature, within the framework of which the EU provided humanitarian and technical support to those countries, and in 1999 Partnership and cooperation agreements (PCA) laid the legal basis for relations between the parties.

At the beginning of the cooperation, the EU supported the states to overcome the difficulties of the transition stage with the programs Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS), Europe-Caucasus-Asia International Transport Corridor (TRACECA), Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe (INOGATE) and PCA. Since the independence of Armenia (as well as the other two states of the South Caucasus), TACIS has contributed to the country's transition to a market economy, mainly by supporting the implementation of legislative reforms, the building of democratic institutions, particularly through continued support for legal reforms, as well as support for membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Kudryashova, 2008; Twinning Project, 2007).

The nature of relations changed significantly with the signing of the PCA, the main objectives of which were to establish political dialogue, strengthen democracy and transition to a free market economy, and promote trade and investment as well as build functional links between the Union and the state (Dekanozishvili, 2004). A research of the PCAs shows, the EU adopted the same approach towards states, therefore the agreements did not differ much from each other and were not differentiated according to the respective countries. Although the states had different geographies, development perspectives and

different priorities, the goals of EU support within the mentioned programs were common for the region. According to D. Lynch, “For the EU the South Caucasus was never a region in itself. The initial approach, embodied in the PCAs that were reached with all former Soviet Republics, used the ‘former Soviet Union’ as the regional category of reference. Differentiation in EU thinking about the former Soviet Union has been slow in coming - and the South Caucasus has come last on the list” (2003, p. 179).

Already after including these states in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) program in 2004, the EU adopted a regional approach, combining it with a differentiation policy. In this way, the EU is committed to supporting the countries of the South Caucasus in building stable societies based on democratic values and, therefore, contributing to the peaceful development and prosperity of the region (Poviliūnas, 2006) and conflict resolution processes. However, in the case of the South Caucasus, this approach was not effective. Apart from the obvious differences and obstacles to regional cooperation (especially the Artsakh conflict), the regional dimension, which is clearly based on the geographical approach of the territory, does not reflect the distinct realities of each country in terms of political, economic and security (Simão & Freire, 2008).

Within this program, relations between Armenia and the EU developed at a slower pace. First of all, negotiating and following the implementation of the Action Plans of the European Union and opening the EU delegation in Yerevan, relations remained rather superficial. Although Armenia was included in the ENP, the presence and involvement of the EU did not grow as fast as, for example, in the case of EU-Georgia relations. This was due to the fact that Georgia was actively announcing its readiness to cooperate with the EU through diplomatic channels, while Armenia did not show such great activity. In general, it can be said that the EU was an attractive development model for Armenian society. Many hoped that in the long term, there might be a possibility of joining the EU (Popescu, 2011). However, the

program had limited success because it had a complex structure and included states with different interests and priorities.

As for the Eastern Partnership (EaP), among the goals of the program, the main one is to create the necessary conditions for accelerating political association and deepening economic integration between the EU and interested partner states, based on the "more for more" principle (Gevorgyan, 2016, p. 83). Within the newly adopted "more for more" policy of the EaP, priority is given to the following four directions:

- development of stronger, diversified and viable economies in the region,
- expanding efforts to strengthen fundamental institutions and good governance in the EaP region,
- improvement of transport links and infrastructures, increase of energy flexibility through strengthening of energy interconnections,
- increasing youth employment and innovation (EaP 20 Deliverables for 2020).

It should be noted that the EaP is meant to expand regional cooperation between the participating countries. Although the participating states strive to deepen bilateral relations with the EU, the authors of the program try to present the EaP countries as a region. However, each of the states has its own state interests and priorities in relations with the EU (Abrahamyan et al., 2016).

Thus, in order to cooperate with the new neighbors, the EU initiated various programs and provided humanitarian and technical assistance to the South Caucasian states, including Armenia, initially through the TACIS, TRACECA, and INOGATE programs. The political cooperation between Armenia and the Union began with the PCA then continued with the ENP program and the EaP project aimed at the effectiveness of ENP. These initiatives further strengthened the EU's expanded presence in Armenia. Bilateral relations developed within the framework of the EaP and with the application of the EU regional policy,

based on the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Extended Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

The challenges of EU-Armenia cooperation

By creating a slowly developing but at the same time stable cooperation with Armenia through the programs initiated, the EU ensured its visible presence in the country. Within the framework of the EaP, the EU provided Armenia with an opportunity for closer cooperation. The latter implied the signing of the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with Armenia.

After three years of successful negotiations, in September 2013, President S. Sargsyan announced that Armenia would not sign the EU-Armenia Association Agreement, as it is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, but is ready to continue cooperation in a different format. Experts note that although Armenia has never officially announced its intentions to join the EU, as Georgia did, for example, the successes in some areas of integration are more impressive (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015). However, there are external and internal factors that significantly affect the deepening of cooperation between Armenia and the Union. Each of the parties has its own problems, which, in turn, are an obstacle to the faster integration of Armenia into the EU. Accordingly, it is necessary to consider several main challenges.

1. First of all, it is necessary to take into account all the key events that have had a great impact, and some still have, on the enlargement policy of the Union. Among them are the 2009 economic crisis in Greece, which had a negative impact on other Eurozone countries as well (EuroMemorandum, 2017), the irregular flow of refugees, in turn, caused new dissent (European Commission, 2016). Brexit is also a serious problem for the EU, as it started the process of leaving the Union for the first time in the history of the EU (European Commission). Together with these three challenges, national movements in EU member states, as well as secessionist movements in the territorial units of a

number of states, led to increased mistrust of EU integration (Bireri, 2014). Finally, the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war is a serious challenge not only for the security of the Union but also for the whole of Europe. These factors greatly affect the internal stability of the EU therefore they are also an obstacle for the integration process.

2. The next major challenge is the presence of unfavorable geopolitical circumstances (in particular, the role of Russia). One of the obstacles to the integration of the EaP countries into the EU is getting rid of the diplomatic and propaganda pressures of Russia. Until 2022 After Russia's February 24 invasion of Ukraine, one group of EU member states saw Russia as a threat, while the other group considered Russia as a possible partner. But currently, there seems to be a unified position on this issue. As a result, Russia-EU relations have gone from a relatively uncertain state to a highly strained state. Russia is not in favor of close relations between the EaP and EU member states. Russia could not accept the "Western" choice of the EaP countries, evidenced by the Russian-Georgian and Russian-Ukrainian disagreements that led to military conflicts. Russia's role continues to be one of the main factors of the EU's hesitancy in terms of eastern expansion (Beraia, 2017). In the case of Armenia, the picture is slightly different, as the country is a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The country is also included in the Joint CIS Air Defense System. The 102nd military base of the Russian Armed Forces and the Border Guard Directorate of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) are located on the territory of Armenia, which together with the Armenian border guards carries out the protection of the state border with Iran and Turkey. Although Armenia and the EU continue to cooperate in areas that are compatible with Armenia's commitments arising from EAEU (Paul, 2015), it is difficult to say that there are prospects for deepening relations toward integration.

3. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the next major obstacle, the settlement of which is a key issue not only for political stability and economic prosperity in the country but also in the region. The Nagorno Karabakh problem arose in 1917. During the formation of three republics in Transcaucasia as a result of the collapse of the Russian Empire: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The active period of the conflict began in 1988, and large-scale military operations took place in 1991-1994, and in 1994 a truce was signed between the parties. On December 10, 1991, the population of Nagorno-Karabakh confirmed the declaration of the independent Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in a referendum, which fully complies with the norms of international law (MFA of Armenia). Since 1992, the main forum for the settlement of the conflict is the OSCE Minsk Group, which is co-chaired by Russia, France and the United States. Since 1994, the conflict has continued to be the biggest obstacle to security and stability in the South Caucasus (Perchoc, 2016). The parties have different ideas about the settlement of the conflict, which is one of the reasons why the negotiation process has not been successful for decades. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, being a self-determination conflict, is considered by Azerbaijan as a territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani side is making every effort to present to the world that the conflict is between it and Armenia, and the latter is "an occupier and aggressor". In the conflict, Armenia is a guarantor of security, a negotiating party, and justly insists on the legal demand of Artsakh Armenians, that is, the recognition of Nagorno Karabakh based on the fundamental principle of self-determination of nations. As a result, Azerbaijan, again violating the ceasefire, started military operations, which turned into a large-scale April 2016 (MFA of Artsakh, 2016) and the Second Artsakh War 2020 (MFA of Armenia, 2020). After the last war, the tension on the front line continues to be high, the clear proof of which is the regular violations of the cease-fire by the Azerbaijani side, as a result of which the country is facing serious

security problems, which characterizes the country as an unstable area and has a great impact on the socio-economic development of the country and the formation of established democratic institutions.

From the analysis of the following challenges, it can be assumed that Armenia still does not have great prospects for EU integration, although there are opportunities for deepening bilateral cooperation. Since gaining independence, having cooperated with the EU in the framework of various projects and reaching the stage of signing the Association Agreement, Armenia made a U-turn and joined the EAEU. It is true that Armenia announced its intention to deepen relations with Russia, but Eurasian integration was not among the priorities of Armenia's foreign policy. That is why a great wave of protest arose among the Armenian society. As a result, shortly after EAEU membership, Armenia signed the CEPA with the EU, according to which Armenia and the EU jointly developed the priority directions of partnership relations.

The opportunities for EU-Armenia cooperation

Armenia is a unique state among the member states of the EaP. Firstly, Armenia is the only EAEU member country that does not have borders with other members, which is an example of non-territorial integration; secondly, it is both a member of the EAEU led by Russia and a signatory to the CEPA with the EU (Lagutina, 2018). The following means that, although the country is a member of the Eurasian integration organizations, it does not stop looking for ways to deepen cooperation with the EU.

In this context, it is necessary to address the opportunities for strengthening and expanding cooperation. One of them is dedicated to the expansion of security cooperation: perhaps, especially in recent years, security is the most important issue for Armenia.

On October 20, 2022, upon the request of Armenia, the EU deployed an observation mission along the Armenia-Azerbaijan

international border on the Armenian side, which opened a new page of cooperation. The mission which consisted of 40 civilian monitoring experts recruited from the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia, lasted two months. The Council's decision to deploy a mission in Armenia followed on October 6, 2022, at the quadrilateral meeting between Armenia, Azerbaijan, France and the EU, during which a statement was adopted, according to which Armenia and Azerbaijan confirmed their loyalty to the UN Charter and the 1991 CIS Alma-Ata declaration, according to which both states recognize each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty. The following will be the basis for the work of the border demarcation commissions (Council of the EU, 2020a). Therefore, the goal of the mission is to restore peace and security in the region, build trust and contribute to the border commissions through its reports. It is true that the mission initially had a temporary nature and after two months it stopped its activity, however, based on the acute security situation, it was clear that the observation mission should have a continuation.

Then, on February 20, 2023, the EU, within the framework of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), started its civilian mission in Armenia (EUMA), this time for an initial period of two years. It was officially established by the decision of the Council on January 23, 2023. The purpose of the civilian mission is to contribute to de-escalation and stability in the border areas of Armenia, and the protection of human rights, as well as to support the process of delimitation and demarcation and strengthening of trust between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It will observe and report, which will strengthen the EU's position on the situation. The mission's exclusively civilian staff consists of a total of 100 people, including 50 unarmed observers. The headquarters is located in Yeghegnadzor, and the field offices are located in Kapan, Goris, Jermuk, Martuni and Ijevan (Council of the EU, 2023; EU Mission in Armenia, 2023).

It should be noted that both Azerbaijan and Russia reacted negatively to the EU civilian mission in Armenia. Russia actually

opposed the mission and Azerbaijan finally accepted the mission, though reluctantly (Negi & Pietz, 2023). However, the mission is important for Armenia: firstly, border clashes on the part of Azerbaijan have decreased relatively secondly, EU member states have clarified their positions regarding Azerbaijan's attacks against Armenia and security issues. However, it is necessary to take into account that this mission is civilian and it cannot provide any military support to Armenia. Nevertheless, it is expected to be a deterrent in case of possible Azeri attacks.

Among the opportunities to expand EU-Armenia cooperation, it is important to mention the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, which is unique in its content. The legal basis in EU-Armenia bilateral relations is the CEPA signed within the framework of the 5th Eastern Partnership Summit held in Brussels on November 24, 2017 (Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, 2017). Within the framework of the agreement, the Union and Armenia have committed to work together for the welfare of the citizens and contribute especially to the strengthening of democracy, political, economic and institutional stability. The parties also committed to promote, maintain and strengthen peace and stability at both the regional and international levels, expand cooperation in the areas of freedom, security, and justice, with the aim of strengthening the rule of law, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (Delegation of the European Union to Armenia, 2021).

On June 1, 2019, Armenia adopted the road map for the implementation of the CEPA, which was revised in 2021. It entered into full force on March 1, 2021, after being ratified by the Republic of Armenia, all EU member states and the European Parliament. This was an important, positive step forward in EU-Armenia relations. Thus, it reaffirmed that the EU and Armenia are committed to democratic principles and the rule of law, as well as to the broader reform agenda. In the last two years, Armenia has made progress with justice reforms and comprehensive constitutional reforms. However, the

implementation of Armenia's ambitious reform program requires considerable administrative and institutional capacity (Council of the European Union, 2022b).

Thus, Armenia and the EU should continue and deepen the political and economic dialogue in those areas that are compatible with the obligations of Armenia within the EAEU framework. The EU should expand its presence in Armenia, and support Armenian institutions, political actors and civil society in implementing democratic reforms. Such an expanded presence will most likely strengthen the Armenian Government's commitment to fulfill its obligations under the CEPA (Grigoryan, 2019), which creates significant opportunities for the development of Armenia's legal and political systems. The implementation of the agreement will also allow to achieve democratic and stable development of the country thanks to EU rehabilitation measures, as well as to create a deeper, dynamic and ambitious framework of bilateral cooperation (Terzyan, 2019). It is also necessary to initiate measures in order to counter all internal and external factors that will hinder the effective implementation of the CEPA.

Although the EU cooperates with civil society, it should consider involving civil society more regularly in EU-Armenia political cooperation. Civil society should continue to be a resource for local political and thematic expertise for the EU. This is especially relevant given the ongoing democratic reforms and the need for oversight of the executive branch. The EU should also explore ways to strengthen the independence of the judiciary, such as consultation on different appointment mechanisms or a vetting system for judges (Grigoryan, 2019). In addition, it is also necessary to raise the level of general awareness in the country, because there is still limited awareness in some parts of the society about the essence of the EU policy and the agreement. It should be taken into account that the political society can be considered the main actor in the

implementation of the CEPA, as it can act as a driving force for the reforms implemented in the country (Delcour et al., 2017).

Thus, relations with Armenia are special because, failing to sign the Association Agreement with the Union and being a member state of the EAEU, it also cooperates with the EU at the same time. Currently, relations with the EU are regulated within the framework of the CEPA, which creates significant opportunities for the modernization of Armenia's legal and political systems. The state continues to deepen cooperation with the EU by adopting a number of common priorities, such as democracy, human rights, science, education and technology, regional development, conflict resolution and etc.

Conclusion

After gaining independence, the EU actively began to establish relations with Armenia. At the initial stage of the cooperation, the EU supported the country to overcome the difficulties of the transition phase. Then, in order to strengthen its presence in the country and deepen relations, Armenia was also involved in various programs initiated by it, within the framework of which it cooperates with the state. However, it should be noted that relations are not developing at such a fast pace due to a number of obstacles.

The challenges facing the EU, including the economic crisis, the irregular flow of refugees, Brexit, separatist movements in national and territorial units in member states, the Russian-Ukrainian war, as well as the Artsakh conflict, the role of Russia are the main challenges that significantly affect and slow down Armenia's EU integration. The analysis of the above-mentioned issues, circumstances, and facts showcases that Armenia still has a lot to do in the way of deepening cooperation and integration with the Union, and it is difficult to talk about the prospects of EU integration. At present, the most important and primary step of Armenia is the quick and proper fulfillment of the obligations assumed by the CEPA.

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