



TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP PROGRAM FOR “LEADERSHIP ACADEMY” ALUMNI

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES OF ARMENIA-EU RELATIONS Lilit Sofyan

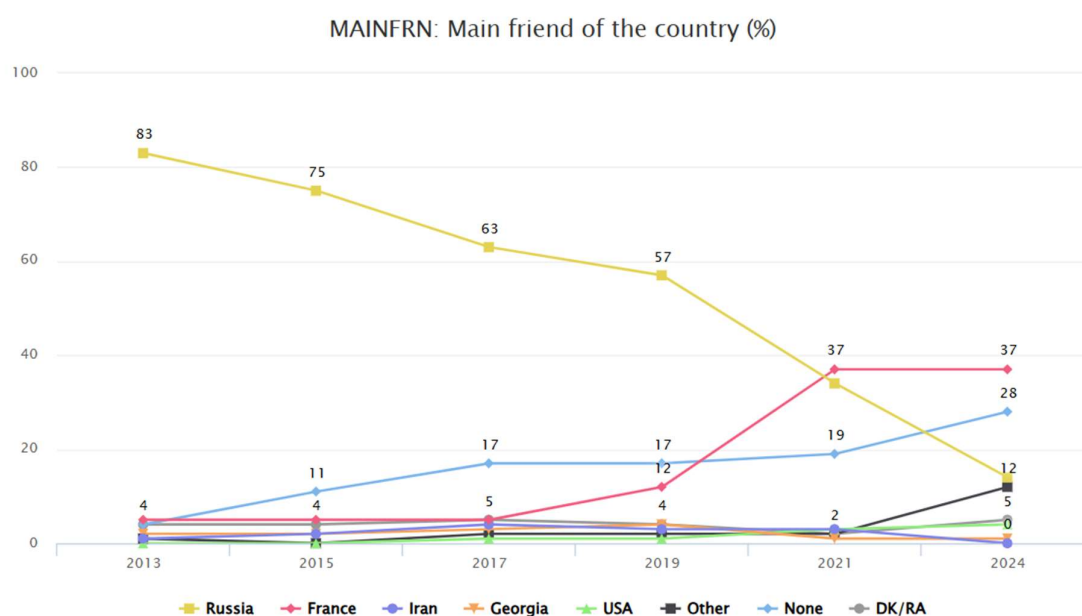
Abstract

This paper examines how young Armenians perceive their country's deepening relationship with the European Union (EU). Drawing upon desk research, survey data, and qualitative insights, it explores both the opportunities and challenges shaping youth attitudes toward EU–Armenia cooperation. Recent findings reveal that Armenian youth generally appreciate the EU's contribution to education, governance, and mobility, yet remain divided due to geopolitical concerns, political polarization, and limited or ineffective communication about tangible EU impacts. Placing these perceptions within broader frameworks of Europeanization and soft power, the study argues that youth engagement and inclusive communication are essential for advancing Armenia's European trajectory.

Introduction

Since Armenia's independence in 1991, relations with the European Union (EU) have evolved from initial technical cooperation to a more complex political and economic partnership. The 2017 Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) marked a significant turning point, establishing a framework for reforms in governance, economy, justice, and the social development of Armenia. Despite the setback of Armenia's sacrifice of its Association Agreement in 2013, the CEPA reaffirmed Armenia's intention to pursue Western-style modernization and closer ties with the EU while maintaining its multi-vector geopolitical partnership.

Over the past three years, Armenia’s geopolitical interests have undergone a notable transformation. Once widely perceived as the country’s “strategic ally,” Russia’s role as a security provider and partner has been increasingly challenged following its lack of support during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and in response to Azerbaijan’s military attacks on Armenia’s sovereign territory in 2022. This shift has resulted in Armenia’s growing aspiration to move closer to the EU both politically and economically despite being significantly dependent on Russia and Russia-led alliances in terms of security and economy. Moreover, the deployment of the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) in 2023, aimed at monitoring and providing stability along the vulnerable border areas between Armenia and Azerbaijan, symbolized a new phase of trust and security cooperation between Yerevan and Brussels. However, the path toward this goal remains complex and, at times, contentious.



Source: Caucasus Barometer

The EU remains Armenia’s largest donor, investing over €65 million annually in sectors such as education, innovation, and good governance. Youth development policy, a longstanding EU priority, occupies a central role in this relationship. Across the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region, the EU has committed €340 million in support for youth

development, employability, and participation.¹ For many young Armenians, programs such as Erasmus+, EU4Youth, and the European Solidarity Corps have been transformative — providing access to quality education, civic engagement, and intercultural mobility.

While the Armenian government pursues a strategic policy “to be as close to the European Union as the EU considers possible,” public opinion — particularly among young people — remains divided. According to recent surveys, despite the visible benefits of EU cooperation, Armenian youth demonstrate neither unequivocal support nor outright opposition to EU integration. This ambivalence reflects a combination of political disillusionment, information asymmetry, and geopolitical uncertainty.

Numerous studies have addressed public attitudes toward the EU in Armenia, while youth-specific perspectives remain underexplored, however. Given that nearly 30 percent of Armenia’s population is under the age of 35,² this study therefore seeks to understand how young Armenians perceive their country’s deepening engagement with the EU. Thus, the main research questions include:

- What are Armenian young people’s perceptions of the opportunities and challenges arising from the country’s partnership with the EU?
- Which factors — such as exposure to EU programs, media consumption, political views, or geographical background — influence these attitudes?

Desk research was conducted, bolstered by the use of public opinion data from other sources, including the Caucasus Barometer survey (2024), the International Republican Institute (IRI survey, 2025), and EU communication reports. These documents and reports were analyzed to contextualize youth sentiment within broader national trends and find answers to this questions.

¹ Annual Survey 2024 – Armenia. Perception of the European Union, EU regional Communication Programme for the Eastern Neighbourhood (EU NEIGHBOURS East), 1 November 2024. <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/annual-survey-2024-armenia/>

² Armenian State Statistical Committee Report, 2025. <https://armstat.am/en/?nid=157>

What do the youth think in Armenia?

As Armenia reassesses its foreign policy priorities following regional crises starting with the 2020 war, understanding how young people interpret these dynamics becomes crucial to evaluate the sustainability of EU–Armenia relations. Survey data reveal that Armenian youth, in particular, are not uniformly pro-European, in contrast to other Eastern Partner countries such as Georgia or Moldova. While many Armenians associate the EU with democracy, the rule of law, developed infrastructure, and modern technologies, others express a degree of Euroscepticism or disengagement regarding the EU’s role and influence in the region. For example, the IRI survey 2025 shows that 73 percent of the overall Armenian population evaluates the current state of relations between Armenia and EU as “good,” while only 14 percent of youth aged 18-35 identify themselves as “only pro-European,” as the share of those who are pro-Western, but also reflects their opinion of maintaining relations with Russia, which is comparably larger, at 32 percent.³

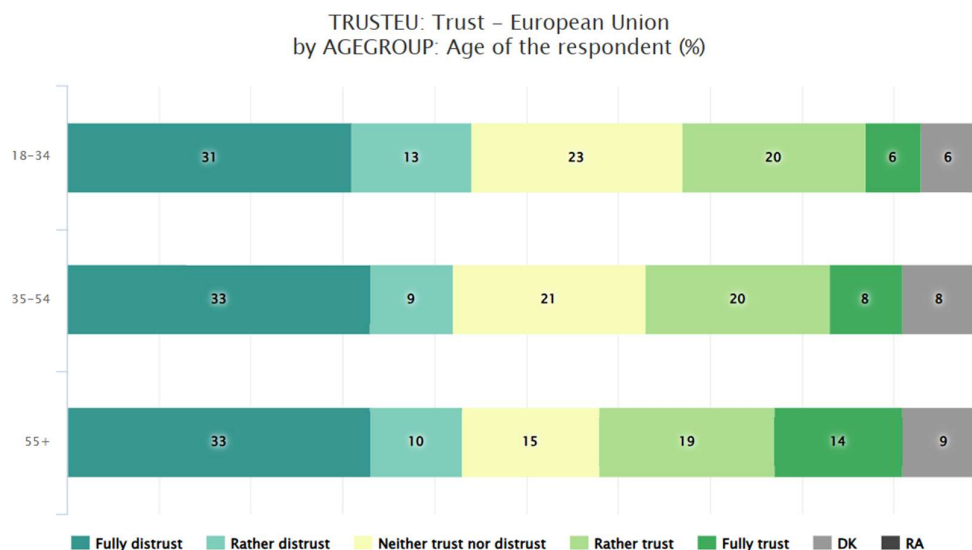
According to the Caucasus Barometer survey, conducted from July to October of 2024, only 30 percent of respondents reported trust in the European Union, while 42 percent did not, with no significant difference observed between younger and older demographic groups.⁴ Interestingly, as sociologist Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan noticed, there is no classic urban-rural divide, as in many other post-communist states, where young urban populations and students are usually pro-European, while the youth in the countryside is more conservative and traditionalist.⁵ As they say “it is the educated, urban youth in Yerevan who are very critical of EU accession.” In other words, the urban youth in Armenia may be more aware and informed of geopolitical issues, having access to various sources of information, but on the other hand, youth in Yerevan do not necessarily support the political course of the Pashinyan government overall, which also results in distrust towards his political stance to deepen partnership with the EU.

³ “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia June 2025.” International Republican Institute (IRI), 21 July 2025. <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-armenia-june-2025/>

⁴ Caucasus Barometer survey, 2024. <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/>

⁵ According to sociologist Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan, “Armenia on the Way to Europe?” ZOIS Caucasus Network, 6 May 2025. <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/events/armenia-on-the-way-to-europe>

Speaking of distrust, one of the main reasons is the notable geopolitical insecurity following the 2023 displacement of ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh and general disappointment from international actors for their late response or ignorance.



While the trust in the EU is lower, at the same time, public opinion on potential EU membership also remains divided but relatively positive: approximately 44 percent of Armenians support the country's future EU accession, whereas around 27 percent oppose it. Even though there is no significant divide within age groups, it is important to highlight that 24 percent of 18-35 aged young people are opposed to the EU membership, while 44 percent is in favor, in 2024. The numbers show that the young population is currently interested in deepening cooperation with the EU but there are several internal and external factors that restrains Armenia despite decisions and statement of the Armenian government, including the recent EU accession legislation adopted by the Armenian parliament.

Perceived Opportunities and challenges

Speaking of the perceived benefits of Armenia's potential accession to the European Union, it is obvious that EU membership may strengthen democratic governance, and as an opportunity to consolidate transparency, accountability, and the rule of law within Armenia's political system. However, only 5 percent valued strengthening democracy as a benefit of joining the EU.

Respondents in the recent IRI survey also frequently highlighted aspects related to security, stability, and economic development. Primarily, according to 37 percent of respondents, closer integration with the EU is viewed as a pathway to strengthening Armenia’s national security and ensuring political and regional stability — a particular concern in the aftermath of recent tension. In contrary, others pointed to the possibility of heightened security challenges, noting that alignment with the EU might provoke geopolitical tension in the region, particularly with Russia, which has a major presence and influence in various sectors in Armenia including the economy and trade, energy, infrastructure, the security services and intelligence, and defense.

Secondly, economic progress and the country’s overall development were also among the most commonly cited advantages, reflecting public expectations that EU membership could foster trade and investments, modernization, and job creation. However, the opposite side thinks that the EU integration may have a negative impact on domestic industries and employment, arguing that Armenia’s economy might struggle to compete within the EU’s regulatory and market framework. Additionally, respondents emphasized the importance of visa liberalization associated with enhanced educational and professional mobility for Armenian youth, but noted, however, that it can also bring migration challenges to Armenia as many skilled young people may seek long-term job opportunities in the Member states which will result in a brain drain and lack of professionals in job market.

Most surprisingly, a significant share (28 percent) of those who are against EU membership expressed concern over the erosion of traditional family values and cultural identity, fearing that closer integration with Europe could lead to cultural homogenization and weaken Armenian social norms. However, it should be highlighted that this concern is not necessarily mentioned by young people only. Thus, this combination of optimism and caution illustrates a complex and multidimensional public attitude: while many young people see the EU as a symbol of progress and reform, others remain wary of the implications for national security, and geopolitical and regional stability.

Factors shaping youth attitudes

How are these perspectives arising? Based on observation, public attitudes toward the EU in Armenia are shaped not only by socioeconomic considerations but also by the country’s complex geopolitical realities and recent unprecedented developments. As mentioned earlier, one of the most influential factors has been the inadequate international response to the 2023 mass expulsion of ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, which profoundly affected public trust in global and regional actors, including the EU. At the same time, the establishment of the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) in early 2023 raised high expectations among many citizens, who saw it as a tangible sign of the EU’s growing presence and commitment to regional stability. However, the 2023 humanitarian and security crisis around the Nagorno-Karabakh issue fostered a sense of disappointment and disillusionment toward the EU that was perceived as passive or ineffective in preventing the tragedy. And the mission’s limited mandate and perceived lack of deterrent power have also tempered enthusiasm, reinforcing the perception that the EU’s role, while symbolically important, remains largely political rather than strategic.

Another critical factor influencing public opinion is the domestic criticism and overall political context in the country. The public polarization surrounding the Pashinyan government’s pro-European course has deepened divisions in society, with part of the population supporting reforms aligned with EU standards, while others remain skeptical. Pro-Russian sentiments, reinforced by Armenia’s long-standing economic and security dependence on Moscow, continue to shape attitudes toward external partners. Moreover, anti-European narratives disseminated through media influenced by external powers have also contributed to misperceptions about the EU’s intentions, values and priorities. There is also a significant information gap within society, and especially among youth in the regions of Armenia, regarding the ongoing support and tangible contributions of the EU. Furthermore, Armenians have limited knowledge of the EU and poor understanding of the main benefits that EU integration and membership would bring to Armenia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the EU-funded programs that promote mobility and civic participation demonstrate the EU’s ability to project soft power; however, without visible security guarantees, this influence may remain fragile. That also explains why, comparatively, Armenian youth appear more cautious than their counterparts in Georgia or Moldova, where EU membership enjoys overwhelming support. This pragmatism reflects both Armenia’s security dilemmas and limited capabilities to align with EU priorities. Together, these factors create a complex public landscape where trust in the EU is mediated by both domestic political discourse and the broader geopolitical context, leaving Armenian society cautiously navigating between aspirations for European integration and the constraints of its regional realities.

Finally, the sustainability of EU–Armenia relations will depend not only on intergovernmental negotiations but on how effectively young Armenians perceive the EU as a partner in building a democratic, prosperous, and secure future. Integrating youth perspectives into policy dialogue is therefore essential for transforming ambivalence into a continuous and mutually beneficial partnership.



Note

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