



Policy Brief

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How To Help Armenia Navigate Its Democracy-Security Nexus

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Summary

The 2018 Velvet Revolution was a breakthrough for Armenia's democracy, but progress has since stalled. The June 2026 parliamentary elections will be a decisive test in a polarized environment dominated by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Civil Contract party and an opposition tied to former presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan. This dominant dichotomy fueled by both sides frustrates the attempts of alternative forces to come to the fore. Support for Civil Contract is stable but the majority of voters are undecided, disengaged, or disillusioned by the trauma of the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh and the 2023 ethnic cleansing there as well as by the lack of credible political alternatives. Civil Contract's political dominance over the last seven years has led to unilateral lawmaking and some controversial actions against opposition figures, media, civil society, and the judiciary. However, recent municipal elections saw the party fail to secure majorities in major cities.

While the diplomatic breakthrough in the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan marked by the White House deal in August sets a path for stability in the near term, it is crucial to follow up and to push for a final agreement. Azerbaijan's continued demands and rhetoric cast doubt as to the extent of its commitment to the process. Similarly, Türkiye still does not meet its commitment to end its blockade of Armenia. Meanwhile, Armenia's drift away from Russia and pivot to West has been characterized by its increased ambition to join the EU. It also seeks to diversify its security with the help of its Western partners, advancing with reforms and political alignment with Euro-Atlantic priorities.

Until the next elections, Armenia is likely to continue deepening its ties with the West while maintaining cautious cooperation with Russia, while peace talks with Azerbaijan drag on and relations with Türkiye remain complex. It is likely that Civil Contract will campaign on defending Armenia's sovereignty and on Western alignment while the fragmented opposition struggles to broaden its support. The most probable scenario is another Civil Contract government with a reduced majority, which will continue efforts toward peace with Azerbaijan and balancing engagement with the West and Russia. Two other scenarios (in descending order of likelihood) are a government coalition of Civil Contract and smaller pro-West parties, which will push a more confrontational stance toward Russia, or an opposition-led government realigning the country with Moscow and further undermining democratization.

The EU, its member states, and the United State should support Armenia by helping it strengthen its democratic institutions and its security in order to preserve the public's confidence in democracy. The country needs a combination of financial, technical, and political assistance to facilitate democratization, to resist external pressures, and to maintain its sovereignty. This includes backing the consolidation of democratic institutions, promoting electoral integrity, encouraging a diversity of democratic actors, and empowering civil society, all against the background of addressing the country's security challenges. By providing Armenia with the tools to defend its territorial integrity and to pursue democratic reforms, the West can help revive the optimism sparked by the Velvet Revolution and overturn a public disillusionment that could weaken Armenia's democracy and its ties with Europe.

Introduction

This brief presents an overview of Armenia's domestic and international environment ahead of next year's parliamentary elections. It first looks into a political landscape characterized by the polarization of parliamentary parties, widespread non-participation, and the struggles of independent media and civil society in the face of financial and political difficulties. It then looks into the progress in the peace talks with Azerbaijan and in normalization with Türkiye, outlining the main difficulties involved. The brief then outlines medium-term scenarios related to the coming elections and the peace process. It concludes with recommendations for Armenia's Western partners as to how they can support it as it navigates a difficult democracy-security nexus and to avoid democratic backsliding.

The Domestic Context

The 2018 Velvet Revolution was a significant democratic breakthrough for Armenia that raised hopes for political rights and civil liberties. Democracy indicators improved but progress has stagnated or reversed in recent years. Armenia remains classified by Freedom House as a "partly free", transitional or hybrid regime,¹ and as an electoral democracy by the Varieties of Democracy project.²

The June 2026 parliamentary elections will be a critical test of trust and legitimacy for all political forces. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Civil Contract party has been in power since 2018, but it did not secure a majority in recent local or municipal elections, even if in most cases it had the largest vote. In several cases, democracy watchdogs flagged pressure on opposition members by Civil Contract to secure council majorities or to replace mayors.³ The opposition is fragmented, centered primarily around political forces loyal to former presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan. They are significantly outnumbered in parliament by Civil Contract. There is also a loose group of small pro-West parties and figures that usually act together and are more radical in their opposition to Russia and the "formers".

Civil Contract and the main opposition forces have stable support, but the largest share of the electorate is undecided, disillusioned, or boycotting elections.⁴ This is primarily due to the trauma of Armenia's defeat in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War at the hands of Azerbaijan in 2020 and the ensuing ethnic cleansing in the region in 2023, as well as to a perceived lack of viable, inspiring political alternatives. The intensifying polarization between Civil Contract and the opposition, often marked by hate speech, has stifled the emergence of new political forces and weakened public engagement with politics.

The unusual dominance of one party for seven years contributes to political polarization. Civil Contract has been able to pass legislation without cross-party support and the opposition has been largely excluded from policymaking. This risks entrenching adversarial politics as Civil Contract and the opposition have tended to move toward more uncompromising rhetoric and action.

The opposition parties struggle to attract more voters due to their high negative ratings and the widespread public anger with their earlier record in government. Civil Contract continues to portray opposition figures—"the formers"—as emblems of corruption and failure, positioning itself as their antithesis and the representative of the people. Opposition forces often resort to similarly populist

rhetoric. Some marginal political figures have become popular, mostly on social media, but also in several local elections. They may be wild cards in 2026 if a coalition is needed after the elections. Much will depend on smaller actors' ability to clear the threshold for winning seats in the parliament. Should new democratic forces do so, it is possible that a more pluralistic parliament with representation beyond the current and former governing parties could enable a decrease in polarization and greater political dialogue.

The fundamental cleavage between "currents" and "formers" informs a wide range of political positions—from national identity and historical narratives to judicial reforms, fiscal transparency, and the status of refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh.

The economy has been improving but poverty, inequality, and unemployment remain high. Yet, economic issues are not a major axis of political competition, unlike corruption, Armenia's posture toward Azerbaijan, and the country's foreign policy alignment between Russia and the West. By contrast, democracy, human rights, and environmental concerns receive marginal attention.

In an effort to redefine the country's identity and foreign policy orientation following the 2020 war, Pashinyan introduced and promoted the concept of "Real Armenia" as distinct from "Historic Armenia".⁵ This emphasizes the country's internationally recognized borders and rejects territorial claims against neighbors—particularly Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Critics argue this justifies a retreat from historical claims and from protecting the rights of refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh to appease Baku and Ankara. Supporters of Civil Contract say it promotes civic patriotism as opposed to the national-conservative values traditionally associated with Armenia's political identity.

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The recent conflict between the government and the Armenian Apostolic Church has unfolded in this ideological context. In the spring of 2024, Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan led the largest protests since 2018 against the border demarcation with Azerbaijan, but the movement quickly lost momentum due to its ties with "the formers". Civil Contract then demanded his resignation, citing alleged celibacy violations and clergy involvement in politics, which was widely viewed as retaliatory and constitutionally dubious. Tensions escalated with the detention of the Armenian-Russian billionaire Samvel Kaparetyan in June and allegations of a coup attempt led by Galstanyan, which authorities link to Russian interference. The government frames these actions as dealing with threats to constitutional order, while critics see politicized law enforcement and encroachment on the church's autonomy. Reactions remain polarized: supporters stress foreign meddling, the opposition calls the charges baseless, and civil society warns of political overreach.

The government regularly frames its opponents as agents of Russia posing a security threat, which it uses to justify employing authoritarian tactics against dissent, including use of force against protests, discrediting media, abuse of administrative resources in election campaigns, lack of transparency in party financing, pressuring mayors to step down, and extended periods of detention as punishment or a tool against political opponents.⁶ Despite attempts to call a no-confidence vote against Pashinyan, the

opposition lacks the numbers in parliament and cannot prompt defections from Civil Contract. It also remains divided, unable to agree on an alternative candidate for prime minister and mired in disputes.

Key areas of reform by the Civil Contract government include the judiciary, law enforcement, education, anti-corruption measures, and fiscal transparency. While some progress has been made, many reforms suffer from inadequate institutional and human capacity, insufficient political will, limited public consultation, and poor communication.

Civil society is vibrant and diverse but suffers from politicized fragmentation, scarce funding, and demonization.

Civil society is vibrant and diverse but suffers from politicized fragmentation, scarce funding, and demonization. CIVICUS classifies Armenia's civic space as "narrowed" with a score of 69 out 100.⁷ A relatively new trend is the polarization among civil society organizations (CSOs) on issues of democratization. While some, as well as activists, speak out on Civil Contract's shortcomings to play their role as democracy and rule-of-law watchdogs, others place more importance on protecting the governing party in its struggle against the former regime, even if that sometimes is at the expense of the opposition's civil and political liberties.

Civil society is more united on security and foreign policy. Notable examples include joint appeals from Armenian and exiled CSOs from Nagorno-Karabakh urging the government not to withdraw claims against Azerbaijan in international courts, calling for a boycott of the UN Climate Change Conference held in Baku, and addressing rights violations by President Ilham Aliyev's regime. CSOs are also working to facilitate the social and political integration of civic actors displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh

The media sector is polarized, reflecting the political landscape, with only a few independent outlets. The latter depend on unsustainable and short-term donor funding and projects, which puts their editorial independence and long-term viability at risk.⁸ In the World Press Freedom Index, Armenia is in the "satisfactory" category with a score of 73.96 out of 100, with the economic dimension being the weakest one.⁹ Physical violence against media workers, limited access to official information, and lawsuits to constrain media organizations are not uncommon. In recent times, Civil Contract figures have made verbal attacks against several independent media. Following the publication of World Press Freedom Index in May, the Prime Minister's chief of Staff called on the media to self-regulate or else "the public will force the authorities to enforce serious tools of regulations".¹⁰ Some media organizations perceived this as a hostile move by the government.

The end of US funding earlier this year has severely affected CSOs and independent media, while monetization and donation practices and fiscal mechanisms cannot provide the funds for independent outlets to be self-sustainable. This situation puts in question their operational and staffing levels, the potential for their development, and even their viability at such a crucial moment for Armenia's democratization. Even though the EU and some Western countries fund civil society and independent media, they would need to do so more heavily if they want to at least maintain the status quo.

The International Context

Armenia is a small country that has to operate in a difficult geopolitical context. The decades-long conflict with Azerbaijan and the need to deter military threats from it is Yerevan's the most pressing foreign and security issue. Baku and Yerevan have also held bilateral peace talks for almost two years and in March they finalize the text of an agreement, largely thanks to unilateral concessions by Armenia, which they then initialed in Washington in August. This was a breakthrough in the decades-long conflict-resolution efforts between the two countries, and it could provide stability in the region for in the short to medium term.

Many concerns remain, however. This deal dismantles the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Minsk Group, once central to conflict mediation but long inactive, leaving Armenia with fewer diplomatic tools. This was a demand of Baku and a concession by Yerevan. At the core of the deal is the transport project labeled the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) to connect Azerbaijan with its Nakhichevan exclave through Armenia's Meghri region. Azerbaijan's term for the route—the "Zangezur corridor"—implies Armenia surrendering control over it, but Yerevan insists the route will remain under its jurisdiction, though it will be operated by international, including US, contractors. The agreement leaves key terms vague (notably, "unimpeded" transit is undefined) and reciprocity appears half-hearted, since Armenia's promised access to Nakhichevan seems subject only to Baku's control without a third-party presence as is the case for the road passing through Armenia. These ambiguities deepen Armenian concerns. Azerbaijan's record of revising or enforcing agreements by force undermines trust, while Aliyev's insistence on Armenia rewriting its constitution to renounce territorial claims adds further pressure on Pashinyan, who already faces domestic criticism. Meanwhile, the United States' role focuses on facilitating the TRIPP commercially, without offering security guarantees. The agreement also sidesteps urgent humanitarian issues: Armenian prisoners of war, displaced communities from Nagorno-Karabakh, and accountability for rights violations remain unresolved. For many in Armenia, the agreement looks like a series of unilateral concessions by their government. And, while the TRIPP is presented as a route to prosperity and stability, it risks entrenching asymmetries and leaving Armenia's sovereignty and security fragile.

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Türkiye, as Azerbaijan's closest ally and in solidarity with it, does not have diplomatic relations with Armenia. It has kept their border closed since 1993, continues its decades-long blockade of Armenia and shows no serious signs of considering a change in policy. Ankara and Yerevan launched a new normalization process after the 2020 war and agreed to open the border for diplomats and third-country citizens, implementation has stalled. But Türkiye took no concrete steps to fulfill its commitments, while the main border checkpoint, the road leading to it, and all the relevant infrastructure are ready on the Armenian side. Ankara is, however, now expected to fast-track normalization as the Washington deal addresses its demands for connectivity. Pashinyan's visit to Istanbul in June was a historic moment,

marked by optimistic but vague messages from both sides. Yet Türkiye remains supportive of Azerbaijan's agenda, and Baku uses its growing influence on Ankara to block progress in normalization and maintain pressure on Yerevan.

Armenia has been a long-time ally of Russia but today their strategic alliance exists on paper only. After Moscow chose not to respond to Azerbaijan's 2022 incursion into Armenian territory and Russian peacekeepers stood aside during the 2023 ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh, Yerevan has distanced itself from it. Armenia has frozen its participation in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, cut its arms imports from Russia to almost nothing, removed Russian border guards from international checkpoints and its border with Azerbaijan, and curtailed Russia's historical security presence in the country. Armenia remains in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, but this is mostly because of its limited alternatives and of the EU's lack of enthusiasm about its accession prospects. The government has accused Moscow of attempting to destabilize Armenia and of plotting coups and influencing politics through the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The EU is increasingly central for Armenia's foreign policy. After the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020 and especially after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, it took a leading role in facilitating talks between the two countries, but this effort ended with Azerbaijan's ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023.¹¹ In response to Russia's passivity in 2022, Yerevan invited the EU to send a monitoring mission to patrol its border with Azerbaijan—the mandate and capacity of which have since expanded. During a visit to Yerevan in June, High Representative of for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas said that EU-Armenia ties had never been closer. Their Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) came into effect in 2021, and they have concluded negotiations on an ambitious new partnership agenda and agreed to launch security and defense consultations and to continue the visa liberalization process.¹² Armenia's close partners among the member states—such as France, the Netherlands, and Luxemburg, as well as Poland and the Nordic countries, which are active on Eastern Neighbourhood policy—champion its interests. However, others such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Romania, and Slovakia exercise their veto power to block or delay policies that advance the Armenia-EU agenda and Armenian interests, predominantly due to their energy ties with Azerbaijan.

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There is strong public support and political will for EU membership in Armenia, and earlier this year the parliament passed a law to launch the country's accession effort. However, membership is a distant goal due to the EU's internal constraints, Armenia's fears of retaliation by Russia, a long queue of candidate states, Georgia's regression from democratic and European path, and Armenia's unresolved security issues. The country's Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU entered into force in 2021.

This year has been the most eventful one in Armenia's relations with the United States. In January, during the final week of the Biden administration, they signed a Strategic Partnership Charter, which the Trump administration has also referred to several times. As concerns like democracy and human rights are becoming less prominent in US foreign policy, Washington increasingly views Armenia only through a

geopolitical lens. Armenia's main appeal to the Trump administration lies in its potential to help contain Russia and to facilitate regional infrastructure projects, including for bringing hydrocarbons from Central Asia and the Caspian Sea to the West as part of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (or Middle Corridor). The latter was a key factor in the administration's interest in engaging with Armenia and Azerbaijan's attempt to resolve their conflict. The government is also considering the United States as the option for replacing Armenia's only nuclear power station, which is managed by Russians and uses uranium from Russia, after its decommissioned.

China has been long missing from Armenia's geostrategic calculus, and it has more advanced relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia. However, the two countries signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement in August. Under it, Armenia seeks greater development, economic and security cooperation. It has also made a bid to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (though its and Azerbaijan's applications were reportedly vetoed by Pakistan and India accordingly).

What Lies Ahead?

Until the June 2026 parliamentary elections, Armenia's foreign policy is likely to continue along its recent trajectory of pursuing closer ties with the West while balancing this with relations with Russia. Given Azerbaijan's continued insistence on almost impossible preconditions for signing the final peace agreement, the likelihood of this happening before the next elections is low. Its additional demands also cast a shadow over the normalization process with Türkiye, which the latter has linked to Yerevan's concessions to Baku. Relations with the EU, its member states, and the United States are likely to become more institutionalized in the near-to-medium term, though still falling short of security guarantees or an EU membership path. At the same time, Armenia is likely to maintain a more reserved stance toward Russia in security matters while continuing pragmatic economic cooperation. Civil Contract can be expected to campaign on its achievements in deepening Western ties and to portray itself as a defender of national sovereignty vis-à-vis Russia. The main opposition forces are likely to continue struggling to formulate an agenda that can mobilize voters beyond their base and to remain in disarray. They remain largely reactive to Civil Contract's actions. In the lead up to the elections, there will likely be a significant use of administrative resources in favor of the governing party, as was the case in elections in recent years. Russia will also attempt to influence and secure its interest throughout the elections.¹³ Armenia faces three medium-term scenarios around the elections. The most probable one is Civil Contract forming another government with a reduced majority in parliament. Next is Civil Contract failing to win a majority and forming a coalition government with small pro-West parties that manage to clear the vote threshold to win seats. The least likely one is the opposition parties based around the former governing elites winning enough seats to form a coalition government.

Another Civil Contract Government

In this scenario, Civil Contract secures another majority in the parliamentary elections, but with fewer seats than it has now, and it continues to govern on its own. The opposition tries to contest the results but has little success in mobilizing public support or in court challenges. Polarization intensifies, marked by Civil Contract and its supporters' renewed confidence and deepening disillusionment among the

opposition. Core democratic institutions remain intact but the government continues employing selective authoritarian practices—targeting opposition groups, media outlets, or segments of civil society it perceives as aligned with Russian interests. Efforts to complete the peace process with Azerbaijan intensify, including on the implementation of the Washington deal, but so do Azerbaijan’s to get Armenia to hold a constitutional referendum. The government announces a constitutional referendum, which it presents as for establishing a Fourth Republic rather than a concession to Baku to avoid a public backlash. Pashinyan and the Civil Contract government continue to orient foreign policy toward the West, while making efforts to preserve a degree of functional engagement with Russia. However, there is heightened tension with Moscow as Russia in turn seeks to exploit Armenia’s key dependencies on it. While acknowledging shortcomings in the conduct of the elections, the EU and the United States express support for the Civil Contract government and the democratic process in Armenia as they deem the opposition forces to be Russia-centered and undemocratic.

The more Civil Contract is able to convince the population about the peace process and to extract signs of commitment or progress from Azerbaijan and Türkiye, the more likely this scenario. It is also more probable if the EU effectively endorses the current government in the coming months by extending and deepening cooperation in visible and publicly relevant areas (particularly visa liberalization). Furthermore, at the time of writing, there is no sign that any new party that could draw significant support could be formed ahead of the elections, or that the existing opposition would be able to change a leadership that is unacceptable for a large majority of Armenians and to present a new agenda that could mobilize voters beyond their limited base.

A Civil Contract-Led, Pro-West Coalition Government

In this scenario, Civil Contract wins the largest share of votes in the elections but falls short of a majority in the parliament while some of the pro-West parties clear the threshold for winning seats. Following the precedent set after the 2023 Yerevan City Council elections, the two sides agree to form a coalition government so as to block the return to power of the “formers”. Despite their junior role, the pro-West parties’ status as kingmakers allows them to exert outsized influence. They pressure Civil Contract into controversial or imprudent decisions. These include a more confrontational and provocative stance toward Russia and the “formers” and further undemocratic measures presented as security ones to defend against them. There is no strong reaction from the EU and the United States to the latter. As in the first scenario, the government announces a constitutional referendum, which it presents as for establishing a Fourth Republic rather than a concession to Baku to avoid a public backlash. The government moves toward leaving the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, as well as to prosecute and jail some in the opposition. As in the first scenario, efforts to complete the peace process with Azerbaijan intensify, while Baku’s pushes for Armenia to hold a constitutional referendum. The government adopts a more unambiguous pro-West foreign policy orientation and accelerates steps toward EU integration. Relations with Russia become increasingly fraught, including over election interference, eventually resulting in economic retaliation by the latter. The EU is not ready to complete Armenia’s accession process but increase its support to the country; however, this falls short of meeting all its critical economic and security needs.

This scenario cannot be ruled out because it is not yet clear if the main opposition and pro-West parties will run in respective alliances or individually in order to maximize the number of seats they could win under the vote threshold rules. Gaming the electoral threshold could also give one or two of the new actors a real chance of entering the parliament. And, if the pro-West parties enter parliament and form a coalition with Civil Contract, the experience of their power-sharing in Yerevan's municipal government suggests that they would push their government toward more confrontational actions.¹⁴

A United Opposition Wins a Majority

In this scenario, the opposition parties by and large built around the “formers” and their proxies win narrow a majority of seats in the parliament and form a new government. Civil Contract reacts with street actions and legal challenges to the results on the grounds of Russian interference. This government displays authoritarian tendencies, with a new wave of politically motivated persecution and further limitations on civil society, the media, and political actors. Corruption deepens. Armenia's pivot to the West stalls and the government starts moves to draw the country closer to Russia. Russian economic and political interests receive enhanced guarantees, and Yerevan aligns itself more with Moscow in international bodies. The government rules out EU membership and significantly downgrades integration as a goal. Cooperation with the EU continues on other tracks, such as the CEPA, but with little enthusiasm on either side. The government also attempts to delay the implementation the Washington deal and the signing of the peace agreement with Azerbaijan. Baku portrays this as “Armenian revanchism”, and applies renewed political, diplomatic, and military pressure on Yerevan. The situation is exacerbated by the personal animosity between Aliyev and those who have regained Armenia's leadership. The West decreases its engagement with Armenia, but cautiously, keeping in mind the experience of Georgia's drift towards Russia and the decline of its clout in the region. There is waning interest in Yerevan and Western capitals in joint long-term infrastructure projects.

This is the least likely scenario but, in light of Civil Contract's declining approval ratings, it could, like the second scenario, be enabled by the opposition parties running in a constellation that will yield most seats. The snap municipal elections in Gyumri in March showed that it is possible for the opposition parties that are not very popular individually to outdo the more popular Civil Contract when acting together strategically.¹⁵ The opposition might also gain support at the expense of the Civil Contract if the peace process deteriorates in the coming months due to negative developments in the negotiations with Azerbaijan or with clashes on the ground, neither of which can be completely ruled out. And, when it comes to the likelihood and ability of a government built around the “formers” to introduce negative measures in domestic and foreign policy, much would depend on the distribution of power within such a coalition and whether the more authoritarian or the more hybrid actors set the agenda. In this scenario, the speed and depth of departures from democratic norms and Western alignment is likely to vary according to which faction—more radical or more moderate—secures dominant influence within the unified opposition coalition.

What Help Does Armenia Need?

The greatest obstacle to Armenia's democratization progress is security. The aggression that it has faced in recent years has deeply cracked the widespread democratic optimism that followed the Velvet Revolution. Armenia's security and sovereignty must be bolstered through comprehensive support, including resources from the European Peace Fund, strengthening border guards, diversifying arms supplies, upgrading technology, and training. Greater pressure should be applied on Azerbaijan and Türkiye to engage sincerely in the peace process, with a focus on Baku dropping its demands for constitutional change and any territorial claims. Both should also be pushed to end their blockade through reciprocal steps with Armenia as its continuation will undermine domestic support for the peace process. Armenia's partners also should accelerate mediation efforts to release Armenian prisoners in Azerbaijan and provide international or diplomatic observers at their sham trials, a particularly acute need since the shutting down of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Azerbaijan in September. It is crucial that the commitments in the August Washington deal be followed up closely, especially regarding the implementation of the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity in a way that fully safeguards Armenia's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and jurisdiction. Any further undermining of these will inevitably increase popular disillusionment with democracy and the West.

To help Armenia secure its fragile democracy in this context, the EU, its member states, and other international actors should:

- Meet the needs of the displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh. Providing social services, housing, and employment relief is of utmost importance, not only because of their situation but also because they have been left out from the recent diplomatic breakthroughs and their representation is critically important for political stability and the sustainability of any agreement reached.
- Ramp up efforts to support accountability in democratic governance, the rule of law, and human rights. This should include stricter conditionality of support and progress in EU integration, tied to democratic advances and not just technical reforms, including in media freedom, freedom of speech, judicial independence, eliminating police brutality, and election campaign and funding transparency.
- Bolster civil society's role as the watchdog of these processes and help build mechanisms that make it a meaningful part of reforms, rather than a procedural or symbolic one.
- Equip civil society and independent media with necessary resources to combat disinformation and to prepare for hybrid threats ahead of the parliamentary elections.
- Place greater emphasis on fostering a diverse and inclusive democratic landscape. Encouraging the growth in civic and political actors would make democracy less reliant on any single party and could achieve stronger long-term resilience and sustainability.

- Communicate clearly and consistently regarding the possibility and extent of Armenia's EU and Western integration, thereby managing the public's expectations and reducing the space for malign manipulations. This should include fast-tracking the EU-Armenia visa liberalization dialogue politically and at the level of institutional capacity-building.
- Increase the resilience of Armenia's economy by fostering trade diversification. Investing in the processing capacities of Armenian producers especially in agriculture is key to decreasing the political shocks due to dependence on Russian markets.
- Provide alternative sources to meet Armenia's critical needs that now overwhelmingly depend on Russia. Energy diversification—including by bringing Armenia into the Black Sea Submarine Cable project—will necessitate advancing its renewables and nuclear sectors, storage capacities, energy efficiency, and deeper integration in regional energy networks. For other dependencies, such as in wheat or vegetable oils, local capacity needs to be built up alongside with alternative sourcing of affordable imports.

Endnotes

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