

From Neighbourhood to Enlargement: Armenia’s European Perspective in Historical and Legal Context

სამეზობლოდან გაფართოებამდე: სომხეთის ევროპული პერსპექტივა ისტორიულ და სამართლებრივ კონტექსტში

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Artak Mkrtichyan Minasyan^{1*} Samvel Poghosyan^{2a**}

არტაკ მკრტიჩიან მინასიანი^{1*}; სამველ პოღოსიანი²

¹ University of A Coruña, Coruña, Spain

² Khachatur Abovyan Armenian State Pedagogical University, Yerevan, Armenia

¹ ა-კორუნიის უნივერსიტეტი, ესპანეთი

² ხაჩატურ აბოვიანის სახელობის სომხეთის სახელმწიფო პედაგოგიური უნივერსიტეტი, ერევანი, სომხეთი

*a.mkrtichyan@udc.es; **poghosyansamvel@yahoo.com

Abstract

Introduction: Russia’s aggression against Ukraine returned European Union enlargement to the centre of the political agenda and renewed debate on the European perspectives of states outside the existing accession framework. Armenia represents a distinctive case because its historical and institutional ties with Europe coexist with long-standing security and economic dependence on Russia and participation in Russian-led regional organisations. This study examines the evolution of EU–Armenia relations from the European Neighbourhood Policy toward closer political and legal rapprochement and assesses whether these developments place Armenia within the contemporary EU enlargement debate. **Methods:** The study applies a historical and legal analysis. It examines the historical development of Armenia’s European orientation and geopolitical dependence, together with the evolution of EU–Armenia relations. The analysis draws on the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), EU primary law, Armenian legislation, and relevant institutional and policy documents adopted by the European Union and Armenia up to August 2026. Particular attention is given to Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union, the Copenhagen criteria, Armenia’s participation in Russian-led organisations, and recent developments in political, security, and sectoral cooperation with the EU. **Results:** The analysis shows that EU–Armenia relations have changed substantially, particularly since the 2020 war and the subsequent weakening of Armenia’s traditional security architecture. CEPA implementation, European civilian missions, security and defence cooperation, the visa liberalisation dialogue, the 2025 Armenian law on launching the EU accession process, and the first Armenia–EU Summit in 2026 have significantly increased the political and legal relevance of Armenia’s European orientation. Nevertheless, Armenia has not submitted a formal application under Article 49 TEU, has not received candidate or potential candidate status, and has not been formally granted a European perspective within EU enlargement policy. Major constraints include the need to satisfy the Copenhagen criteria, increase alignment with EU foreign and security policy, address incompatibilities arising from membership in the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and secure unanimous support from EU Member States. **Conclusion:** Armenia has moved beyond a conventional neighbourhood relationship with the European Union, but it remains outside the formal enlargement process. Current cooperation may create favourable political, institutional, and legal conditions for a future membership application, yet rapprochement should not be equated with accession. A transition from neighbourhood to enlargement would require a separate political decision by Armenia and the EU, substantial domestic reforms,

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resolution of conflicting external commitments, and sufficient willingness and capacity within the European Union to pursue further enlargement.

Keywords: Armenia; European Union; enlargement; Eastern Partnership; EU-Armenia relations.

შესავალი: რუსეთის აგრესიამ უკრაინის წინააღმდეგ ევროკავშირის გაფართოების საკითხი კვლავ პოლიტიკური დღის წესრიგის ცენტრში დააბრუნა და განაახლა დისკუსია იმ სახელმწიფოების ევროპულ პერსპექტივებზე, რომლებიც ამჟამად გაფართოების მოქმედ ჩარჩოს მიღმა იმყოფებიან. სომხეთი ამ მხრივ განსაკუთრებულ შემთხვევას წარმოადგენს, რადგან მისი ისტორიული და ინსტიტუციური კავშირები ევროპასთან თანაარსებობს რუსეთზე ხანგრძლივ უსაფრთხოების და ეკონომიკურ დამოკიდებულებასთან და რუსეთის მიერ მხარდაჭერილ რეგიონულ ორგანიზაციებში მონაწილეობასთან. კვლევის მიზანია შეისწავლოს ევროკავშირ-სომხეთის ურთიერთობების ევოლუცია ევროპული სამეზობლო პოლიტიკიდან უფრო მჭიდრო პოლიტიკურ და სამართლებრივ დაახლოებამდე და შეაფასოს, რამდენად ათავსებს ეს განვითარება სომხეთს ევროკავშირის გაფართოების თანამედროვე დისკუსიაში. **მეთოდები:** კვლევაში გამოყენებულია ისტორიული და სამართლებრივი ანალიზი. შესწავლილია სომხეთის ევროპული ორიენტაციისა და გეოპოლიტიკური დამოკიდებულების ისტორიული განვითარება, ასევე ევროკავშირ-სომხეთის ურთიერთობების ევოლუცია. ანალიზი ეფუძნება ყოვლისმომცველ და გაძლიერებულ პარტნიორობის შეთანხმებას (CEPA), ევროკავშირის პირველადი სამართლის აქტებს, სომხეთის კანონმდებლობას და ევროკავშირისა და სომხეთის მიერ 2026 წლის აგვისტომდე მიღებულ შესაბამის ინსტიტუციურ და პოლიტიკურ დოკუმენტებს. განსაკუთრებული ყურადღება ეთმობა ევროკავშირის შესახებ ხელშეკრულების 49-ე მუხლს, კოპენჰაგენის კრიტერიუმებს, სომხეთის მონაწილეობას რუსეთის მიერ მხარდაჭერილ ორგანიზაციებში და ევროკავშირთან პოლიტიკური, უსაფრთხოების და სექტორული თანამშრომლობის უახლეს განვითარებებს. **შედეგები:** ანალიზმა აჩვენა, რომ ევროკავშირ-სომხეთის ურთიერთობები მნიშვნელოვნად შეიცვალა, განსაკუთრებით 2020 წლის ომისა და შემდგომ პერიოდში სომხეთის ტრადიციული უსაფრთხოების არქიტექტურის შესუსტების ფონზე. CEPA-ს განხორციელებამ, ევროკავშირის სამოქალაქო მისიებმა, უსაფრთხოებისა და თავდაცვის სფეროში თანამშრომლობამ, ვიზალიზერალიზაციის დიალოგმა, 2025 წელს სომხეთის მიერ ევროკავშირში გაწევრიანების პროცესის დაწყების შესახებ კანონის მიღებამ და 2026 წელს სომხეთ-ევროკავშირის პირველმა სამიტმა მნიშვნელოვნად გაზარდა სომხეთის ევროპული ორიენტაციის პოლიტიკური და სამართლებრივი მნიშვნელობა. მიუხედავად ამისა, სომხეთს ჯერ არ წარუდგენია ოფიციალური განაცხადი ევროკავშირის შესახებ ხელშეკრულების 49-ე მუხლის საფუძველზე, არ მიუღია კანდიდატი ან პოტენციური კანდიდატი ქვეყნის სტატუსი და ევროკავშირის გაფართოების პოლიტიკის ფარგლებში ფორმალურად არ მინიჭებია ევროპული პერსპექტივა. მთავარ შეზღუდვებს წარმოადგენს კოპენჰაგენის კრიტერიუმების დაკმაყოფილების აუცილებლობა, ევროკავშირის საერთო საგარეო და უსაფრთხოების პოლიტიკასთან უფრო ფართო თანხვედრა, ევრაზიულ ეკონომიკურ კავშირსა და კოლექტიური უსაფრთხოების ხელშეკრულების ორგანიზაციაში წევრობიდან გამომდინარე შესაძლო შეუთავსებლობების მოგვარება და ევროკავშირის წევრი სახელმწიფოების ერთსულოვანი მხარდაჭერის მოპოვება. **დასკვნა:** სომხეთი ევროკავშირთან ჩვეულებრივი სამეზობლო ურთიერთობის ფარგლებს უკვე გასცდა, თუმცა კვლავ რჩება ფორმალური გაფართოების პროცესის მიღმა. არსებული თანამშრომლობა შეიძლება ხელსაყრელ პოლიტიკურ, ინსტიტუციურ და სამართლებრივ პირობებს ქმნიდეს მომავალში წევრობაზე განაცხადის წარსადგენად, თუმცა დაახლოება არ უნდა გაიგივდეს გაწევრიანების პროცესთან. სამეზობლოდან გაფართოების ეტაპზე გადასვლა მოითხოვს როგორც სომხეთისა და ევროკავშირის ცალკე პოლიტიკურ გადაწყვეტილებას, ისე მნიშვნელოვან შიდა რეფორმებს, ურთიერთსაწინააღმდეგო საგარეო ვალდებულებების

მოგვარებას და ევროკავშირის საკმარის პოლიტიკურ ნებასა და ინსტიტუციურ შესაძლებლობას შემდგომი გაფართოებისთვის.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: სომხეთი; ევროკავშირი; გაფართოება; აღმოსავლეთ პარტნიორობა; ევროკავშირ-სომხეთის ურთიერთობები.

1. Introduction

The Russian aggression against Ukraine placed enlargement again at the centre of the European Union’s political agenda. Decisions adopted in relation to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia showed that the limits of the enlargement process were not as fixed as they had appeared only a few years earlier. At the same time, this new context reopened the discussion concerning other European States situated outside the existing enlargement framework. Armenia is one of the most particular cases in this regard.

Armenia’s European perspective cannot be explained only by the recent deterioration of its relations with Russia. The country has historical and cultural links with Europe, and since independence it has participated in several European organisations and programmes. However, its external policy was also conditioned by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan, its security dependence on Russia and its participation in Russian-led regional organisations. For this reason, relations with the European Union (EU) developed more cautiously than in the cases of Ukraine, Moldova or Georgia.

For a long period, Armenia remained within the logic of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership. The decision not to sign the Association Agreement negotiated with the EU in 2013 appeared to confirm the limits of this relationship. Nevertheless, cooperation was not interrupted. The later conclusion of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) provided a different legal formula, adapted to Armenia’s membership of the Eurasian Economic Union. This agreement maintained legal approximation and a broad sectoral cooperation, although without placing Armenia within an accession framework.

The situation changed more visibly after the 2020 war and the subsequent crisis of Armenia’s traditional security architecture. The implementation of CEPA, the deployment of European missions, the development of security cooperation and the opening of the visa liberalisation dialogue gave the EU a greater place in Armenia’s external relations. The European Parliament resolution of March 2024, the Armenian law adopted in 2025 and the first Armenia-EU Summit in May 2026 also brought the question of possible accession into political discussion (European Parliament, 2024; European Union & Republic of Armenia, 2026). Even so, these developments have not provided Armenia with candidate status or with a formal European perspective.

The purpose of this study is to examine how relations moved from neighbourhood to the present rapprochement and whether this evolution places Armenia within the EU enlargement debate. The main argument is that the relationship has changed in a substantial way, especially since 2020, but a distinction must still be made between closer cooperation, recognition of European aspirations and the opening of an accession process. Armenia is no longer situated in an ordinary neighbourhood relationship. This does not mean that it has already entered the enlargement process.

The study combines historical and legal analysis. It takes into account historical developments that shaped Armenia’s European orientation and its regional dependence, and examines CEPA, EU primary law, Armenian legislation and the main institutional documents adopted up to August 2026. The first part explains the historical background and Armenia’s geopolitical vulnerability. The following part analyses the development of EU-Armenia relations and the instruments that support the present rapprochement. The final part considers Armenia’s position under Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union and the principal internal, external and EU-level conditions that would affect a possible accession.

2. Historical Background: Armenia between European Belonging, Regional Dependence and Geopolitical Vulnerability

2.1. *The Civilizational Anchor: Historical Roots of Armenia’s European Identity*

Armenia’s orientation toward Europe is not merely a modern tactical realignment dictated by contemporary security deficits; it is deeply rooted in a civilizational self-perception. Historically positioned at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Armenia’s civilizational identity was fundamentally shaped by its early

adoption of Christianity as a state religion in 301 AD and the creation of the Armenian alphabet in 405 AD. These developments anchored the country within the broader Christian and Greco-Roman cultural architecture that laid the foundations of modern Europe (Hovannisian, 1997a).

Throughout the medieval period, particularly during the Kingdom of Cilician Armenia (11th-14th centuries), Armenian political, legal, and noble elites established direct dynastic, commercial, and military ties with European crusader states and Western European monarchies. Cilician legal codes and administrative structures absorbed significant elements of Roman and feudal European law (Mutafian, 2001). Furthermore, during the 18th and 19th centuries, the Armenian Enlightenment - spearheaded by the Mekhitarist Order in Venice and Vienna - and the intellectual networks of Constantinople and Tiflis actively mediated Western European political philosophy, constitutionalism, and secular humanism into Armenian political thought (Hovannisian, 1997b).

In the period after the First World War, the short-lived First Republic of Armenia (1918-1920) explicitly envisioned itself as an outpost of Western democratic governance in the South Caucasus. Its international recognition under the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) reflected an early attempt to integrate Armenia into the post-imperial European international order. However, this Western orientation was abruptly severed by the joint Bolshevik-Kemalist partition of the republic (1920-1921), leading to seven decades of Sovietization (Hovannisian, 1997b).

2.2. The Post-Soviet Dilemma: Institutionalized Regional Dependence

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly independent Republic of Armenia inherited a complex geopolitical landscape defined by severe structural vulnerabilities. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, coupled with the bilateral land blockades imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan, fundamentally constrained Armenia's foreign policy manoeuvrability (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015).

Faced with an existential threat environment and an asymmetrical military balance in the region, Yerevan adopted a strategy of "complementarism", seeking to balance close security ties with Russia alongside constructive engagement with the West, particularly the EU, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United States. However, over time, this strategy proved structurally unsustainable: Armenia became deeply integrated into Russia-led security frameworks, most notably the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and bilateral defence agreements granting Moscow long-term military base presence (102nd Military Base in Gyumri). Critical sectors of the Armenian economy - including energy transmission (natural gas networks, nuclear power supply), telecommunications, and railway infrastructure - were progressively transferred to Russian state-owned monopolies. Armenia's strategic dependence culminated in 2013, when the government decided to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015). This decision vividly demonstrated how economic and security coercion could overrule Armenia's European aspirations.

2.3. Geopolitical Vulnerability and the Imperative for Strategic Autonomy

Armenia's structural dependence created an acute security paradox. Rather than guaranteeing sovereignty and territorial integrity, exclusive reliance on a single regional patron heightened Armenia's geopolitical vulnerability (Yemelianova, 2023).

The limits of this arrangement were catastrophically exposed during the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, subsequent Azerbaijani border incursions into sovereign Armenian territory (2021-2022), and the forced displacement of entire Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 (European Parliament, 2024). The institutional paralysis of the CSTO and Russia's failure to uphold its contractual and peacekeeping commitments triggered a profound legitimacy crisis regarding Armenia's traditional security architecture (Yemelianova, 2023).

Consequently, Armenia's post-2020 foreign policy has evolved from passive balancing to an active quest for strategic diversification.

3. From Neighbourhood to Rapprochement: The Development of EU-Armenia Relations

In comparison with other States that emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, relations between Armenia and the European Union remained for a long time more discreet and limited. This was not the consequence of an absence of European links, but rather of the particular idiosyncrasy of Armenia's external position, its security architecture and the high degree of economic dependence on Russia. As was explained in the previous section, these circumstances considerably reduced Armenia's room for manoeuvre.

Nevertheless, the relationship with the EU was maintained and progressively acquired a more developed legal and institutional content (Mkrtichyan Minasyan, 2024).

The South Caucasus was included in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004 and, five years later, Armenia became part of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). These frameworks made possible the progressive development of relations with the EU. Their scope, however, was limited. The ENP was not conceived as an instrument of the enlargement policy. The Commission did not link closer cooperation with neighbouring countries to their possible accession to the Union (European Commission, 2003). The same caution remained under the Eastern Partnership. It allowed greater political dialogue, legal approximation and sectoral cooperation, but without recognising a European perspective for the participating countries. In the case of Armenia, this distinction soon had practical consequences. Between 2010 and 2013, Armenia and the EU negotiated an Association Agreement, including a DCFTA. Its signature became impossible after Armenia decided to join the EAEU, since the trade commitments were not compatible. The association model followed with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia could not therefore be applied to Armenia in the same way. Nevertheless, this did not interrupt cooperation with the EU. Both sides searched for another formula, adapted to Armenia's obligations within the EAEU.

This led to the CEPA, signed in November 2017 and fully in force since March 2021. The agreement preserved an important part of the previous cooperation agenda and became the main legal basis for the subsequent rapprochement. CEPA must be considered a distinctive agreement. Its political component and many of its mechanisms of legal approximation are close to those found in the Association Agreements, but it does not include a DCFTA and does not place Armenia within the same framework of economic integration as the associated trio (European Union & Republic of Armenia, 2018; Khvorostiankina, 2017). This difference should be highlighted because the name of the agreement and its broad scope may create an impression that its legal effects are equivalent to association. They are not. CEPA was precisely adapted to the limits resulting from Armenia's EAEU membership.

At the same time, CEPA cannot be reduced to an ordinary cooperation instrument. It provides a broad framework for political dialogue, reform, sectoral cooperation and approximation of Armenian legislation to EU law. The commitments cover, among other matters, justice, public administration, transport, energy, environment, consumer protection, employment, competition and trade-related regulation. Approximation is accompanied by monitoring obligations and requires not only formal legislative amendments but also administrative capacity and effective implementation. The Agreement also created a Partnership Council, a Partnership Committee and specialised subcommittees, together with parliamentary and civil-society bodies. Consequently, EU-Armenia relations acquired a continuity and an institutional density that did not depend exclusively on political declarations or changes of government (European Union & Republic of Armenia, 2018).

This legal base allowed cooperation to be extended after the entry into force of CEPA. Armenia benefited from the post-2020 Economic and Investment Plan for the EaP and concluded or implemented instruments concerning Europol, Eurojust, Horizon Europe and the Common Aviation Area. These developments enlarged the network of legal relations with the EU and brought Armenian administrations into more regular contact with EU institutions, agencies and standards. They do not constitute an accession process, but they have a practical importance that should not be underestimated. In several sectors, Armenia is already carrying out reforms and approximation exercises similar in their method, although not in their general intensity, to those expected from States with a closer association framework. The 2025 Partnership Implementation Report noted, in this regard, a priority exercise concerning approximation to 255 EU legal instruments by 2026 (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025).

After 2020, the development of relations acquired a clearer security and geopolitical dimension. The events that explain this change have already been discussed in the historical section. For the purposes of the present section, it is sufficient to indicate their legal and institutional consequences. The presence of the EU on the ground began in 2022, initially through a temporary monitoring capacity. This experience was followed by the establishment of EUMA, within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). EUMA is a civilian and unarmed mission and operates exclusively on the Armenian side of the international border with Azerbaijan. Its mandate is mainly related to observing and reporting on the situation on the ground, contributing to human security and, when circumstances allow, supporting confidence building. The continuation of EUMA also shows that the involvement of the EU in Armenia is no longer limited to political

declarations or financial assistance. In January 2025, the Council extended the mandate of the mission until February 2027 and allocated more than EUR 44 million for this new period (Council of the European Union, 2025).

Security cooperation also moved beyond monitoring. In July 2024, the Council adopted the first assistance measure for Armenia under the European Peace Facility, amounting to EUR 10 million. A second measure of EUR 20 million was adopted in January 2026, raising total support to EUR 30 million. The measures are non-lethal and focus on logistical capacity, protection of civilians and possible interoperability for participation in international missions, including EU operations (Council of the European Union, 2026b). Moreover, Armenia and the EU launched security and defence consultations and signed a framework participation agreement that permits Armenian participation in EU crisis-management operations. These instruments remain limited when compared with a security guarantee, and they should not be presented as such. Nevertheless, they show that an area almost absent from the earlier EU-Armenia relationship has become one of its most dynamic dimensions (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025).

Mobility has followed a parallel evolution. The visa liberalisation dialogue was launched in September 2024 and the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan was handed to the Armenian authorities in November 2025. The Action Plan establishes benchmarks in document security, border and migration management, public order, anti-corruption, data protection and fundamental rights. The first Commission progress report, presented in April 2026, recognised strong political commitment and the initiation of numerous reforms, but it also made clear that visa-free travel depends on the fulfilment and effective implementation of all benchmarks (European Commission, 2026). This is a good example of the current character of the relationship: rapprochement is producing concrete opportunities, although these remain conditional and do not derive automatically from political proximity.

In December 2025, Armenia and the EU adopted a new Strategic Agenda, replacing the Partnership Priorities of 2017. The document extends cooperation to a wide range of areas and gives more relevance to security and defence, together with democracy, human rights, mobility, connectivity and economic development. However, this development takes place within the existing framework. The Strategic Agenda is based on CEPA and continues to form part of the Eastern Partnership (European Union & Republic of Armenia, 2025). There is, therefore, a clear increase in the level of cooperation, but without changing the legal nature of relations. CEPA remains a partnership agreement and not a pre-accession instrument.

The first Armenia-EU Summit, which took place in Yerevan in May 2026, gave new political visibility to relations between the two sides. In the Joint Declaration, the parties expressed their support for a further sectoral integration of Armenia and its rapprochement with the EU acquis. The document also acknowledged the European aspirations of the Armenian people and envisaged closer cooperation in several areas, such as connectivity, transport, energy, digital matters, as well as security and defence. This does not mean, however, that Armenia was granted a formal European perspective. The wording of the declaration remained prudent and the declaration did not recognise Armenia as a candidate country, or even as a potential candidate country (European Union & Republic of Armenia, 2026). This distinction should be kept in mind when considering the actual place of Armenia in the present enlargement debate. Another important step was taken shortly after the Summit. In July 2026, the EU Partnership Mission in Armenia was launched as a second civilian CSDP mission in the country. This mission should not be confused with EUMA, since it has a different mandate. Its main purpose is to provide advice and contribute to the strengthening of Armenian capacities in dealing with hybrid threats, including cyber-attacks, foreign information manipulation and illicit financial flows (Council of the European Union, 2026a).

Therefore, the present stage may be described as a passage from neighbourhood to a more ambitious rapprochement. The relationship has moved beyond the traditional instruments of the ENP and now includes legal approximation, institutional monitoring, mobility conditionality, economic resilience, security cooperation and two civilian missions. However, it would be premature to describe this development as gradual integration in the same sense used for candidate States or for States linked to the EU by Association Agreements and DCFTAs. CEPA remains both the platform and the limit of the current relationship. It allows closer engagement with the EU, but the transition from partnership to enlargement would require a separate decision under EU primary law.

4. Armenia's Place in the EU Enlargement Debate

The renewed enlargement process after the Russian aggression against Ukraine created a window of opportunity for States that were not previously included in an immediate accession perspective. In the Armenian case, the debate became visible later and with greater caution than in Ukraine, Moldova or Georgia. The European Parliament's resolution of 13 March 2024 was the first EU institutional text to address the issue in particularly explicit terms. It considered that, if Armenia were interested in applying for candidate status and continued its reforms, this could open a transformative phase in EU-Armenia relations (European Parliament, 2024). However, the position of the European Parliament, although politically relevant, did not create a legal accession perspective.

The internal Armenian debate later acquired a legal form. On 26 March 2025, the National Assembly adopted the Law on Launching the Process of the Republic of Armenia's Accession to the European Union (Republic of Armenia, 2025). This law has an evident political and symbolic importance because it places European integration among the objectives of Armenian public policy. Nonetheless, its effects should not be confused with those of an application for membership. A national law cannot initiate the procedure established by EU law, confer candidate status or impose any obligation on the Union. As of August 2026, Armenia has not submitted a formal application under Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), as was also clear from the Prime Minister's statements at the end of July (Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2026). In addition, Article 205 of the Armenian Constitution requires accession to a supranational international organisation to be decided by referendum (Republic of Armenia, 2015, art. 205). The first Armenia-EU Summit acknowledged the aspirations expressed through the 2025 law, but did not go further and maintained the relationship within CEPA and the Strategic Agenda (European Union & Republic of Armenia, 2026).

Article 49 TEU constitutes the only legal basis for accession. It permits any European State that respects the values of Article 2 TEU and is committed to promoting them to apply for membership. The application is addressed to the Council, which decides unanimously after consulting the Commission and obtaining the consent of the European Parliament. The final accession agreement must also be ratified by all contracting States according to their constitutional requirements (European Union, 2016a, art. 49). Therefore, even the submission of an application would only open a procedure whose continuation depends on political decisions by the Member States and on a broad legal assessment.

The first question would concern Armenia's eligibility as a European State. Article 49 does not establish a precise geographical test, and European practice has considered historical, cultural, political and institutional factors together with geography. Armenia's participation in the Council of Europe, its historical links with European institutions and the position adopted by the European Parliament support the view that an application cannot be excluded solely on geographical grounds. At the same time, no EU institution competent to open an accession procedure has yet made a definitive determination on this matter. In this regard, the recognition of the European aspirations of the Armenian people in the 2026 Summit Declaration is important, but it is not legally equivalent to the recognition of a European perspective or candidate status (European Union & Republic of Armenia, 2026).

If this initial question were resolved favourably, Armenia would have to satisfy the Copenhagen criteria. These require stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and protection of minorities; a functioning market economy capable of dealing with competitive pressure inside the Union; and the ability to assume the obligations of membership. The Union's capacity to absorb new members while maintaining the momentum of European integration is also an important consideration (European Council, 1993). These requirements are substantially wider than those currently examined within CEPA.

CEPA may nevertheless perform a preparatory function. Its provisions on democratic principles, human rights, judicial and administrative reform and legislative approximation create an initial basis for evaluating several matters that would later form part of an accession process. The Commission has recognised progress in governance, democracy, the rule of law and the implementation of CEPA. At the same time, it has also identified political polarisation, hybrid threats, corruption-related difficulties and the need to continue reforms concerning justice, public administration, border management and data protection (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025). These deficiencies do not prevent the opening of a political debate, but they show that the assessment required for membership would be more demanding than the existing partnership monitoring.

The economic criterion would present additional difficulties. Armenia has not developed a DCFTA with the EU and has not followed the same path of integration into the internal market as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. More importantly, Armenia remains a full member of the EAEU (Eurasian Economic Commission, n.d.). EU membership entails participation in the EU customs union and the common commercial policy, which are areas of exclusive Union competence (European Union, 2016b, arts. 3, 28 and 207). Consequently, simultaneous membership of the EU and continued participation in the EAEU customs and trade framework would be legally very difficult to reconcile. This does not mean that Armenia would have to leave the EAEU before any preliminary political discussion. It does mean that the issue would have to be resolved before accession.

Armenia's other international commitments would also be examined. Under Article 351 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, agreements concluded by an acceding State before accession are not automatically deprived of effect, but incompatibilities with EU law must be eliminated (European Union, 2016b, art. 351). In this context, Armenia's formal membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, despite the suspension of its practical participation, would raise questions in relation to the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the mutual assistance obligations of Article 42(7) TEU (European Union, 2016a, art. 42(7)). NATO membership, on the contrary, is not a legal requirement for EU accession and should not be presented as one. The relevant matter is not the substitution of one military alliance by another, but the compatibility of Armenia's security commitments with the obligations deriving from EU membership.

Foreign-policy alignment may become one of the most sensitive issues. Armenia's rate of alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy increased from 7% in 2022 to 37% in 2025. This is a considerable development, but the level remains partial and Armenia has not aligned itself with the EU restrictive measures against Russia. The Union has recognised cooperation by Armenia in preventing circumvention, while continuing to consider re-export risks a matter of concern (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025). At the current stage, this cautious position is understandable in light of Armenia's economic and security exposure. In an accession process, however, selective cooperation would have to evolve towards more systematic alignment with EU external action.

The position of the Member States would be equally decisive. The European Parliament has been the EU institution most clearly in favour of Armenia and of stronger measures after the displacement of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Council and the European Council have generally adopted a more pragmatic position, taking into account relations with Azerbaijan, energy interests, regional stability and the different preferences of the Member States. Unanimity under Article 49 TEU means that the support of some institutions or some Member States cannot compensate for the opposition of another Member State. This institutional reality already affects measures much more limited than accession and would acquire greater importance if Armenia submitted an application.

Finally, Armenia's possible accession must be placed within the parallel debate on enlargement and deepening. The European Council has repeatedly stated that aspiring members and the Union itself must be ready at the time of accession, and that internal reforms have to advance in parallel with enlargement (European Council, 2025). This debate concerns the budget, institutional representation, decision-making and, especially, the use of unanimity in foreign and security policy. Armenia is not the cause of these difficulties, but its complex security environment and external commitments make them especially visible. A future accession would require not only Armenian reforms but also a Union able to integrate new members without further weakening the coherence of its external action.

For these reasons, Armenia occupies an intermediate and legally complex place in the present enlargement debate. It can no longer be considered only an ordinary neighbour, particularly after the adoption of the Strategic Agenda, the first bilateral Summit, the development of security cooperation and the explicit recognition of Armenian European aspirations. Nevertheless, Armenia is not part of the formal enlargement process, has not submitted an application, has no candidate status and continues to be bound by external commitments that would be difficult to reconcile with membership. The current rapprochement may create favourable conditions for a future application, but it should not be confused with the existence of an accession perspective. At this moment, the most accurate conclusion is that accession has become politically discussable and legally conceivable, although it remains institutionally distant and subject to important internal, external and EU-level conditions.

5. Conclusions

Armenia’s European perspective is the result of both a historical orientation and more recent political and security developments. Its links with Europe existed before the present crisis in relations with Russia. However, the failures of the security architecture on which Armenia had relied for many years gave a new and more practical importance to cooperation with the EU. The current rapprochement should therefore not be understood only as a civilizational return or only as a geopolitical reaction. Both elements are present.

The development of EU-Armenia relations also shows a considerable capacity of adaptation. The impossibility of signing the Association Agreement in 2013 did not end cooperation. CEPA offered another formula and preserved many elements of political dialogue, legal approximation and sectoral cooperation, while taking into account Armenia’s membership of the EAEU. Since its entry into force, this agreement has allowed relations to become broader and more institutionalised. The Strategic Agenda, the first bilateral Summit, the visa liberalisation dialogue, the European Peace Facility measures and the two civilian missions confirm this development. Nevertheless, all these measures continue to operate within partnership instruments. They have not transformed CEPA into a pre-accession agreement.

The same caution is necessary when considering the steps taken since 2024. The European Parliament supported the possibility of a future application, and the Armenian law of March 2025 gave political and symbolic expression to the objective of accession. Neither measure, however, opened the procedure under Article 49 TEU. Armenia has not submitted an application and the Member States have not recognised it as a candidate or potential candidate country. The first Armenia-EU Summit acknowledged the European aspirations of the Armenian people, but did not alter this legal situation.

A future application is legally conceivable, but it would raise difficult questions. Armenia would have to satisfy the Copenhagen criteria and continue reforms already examined under CEPA. It would also have to resolve the incompatibility between EU membership and the customs and trade obligations resulting from the EAEU, clarify the future of its formal CSTO membership and reach a much higher level of alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy. At the same time, progress would depend on unanimity among the Member States and on the capacity of the Union to continue enlargement together with its own internal reform.

Consequently, Armenia occupies an intermediate position. It can no longer be treated only as one of the Eastern Partnership neighbours, but it is not yet part of the formal enlargement process. Under the current legal and institutional framework, CEPA implementation and sectoral integration remain the principal operative channels of EU–Armenia relations. These developments may prepare favourable conditions for a later application, although they do not replace it. The passage from neighbourhood to enlargement is therefore still incomplete. What has changed is that Armenian accession, previously considered remote, has become a matter that can now be discussed in political and legal terms.

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