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## Armenian–Ukrainian Relations: Common Challenges and Different Visions

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Ukraine is a strategically important partner country for Armenia, even despite the ongoing stalemate in bilateral political relations, which has developed as a result of the 2014 Ukrainian revolution (also known as the “Euromaidan Revolution” or the “Revolution of Dignity”) and the surprising accession of Armenia to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

Armenian-Ukrainian bilateral relations and cooperation still has significant potential, however, especially given Ukraine’s role as a key state in the EU’s Eastern Partnership (EaP) Program, and as a key element of the common European and Euro-Atlantic security system.



At the same time, both Ukraine and Armenia are part of the Eastern Partnership Program, which offers post-Soviet countries the opportunity of deeper engagement and gradual integration within the EU, easier travel to the EU through visa liberalization, and the introduction of measures to tackle illegal immigration.

Nevertheless, Ukraine remains burdened by a challenging course of democratization, the aftermath of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing military conflict in the eastern Ukraine with pro-Russian and Moscow-backed forces.

For its part, the Armenian government adopted a sudden political “U-Turn” away from its own chance for greater European integration and association, instead joining the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Armenia also faces a daunting security threat, however, from a recent escalation in military skirmishes and combat with Azerbaijan over the disputed areas of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Despite the lack of direct geographic connections between Armenia and Ukraine, both countries share a “common” line which can be defined as an ongoing deep political and geopolitical challenge that encompasses the wider Black Sea region. This degree of geopolitical instability brings new multilateral challenges to the Eastern Partnership region, as the established model of state governance falls short in providing sustainable growth and economic and political stability in the region.

Within this framework, the outlook for Armenian-Ukrainian relations is much broader from the more limited bilateral context. The real value-added implication of the relationship can be found within the broader framework of ongoing regional developments. Today, Ukrainian statehood faces a variety of institutional challenges: corruption, the necessity of public sector reform, aggressive Russian propaganda, economic recession, etc.

The outcome of the democratization process in Ukraine will be crucial not only for the Ukrainians but generally for all post-Soviet states, including Armenia. Simultaneously, Armenia, despite its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), faces almost the same institutional and democratization challenges as Ukraine. The high rate of corruption and low level of economic competitiveness are barriers to the further development and diversification of Armenia's economy. Whenever it comes to Armenian-Ukrainian relations, however, one of the more under-estimated facts is the size and importance of the Armenian ethnic diaspora community in Ukraine. According to data of the Union of Armenians of Ukraine, for example, there are approximately 350,000 ethnic Armenians currently living in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

It is also worth noting that the Armenians in Ukraine constitute the second largest Armenian community in Europe, second only to France. The key feature of the Armenian community in Ukraine is its high degree of integration within Ukrainian society. The Armenian community acts in accordance with the ongoing political and social agenda of the Ukrainian state.

And according to parliamentarian Nikolay Knyazhytsky, some 52 Armenians have sacrificed their lives in fighting in eastern Ukraine against the pro-Russian forces. This has also been confirmed by Ukrainian Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, who is also considered to be one of the key Armenian-Ukrainian policy makers.

Simultaneously, the level of political and economic relations between Armenia and Ukraine remains dramatically low. First and foremost, there is a lack of public support for the deepening of relations between the two countries, as the Armenian reality is that Ukraine is usually perceived as a country that confronts Russia and automatically "harms and hampers" the prospects of a strong Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union.

On the other hand, the Armenian ruling political majority usually believes that the recent developments in Ukraine are not naturally driven by the necessity of change and democratic reforms but are rather a reflection of a weak political power system that was formed by ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.

Accordingly, there is a dominant misunderstanding of the real reasons and motivations for the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity and that further drives the democratization process in Ukraine. As a result, the key policy makers in Armenia perceive Ukraine as a country not located in its nearest neighborhood and strategically important for Armenia, but rather, as a country that does not have a direct connection with the Armenian political reality and its foreign policy.

Yet Armenian Foreign Minister Nalbandyan, in a speech at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's 89th Rose-Roth Seminar in Yerevan, voiced the official position of Yerevan on Ukraine, particularly noting that "today, the attention of the international community is focused on finding ways of settlement of the Ukrainian Crisis. Armenia and Ukraine are connected not only with centuries-old friendship, but also through thousands of Armenians living in Ukraine."<sup>2</sup>

The reality, however, is that the Armenian leadership has already taken some steps that not only contradict the term "friendship," but rather, tend to discredit Armenia as a reliable international partner for the Ukrainian government. Armenia's controversial vote over the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 68/262 entitled "Territorial Integrity of Ukraine,"<sup>3</sup> where Armenia backed the Russian position, for example, endangered the future of Armenian-Ukrainian relations, triggering a deep diplomatic crisis that led to the Ukrainian recall of their ambassador to Armenia.<sup>4</sup> This process would not be as painful for Armenia if not for the existence of the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and increasing potential of the Azerbaijani lobby in Ukraine and other countries over the issue of territorial integrity.

<sup>2</sup> Address of Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian at the Opening Session of the Rose-Roth Seminar of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 18 June 2015.

[www.mfa.am/en/speeches/item/2015/06/18/min\\_roseroth](http://www.mfa.am/en/speeches/item/2015/06/18/min_roseroth) (accessed 4 February 2016)

<sup>3</sup> High-level Meetings and the General Debate of the 68<sup>th</sup> Session of the General Assembly Plenary Meetings. United Nations. 27 March 2014.

<https://papersmart.unmeetings.org/en/ga/68th-session/plenary-meetings/documents/voting-record/resolution-68262/> (accessed 4 February 2016)

<sup>4</sup> "Ukraine Recalls Ambassador to Armenia over Crimea Recognition," Asbarez, 21 March 2014.

<http://asbarez.com/120951/ukraine-recalls-ambassador-to-armenia-over-crimea-recognition/> (accessed 4 February 2016)

<sup>1</sup> "Союз армян Украины -." Союз армян Украины -. <http://sau.net.ua/organisation> (accessed 4 February 2016)

Meanwhile, the clash between two different value systems, the “European” and the “Eurasian” perspectives, seems to be inevitable throughout the post-Soviet region. This clash is a result of the ongoing systematic internal development of the European Neighborhood Policy and the competing development of Russia’s Eurasian project. The rapid expansion of Russia’s Eurasian agenda has introduced new realities for both countries.

Today, the Russian economy is undergoing its gravest crisis since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The ongoing Ukrainian war, the deepening of Western-imposed economic sanctions and a related trade embargo, and dramatically decreasing international oil prices are the key elements which continue to worsen the economic situation in Russia.

Accordingly, the Russian government has decided not to end its Eurasian project but rather to play it in a new manner. As a key element of its new policy, President Putin seeks the creation of buffer zones that will protect Russia from the West. These buffer zones were directly drawn in Ukraine and Armenia. In particular, President Putin chose two different buffer models in Armenia and Ukraine. Russia has used the “tough buffer model” for Ukraine, by engaging military power and its proxies to annex Crimea and provoke bringing instability and to foster war in both the Donbas and Lugansk regions.

In Armenia, the Russian side tried the so called “soft buffer model,” which did not have a direct military component, but successfully forced the Armenian government to make an unexpected political “U-turn” on 3 September 2013 and withdrawing from its pro-European ambitions and replace it with a blurry Eurasian integration prospect.

As a result, the current stage of Armenian-Ukrainian relations can be described as a new “Hybrid Age,” and affirm the necessity to reconsider and reframe the platform for cooperation. It is, however, worth mentioning that even during the pre-Euromaidan period, Armenian-Ukrainian ties were limited to corporate business interests of particular individuals. Many government officials and businessmen both in Ukraine and Armenia remain interested in the development of deeper economic relations, even though the level of bilateral trade fell to \$223 million in 2014.<sup>5</sup>

Due to the ongoing economic crisis and recession in Russia, Armenia’s official policy now has an opportunity to implement a more balanced policy towards Ukraine, thus effectively maneuvering and changing the perception of Armenia among the Ukrainian political leadership. There is a necessity to implement sustainable and systematic policy for melting the ice in bilateral political relations, which can also help to expand commercial ties and economic relations.

In this context, recent developments in the Armenian-Ukrainian relations can be described as turbulent. There is a chance, however, that a strong political dialogue can be reestablished as a result of the broader geopolitical transformations in the post-Soviet area. On the other hand, global political trends, such as the lifting of sanctions on Iran, can also change the situation, opening Ukraine to new economic opportunities and attractiveness in the South Caucasus region and in Armenia particularly.

The willingness of the Armenian government to negotiate and finalize a new framework agreement with the European Union is another positive signal. It can also be perceived by Kyiv as an important step from the Armenian government to balance its pro-Russian stand and diversify its foreign policy agenda by moving closer to the European Union.

However, the key step to be taken now is the development of people-to-people contacts between Armenian and Ukrainian societies, which share a common historical past and traditions of friendly relations for already 9-10 centuries. In order to foster better mutual understanding between Armenia and Ukraine, it is vital for the civil societies in both countries to assume a position as a “bridge” and bring a real breakthrough in bilateral perceptions.

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<sup>5</sup> “Ukraine's Ambassador Says Economic Relations with Armenia are successful,” Arka News, 2 February 2015. [http://arka.am/en/news/economy/ukraine\\_s\\_ambassador\\_says\\_economic\\_relations\\_with\\_armenia\\_are\\_successful/](http://arka.am/en/news/economy/ukraine_s_ambassador_says_economic_relations_with_armenia_are_successful/) (accessed 4 February 2016)