

EU-Armenia people-to-people contacts

EU-Armenia relations have recently been strengthened through the two parties' comprehensive and enhanced partnership agreement (CEPA), applied provisionally since June 2018. This instrument, along with additional frameworks – an association agreement, the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership – promotes enhanced people-to-people contacts between the EU and Armenia.

EU-Armenia relations

Over the years, the EU and Armenia have generally been on positive terms. The EU-Armenia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), signed in 1996 and in force since 1999, was the first step in the establishment of bilateral relations, and serves as their legal basis. In 2003, before its 2004 eastward round of enlargement, the EU launched the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), and then in 2009 the eastern regional dimension of this policy, the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Negotiations on an association agreement (AA) and a deep and comprehensive free trade area (DCFTA) were finalised in 2013, but were abandoned that same year, following Armenia's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Nevertheless, EU-Armenia relations continued to develop, and in 2017 the two parties signed a comprehensive and enhanced partnership agreement (CEPA). Following early parliamentary elections triggered by the political crisis of October 2018 and the subsequent peaceful Velvet Revolution, a new government was appointed, with Nikol Pashinyan as prime minister. The EU welcomed these developments as 'a smooth, democratic, peaceful transition'. With regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Minsk Group remains the negotiating format for its peaceful resolution; the EU has allocated more than €4.7 million to the European Partnership for Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK), a programme it set up to support peace-building efforts around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by facilitating dialogue between civil society, media and policy-makers.

Support for a cohesive society: a collaborative EU and Armenian civil society effort

The EU has repeatedly ensured its support for Armenian society through its bilateral relations with the country. Strengthening institutions, promoting the role of civil society players, supporting capacity-building and prioritising people-to-people contacts have been core values within the ENP Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility, the EaP Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, as well as the most recent EU-Armenia CEPA, provisionally in force since June 2018. The Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP) has been invited since 2016 to co-organise yearly events with the Union of Communities of Armenia and the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Development of the Republic of Armenia. The latest event, on 28 March 2019, was dedicated to local authorities and CSOs, notably aimed at looking at how those stakeholders should be involved in the implementation of the CEPA.

From 2017 to 2020, the EU is providing €160 million in funding assistance to civil society; the bulk of assistance reflects the four overall EU cooperation priorities – governance, connectivity, economy and society. Of the 91 EU projects currently implemented in Armenia, those concerning societal development specifically support the promotion of democratic development and good governance, civil society capacity-building and participation, vocational education, as well as agriculture and economic development.

The EU provided renewed support to Armenia in January 2018, reflecting the common values identified in the new CEPA. Civil society received a significant share of this support – €1.74 million for new activities promoting and protecting human rights and active citizenship – throughout the year. Furthermore, the EU provided more than €422 000 for the Elections4All project in order to promote Armenians' fundamental

This 'at a glance' note is one in a series produced at the request of a member of the European Committee of the Regions, in the framework of the Cooperation Agreement between the Parliament and the Committee.

right to vote. The project supported the coordinated action of civil society organisations (CSOs) and citizens in order to monitor the Armenian parliamentary election process in November 2018. The EU fully supports a cohesive society in Armenia, and therefore continues to [encourage](#) the mediation efforts towards the peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Aside from funding CSOs on the ground, the EU supported, through the OSCE Minsk Group, the January 2019 exchanges between Prime Minister Pashinyan and Azerbaijan's [President, Ilham Aliyev](#).

Role of civil society in Armenia

Democracy watchdog [Freedom House](#) asserts that Armenian civil society is relatively healthy, considering that it is in a region that has witnessed severe government crackdowns on CSOs in recent years. This was the case during the 2015 '[electric Yerevan](#)' protests over electricity price hikes; another example was the [assault](#) on a member of an independent political group during a peaceful opposition demonstration. Human rights organisation, [Human Rights Watch](#), states that Armenian authorities continue to interfere with freedom of assembly, using excessive force against peaceful protests and pressing unjustified criminal charges. No less than 5 200 CSOs have been registered with the Armenian Ministry of Justice, yet the laws governing their operation create a highly regulated environment. The global alliance of CSOs, [CIVICUS](#), estimates that only 15-20 % of registered CSOs are active. Furthermore, allegations of corruption in the sector, as reported by the [EaP Civil Society Forum](#) in 2017, have given reason for concern. Nevertheless, the Velvet Revolution of April 2018 provided a stark contrast to the picture in previous years. Well-organised civil society movements participated in the peaceful protests that brought about early parliamentary elections. The [OSCE election observation mission](#) deployed in the country found that the process had been held with respect for fundamental freedoms and had enjoyed public trust. Nevertheless, CSOs remain weak in their capacity to influence policy through formal channels.

Visa facilitation and mobility

The EU has consistently sought to strengthen its ties with Armenian civil society through visa facilitation and mobility. The EU signed a [mobility partnership](#) with Armenia in 2011, as well as two agreements – a [visa facilitation agreement](#) in 2012 and a [readmission agreement](#) in 2013. These two agreements came into force in January 2014. The number of visa applications has increased considerably since the 2012 agreement came into force. For example, in 2017 a total of [66 171](#) visas were issued for Armenians wishing to enter the Schengen area. In 2016-2017, [25.8 %](#) of total arrivals (1 259 657) into Armenia originated from an EU country.

Education and research cooperation

Armenia takes part in regional education, training and research programmes funded by the European Union. The EU's research and innovation programme, [Horizon 2020](#), became operational in Armenia in 2016. Further higher education and vocational training opportunities as well as mobility are offered to Armenian students and academia through the [Erasmus+](#) programme over the 2014-2020 period. The programme is supporting 97 projects worth €2.7 million over the [2018-2019](#) period, covering both students and staff. From [2015 to 2017](#), 1 323 Armenian Erasmus+ participants spent study or teaching time in the EU, and 578 EU participants did the same in Armenia. Through the DCFTA, [70](#) Armenian schools participated in the [eTwinning Plus](#) platform, to increase cooperation with Europe through the use of online tools.

The European Parliament

In its [recommendations](#) of 22 May 2018 to the EU negotiators of the EU-Armenia comprehensive agreement, the Parliament called for advancing the delivery of tangible benefits for Armenian society. Ways to do this include committing to conflict resolution; pursuing political reform; ensuring fundamental freedoms and the fight against corruption; and promoting trade and economic cooperation. The Parliament [commended](#) Armenia for the way it handled parliamentary elections in December 2018, and for having prevented electoral irregularities and malpractices. The Parliament has also organised meetings between young Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders through its [Young Political Leaders Programme](#).

