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SECURITY MATTERS

Armenia’s exercises in democracy, defence and partnerships

Editorial

Defence reform all around

The 7 June 2026 general elections in Armenia resulted in a victory for the Civil Contract party of incumbent Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The victory was a win for democratic reform and the continuation of the peace process with Azerbaijan. It was also a win against Russian interference aimed at stirring division and conflict. Today's elections in European countries are not only a contest between diverging views and preferences, but also a battle against foreign malign influence. The threat from Russia, the disengagement of the United States (US), and weakened international institutions prompt European countries to rethink their security and invest in defence. This applies to European Union (EU) members, but also to other European nations such as Armenia, which seeks to build peaceful relations with its neighbours and strengthen its security through partnerships.

Armenia has embarked on a process of triple reform. *First*, a democratic reform and anti-corruption agenda has yielded progress in some areas, especially in tackling corruption. However, concerns persist, as Armenia's transition from a presidential to a parliamentary system in 2018 has not translated into a more powerful parliament but has instead led to a more influential prime minister and government. *Second*, the lost war against Azerbaijan and the absence of Russian support highlighted the need for military reform. A defence reform programme was devised, ranging from improving democratic oversight to increasing effective management and administration, and from reducing conscription to addressing cybersecurity. *Third*, an international reorientation, spearheaded by deepened ties with the EU has taken shape. The May European Political Community Summit and subsequent EU-Armenia Summit in Yerevan, which attracted many European leaders, were a clear sign of this.

The Netherlands is also going through a process of reform. While continuous efforts are being made to shield Dutch democracy from disinformation and cyberattacks, the Netherlands is also boosting investments in its defence. It is doing so primarily as a NATO member – seeking to spend up to 5 per cent of GDP on defence – but also in relation to the EU and initiatives, such as the Coalition of the Willing supporting Ukraine. The latter is also becoming instrumental in joint defence industry development and learning from practice. Alongside (re-)building its armed forces, the Netherlands is also preparing its population for crisis situations. In that sense, defence is not only a matter for the armed forces and other national security actors, but also for the population at large, which needs to become more resilient to external threats and potential crisis.

The TRAC-D project seeks to assist Armenia in building capacity in the defence sector and to facilitate increased exchanges between the Armenian and Dutch defence establishments. These two objectives are in line with Armenia's democratic reform trajectory and the interest of both countries in learning from each other's experiences. The emphasis is on good governance in defence and challenging issues such as emerging technologies (cybersecurity and AI), information management (countering foreign information manipulation and interference – FIMI), and human rights, integrity, and gender in the defence organisation. While the two countries differ significantly in terms of their experiences and threat perceptions, both are paying increased attention to strengthening defence and are keen to learn from each other.

With this in mind, CESS and Peace Dialogue assembled two working groups of defence and security sector actors and initiated a young professional traineeship for Armenian talent in defence governance. Regarding the former, working group participants met in Yerevan in May to discuss FIMI, while a group of young Armenians visited The Hague in June as part of the traineeship for a series of meetings with Dutch institutions and civil society organisations.

In this issue of *Security Matters*, four interviews are featured. *First*, we give the floor to Elina Khachatryan, the president of Peace Dialogue, our implementing partner in Armenia. She lays out the challenges that Armenia faces in developing a democratic society where human rights are respected. Moreover, Elina discusses Peace Dialogue's ambition to contribute to Armenia's democracy. *Second*, Dennis Hennequinn looks at the Dutch side of the TRAC-D project, discussing how the Dutch Armed Forces are developing and what options exist for cooperation within the EU and NATO, as well as bilaterally. He also highlights the new White Paper of the Dutch Ministry of Defence.

Third and *fourth*, we give the floor to our Armenian TRAC-D trainees. Svetlana Baghdasaryan from the National Defence Research University explains how Armenia approaches education and training in today's defence environment. She explains how countries can learn from each other by assessing different models and gauging what works and what does not, while taking cultural differences into account. Zemfira Hakobyan from the Security Council in Armenia places the TRAC-D efforts, which are focused on defence, within a broader security framework. She concludes by highlighting the value of exchange programmes and, just like Svetlana Baghdasaryan, offers some useful pointers for the TRAC-D organisers.

Jos Boonstra, senior researcher, CESS

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Interview

Building a resilient democratic society

Elina Khachatryan, President, Peace Dialogue, Armenia

You became president of Peace Dialogue earlier this year. What are your plans? How do you see Peace Dialogue evolving?

Becoming president of Peace Dialogue was not something I had anticipated, but it quickly became clear to me what my responsibility should be: to carry forward and further strengthen the organisation's vision and mission. Since 2009, Peace Dialogue has been guided by a simple yet fundamental belief: that peace, justice, and democracy are inseparable. Lasting peace cannot be achieved solely through political agreements or security measures; it requires democratic institutions that are accountable, uphold the rule of law, protect human rights, and enable meaningful public participation. This understanding has shaped every aspect of our work, from security sector governance and democratic oversight to peacebuilding, human rights, and resilience against emerging threats.

Over the years, we have built a strong community of civil society organisations, human rights defenders, researchers, peacebuilders, and institutional partners who share this vision. Preserving and strengthening this network is one of my key priorities, because sustainable change is only possible through collaboration and trust.

As president, I see my role not only as continuing Peace Dialogue's legacy but also ensuring that the organisation evolves to address new challenges while remaining true to its core values. My goal is to expand our impact, strengthen partnerships, and continue promoting democratic governance, human rights, and inclusive dialogue as the essential foundations for sustainable peace and resilient societies.

Armenia is going through a period of rapid change. What are the priorities for Armenia in terms of defence and security and international cooperation?

Armenia is undergoing a profound transformation in both its security environment and its international engagement. I would say that the country's main priorities are strengthening its defence capabilities, safeguarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity, advancing a sustainable peace agenda, diversifying international partnerships, and deepening cooperation with democratic allies and multilateral institutions. These priorities are essential to ensuring Armenia's security in an increasingly complex geopolitical context.

However, I believe that achieving these objectives should start with building resilience. A resilient society and resilient state institutions are what make defence reforms, international partnerships, and peace initiatives sustainable in the long term. Military capabilities alone cannot guarantee security if democratic institutions are weak or society is vulnerable to manipulation and external interference.

For this reason, I consider strengthening democratic institutions, upholding the rule of law, protecting human rights, and increasing resilience against foreign interference, disinformation, and other hybrid threats to be among Armenia's most important priorities. These are not only democratic values but also essential components of national security.

At Peace Dialogue, this understanding guides our work. Through research, capacity building, policy dialogue, and public engagement, we work to strengthen democratic governance, promote civilian oversight of the security sector, and enhance societal resilience to hybrid threats. We believe that a resilient democracy is the strongest foundation for lasting peace, effective defence, and meaningful international cooperation.

Peace Dialogue and CESS teamed up on the TRAC-D project. What added value can the project offer Armenia, in your view?
In my view, the TRAC-D project comes at a particularly timely moment for Armenia. As the country continues to reform its security sector and adapt to a rapidly changing security environment, initiatives that foster dialogue, learning, and cooperation are especially valuable.

One of the project's greatest strengths is that it brings together state institutions and civil society in a constructive way. Effective security sector governance requires trust, transparency, and continuous dialogue between these actors. Throughout the project, discussions have been open and solution-oriented, enabling participants to jointly identify challenges and develop practical recommendations. This collaborative approach contributes to making the security sector more transparent, accountable, and responsive.

Another important benefit is the partnership between Armenia and the Netherlands. Both countries are currently implementing security sector reforms. While our historical contexts differ, many of the contemporary security challenges we face – such as hybrid threats, cyber risks, and the need to strengthen democratic oversight – are increasingly similar. This creates an excellent opportunity to exchange experiences, learn from each other's successes and challenges, and deepen long-term cooperation between Armenian and Dutch institutions.

I believe the project has laid a strong foundation for continued collaboration and mutual learning, which will contribute to stronger democratic governance and more resilient security institutions in both countries.

Interview

Dutch defence: the 2026 White Paper and international cooperation

Lt. Col. Dennis Hennequin, Senior Policy Officer, International Military Affairs, Ministry of Defence, the Netherlands

The Netherlands Ministry of Defence recently published a White Paper indicating substantial change. What changes are most noteworthy?
The 2026 Defence White Paper signals a fundamental reshaping of the Dutch Armed Forces. The security environment has become more volatile: daily cyberattacks, espionage, sabotage, and disinformation blur the line between peace and war, while global tensions continue to rise. Consequently, the force is being reoriented around three core pillars – *deterrence, defence*, and the *capacity to sustain protracted conflict*. Personnel remains the decisive factor: recruitment and retention will bring the force to over 100,000 by 2030.

Fight, endure, innovate – military readiness remains paramount, but the emphasis has shifted from pure efficiency to combat power. A flexible mix of high-end and affordable, scalable weapons is introduced. Within five years, more than half of operational effects are expected to stem from unmanned systems such as drones and robots. Investment in digitalisation links intelligence, cyber, command and control, enabling reliable data to be quickly translated into action; advanced sensors, including space-based ones, will detect threats early.

All of this is pursued together with NATO allies and an engaged Dutch society, alongside efforts to strengthen the European defence industry. This White Paper is a call to action – to build a force that can credibly deter, defend, fight and win the battles of tomorrow.

Dutch defence is also increasingly looking at cooperation with countries outside of NATO. What scope is there for Armenian-Dutch cooperation?
The Netherlands Ministry of Defence is increasingly looking beyond NATO and the EU to partnerships that bolster shared European interests, while keeping the security of the Netherlands and Europe as the main priority. In this framework, defence cooperation with Armenia is feasible but is likely to remain modest for the foreseeable future. In our view, defence cooperation works best through multilateral mechanisms rather than bilateral defence arrangements.

A non-resident Defence Attaché is the primary liaison of the Netherlands Ministry of Defence to Armenia. The Attaché can identify possible defence-related cooperation projects in the near future. The most relevant areas for defence cooperation are capacity building in cyber and countering disinformation; the exchange of knowledge and frameworks relating to an open and integrated defence government model; and defence education. The exchange of best practices between the two countries can work both ways, as the TRAC-D projects shows.

You have been actively engaged in the TRAC-D project through coordination and training. What added value can the project bring, in your view?
I see TRAC-D as a valuable project. It is one of those initiatives that feels like a real win-win, especially for defence cooperation in a region that we are not so familiar with. *First*, being there on the ground gives us a visible presence that no briefing can match. Being in the region, walking the streets, talking to people, and watching how things actually work gives you a grasp of the vibes, the culture, and the regional dynamics. And that works both ways.

Second, and probably the best part, is the knowledge exchange. We go in with Dutch expertise, but we come out with insights and knowledge of how things work from the Armenian perspective and across the region. That also gives us a better understanding of why things work or do not work in international defence cooperation due to cultural, geographical, political or societal factors.

Finally, the TRAC-D programme plugs us into a wider international network. Meeting policymakers, government officials, and NGOs could open doors for future cooperation. Bringing together senior-, mid-, and junior-level professionals from the defence sector and letting them work together – that works! A fresh collaborative setting is created within the TRAC-D gatherings through icebreakers and personal introductions.

People listen and learn from each other and see how each participant can add value, no matter their rank or position. In that sense, it was great to host a group of young Armenian defence staff and security experts in the Netherlands before the summer. So far, the TRAC-D project feels less like a project and more like the creation of a community that benefits us all.

Interview

Recruiting future leaders in defence

Svetlana Baghdasaryan, Associate Professor, Research Fellow at the National Defence Research University, Ministry of Defence, Armenia

Can you tell us a bit about your work and the ambitions you have?

The National Defence Research University (NDRU) of the Ministry of Defence was established in 2016, on the foundation of the Institute for National Strategic Studies and currently operates within the University. NDRU's statutory jurisdiction encompasses research, educational, and academic publishing activities. The University aims to enhance the efficiency of the Armenian security and defence system through educational and research initiatives. Furthermore, by organising strategic-level military education in the defence and security sector, it seeks to foster strategic, operational, and critical thinking, as well as leadership skills, among military leaders. The University conducts departmental training courses and a master's programme for senior and higher-ranking officers.

At the NDRU, I serve as a research fellow at the Centre for Strategic Leadership and Management Studies. I conduct applied scientific research aimed at adapting contemporary leadership methodologies to military education and integrating these approaches into the broader management system. My work combines theoretical analysis with practical application, enabling the development of future military leaders' strategic thinking, managerial skills, and capacity to respond swiftly to shifting geopolitical challenges. Through this role, I strive to bridge the gap between academic innovation and defence policy implementation. My ambitions align with the University's core mission – specifically, ensuring the continuity and internationalisation of research efforts. In particular, I plan to undertake postdoctoral work abroad, which will allow me to master cutting-edge methodologies, embrace global best practices, and introduce advanced defence education frameworks to the institution upon my return.

You are participating in the TRAC-D traineeship and recently undertook a study trip to the Netherlands. What were your impressions?

Within the framework of the TRAC-D traineeship, I was most impressed by the cultivation of trust within the Dutch management system and the practice of governance based on decentralised interaction, which constitutes the cornerstone of leadership and 'mission command' in the military sphere. This experience demonstrated that empowering individuals leads to the creation of highly resilient structures. It highlighted how agile decision-making processes and organisational flexibility can significantly optimise strategic outcomes in volatile environments.

I am impressed by certain programmes implemented within the Ministry of Defence of the Netherlands, particularly the sponsor-partnership approach, which I believe underscores the prioritisation of the mission. Furthermore, I am particularly impressed by the initiatives aimed at recruiting young professionals into the armed forces, ensuring a continuous influx of innovative thinking and modern skills into the system. Similar programmes for young people exist within the Armenian Armed Forces, though they have a more specialised professional focus. Integrating these strategic approaches into my own research will allow me to design comprehensive frameworks for modern military education. By combining the insights gained from the TRAC-D traineeship with contemporary defence methodologies, I aim to contribute to the transformation of leadership training, fostering a new generation of adaptable and forward-thinking defence specialists capable of addressing complex security imperatives.

What advice would you offer future TRAC-D trainees on getting the most out of the programme?
To get the most out of the TRAC-D programme, my primary advice to future participants is to look beyond successful outcomes and focus closely on the process and its underlying challenges. When studying inspiring models – such as the culture of trust and interaction in the armed forces, the recruitment of young professionals, or the 'sponsor-partnership' approach – do not limit yourselves only to what works well. Inquire about the initial steps they took, the cultural barriers or resistance they encountered, and how they overcame those early obstacles. Understanding these transitional frictions is vital for anyone aiming to introduce profound systemic changes.

Additionally, maintain a balanced and objective perspective. Consider both the strengths and the complex limitations of these institutional models; for instance, how over-reliance on consensus can sometimes slow down critical decision-making in high-stakes scenarios. Paying attention to these practical nuances and implementation difficulties will provide you with a realistic roadmap for adapting and localising a modern leadership culture within your own systems. Ultimately, the goal is not to replicate these foreign practices blindly, but to critically analyse their mechanics so that you can develop customised solutions that align with your nation's unique defence environment and strategic priorities.

Interview

Developing expertise through security cooperation

Zemfira Hakobyan, Specialist at the Department of Political, Social and Economic Security Security Council, Armenia

Can you tell us a bit about your work and the ambitions you have?
I work at the Department of Political, Social and Economic Security at the Office of the Security Council of the Republic of Armenia. I have always been interested in defence, security, and international relations, and my ambition is to continue growing in this field. I believe that transparent, resilient, and effective security institutions are built not only on expertise but also on cooperation, openness, and a willingness to keep learning. I hope to contribute to this by continuously developing my knowledge, learning from international best practices, and applying those experiences in Armenia.

You are participating in the TRAC-D traineeship and recently undertook a study trip to the Netherlands. What were your impressions?
The study visit to the Netherlands was an outstanding learning experience. What impressed me most was the openness with which Dutch institutions discussed both their achievements and the challenges they continue to face. Rather than presenting a perfect model, they shared practical experiences, lessons learned, and the importance of continuous institutional development.

The programme offered valuable insights into democratic oversight of the defence sector, strategic decision-making, civil-military relations, and the role of transparency and accountability in strengthening public trust. Equally valuable were the discussions with experts and fellow participants, which allowed us to exchange perspectives and compare approaches to common security challenges.

Beyond the institutional visits, the programme created an environment that encouraged critical thinking, open dialogue, and professional networking. I returned to Armenia with new ideas and a broader understanding of how democratic governance can enhance the resilience and effectiveness of the security sector.

What advice would you offer future TRAC-D trainees on getting the most out of the programme?
My advice is to approach the programme with curiosity and a willingness to engage. Read about the institutions before each visit, ask questions, and actively participate in discussions. The experts are incredibly approachable, and some of the most valuable insights come from informal conversations rather than formal presentations. Make the most of every opportunity to build professional relationships and exchange ideas with fellow participants.

Do not try to absorb everything at once. Take notes, revisit your observations after each visit, and think about which ideas could realistically be adapted to your own work. That reflection is what turns the experience into something lasting.

CESS news

In memoriam

On 28 February 2026, Edgar Khachatryan passed away. He was the founder and driving force of Peace Dialogue in Vanadzor, Armenia. In that capacity, he was a crucial partner of CESS in the DIOS project from 2021 to 2024. Edgar Khachatryan exemplified what civil society should strive for: he was a connector, bringing civil society and government together, as well as different donor organisations and other (international) stakeholders; a skilled trainer who fascinated trainees; and a gifted researcher who translated complex material into clear information and ideas. Most importantly, he shared a passion for a peaceful South Caucasus region, a democratic Armenia, and respect for the human rights of its citizens.

Among his many activities in the months leading up to his untimely passing, Edgar was instrumental in launching the TRAC-D project, connecting CESS with Armenian stakeholders and helping to shape the project – including its logo – to what it is today. We are indebted to Edgar Khachatryan and wish his family, friends, and colleagues strength, as well as the inspiration to carry forward what he offered to so many people.

CESS moved

After more than 25 years, CESS left the Lutkenieuwstraat in Groningen and moved to a new address, also in downtown Groningen. At 't Klooster 3, CESS has found a cosy new office in the heart of the city – again in an alleyway, but this time with a view to a lovely seventies internal garden. Visiting Groningen? Come over for a cup of coffee.

Latest publications

(www.cess.org / www.eucentralasia.eu)

CESS Greenwood Paper, No. 29, November 2025

Many hands make light work: Parliamentary oversight of the security sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Jos Boonstra

The legislature's role in Bosnia and Herzegovina's security sector governance is limited. Parliaments rarely initiate security and defence legislation, and security oversight committees largely fail to hold the executive to account. While the country's complicated governance system and the lack of political will are a hindrance to comprehensive reform, they need not prevent all progress toward democratisation and EU membership. This study offers a recipe for boosting parliamentary capacity and cooperation, with a view to establishing a healthier culture of security oversight.

Volten Brief, No. 11, May 2025

Cybernostalgia in Romania: From a past perfect to a present tense

Anouk Vos and Natalia Wojtowicz

In 2024, Romania saw a large-scale cybernostalgia campaign, where folklore and family values were fused with sophisticated cyberattacks to influence the presidential elections.

As this new tool in Russia's election-interference toolbox becomes more and more successful, the EU and its member states need to take a closer look at how digital melancholy is shaping the way we vote.

EUCAM Commentary No. 55, January 2026

Should Kazakhstan power Europe?
Douwe van der Meer

Kazakhstan wants to export green electricity to Europe through the 'Green Energy Corridor'. Electricity shortages in Kazakhstan, its continued reliance on coal, and the risk of export blockades across the Caspian Sea make this a flawed proposition. Instead, a green partnership should focus on integrating renewable energy into Kazakhstan's power grid, while Europe reduces its net emissions abroad.

EUCAM Watch No. 27, March 2026

Navigating cyber threats on a digital Silk Road

Digitalisation and cybersecurity are central items on the agendas of Central Asian countries, both in domestic policy debates and in engagement with international partners. In this EUCAM Watch, we offer an overview of national digitalisation policies and assess measures taken against cyber threats.

About TRAC-D – Transparency and Accountability in Armenian Defence Governance

The TRAC-D project seeks to strengthen democratic governance in Armenia's defence sector. TRAC-D supports capacity building by providing tools and developing skills to navigate a rapidly evolving defence governance environment. TRAC-D promotes inclusive cooperation among defence actors from different Armenian institutions and civil society, with a view to building networks in Armenia as well as with Dutch partners. The processes of capacity building and inclusive cooperation should, in turn, lead to a more transparent and accountable culture of defence sector governance that is ready to meet new social, economic, political, and technological challenges.

TRAC-D senior working groups of Armenian defence experts look at different topics related to defence. First, information management and countering disinformation are addressed. Second, capacity building is foreseen on cybersecurity and the impact of new technologies, such as AI, on defence governance. Third, the impact of human rights and societal issues, including gender, on the defence sector is discussed and researched. The project also provides for two successive groups of young talent in defence governance, who follow a curriculum of training, joint research, and study visits.

In TRAC-D, CESS and Peace Dialogue cooperate closely with Armenian and Dutch defence sector institutions, with a view to strengthening cooperation between Armenia and the Netherlands, as well as between civil society and government institutions. The project is funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

CESS

The Centre for European Security Studies (CESS) is an independent institute for research and training, based in Groningen, the Netherlands. CESS seeks to advance security, development, democracy and human rights by helping governments and civil society face their respective challenges. CESS is an international, multidisciplinary and inclusive institute. Its work is part of the European quest for stability and prosperity, both within and outside Europe. CESS encourages informed debate, empowers individuals, fosters mutual understanding on matters of governance, and promotes democratic structures and processes.

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The views expressed by the authors do not necessarily reflect the opinion of CESS.
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