

# A faster and safer railway for Armenia

Providing better, faster and safer railway services and connecting land-locked Armenia to its neighbours, while at the same time supporting the competitiveness of its economy, was the aim of the **Rehabilitation of Railway between Tbilisi and Yerevan project**, funded by the EU. The project assessed the possibility of rehabilitating the Yerevan-Tbilisi railway as well as the alternative railway link between Yerevan and Tbilisi via Azerbaijan so they meet international safety standards.

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*Text and photos by Aghavni Harutyunyan*

**Yerevan** – “Armenia is suffering from its closed borders. The better its transport facilities the better its export possibilities,” says Uffe Holst Jensen, Head of ENP and Operations Section at the EU Delegation in Yerevan. He adds that under the EU’s Eastern Partnership policy, negotiations for comprehensive trade agreement will be launched: “The EU is offering Armenia the possibility to export many goods free of costume duties. Improving transport infrastructure could be a good environment for that.”

According to Giovanni Mastrandrea, from the project, “the railway is fairly old. Initially it was properly managed and maintained, but the 1990s saw a gradual lack of maintenance and technical improvements, leading to a rapid decline of the line.”

The Tbilisi-Yerevan railway line was inaugurated in 1899 and electrified in 1967, and is a typical mountain railway. The line is in desperate need of improvements and modernisation, especially as the alternative Yerevan-Tbilisi link via Azerbaijan has for years now gone no further than Dilijan. The result of improvements on the Tbilisi-Yerevan line would be: 50 trains running per day in both directions at a maximum speed of 140 km/h for passenger trains covering the distance in five hours, instead of more than 12 hours today, and maximum 80/100 km/h for freight trains.

The Yerevan-Tbilisi railway rehabilitation also needs to secure cooperation between Armenian and Georgian administrations, according to Giovanni Mastrandrea.

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### Opening borders

Three studies were undertaken by the project: the first was a feasibility study for the rehabilitation of the Tbilisi-Yerevan railway line, the second on the rehabilitation of the Hrazvan-Ijevan section of the line towards Azerbaijan, where a severe landslide blocked traffic, and the third was a study on the technological rehabilitation of the main Georgian railway. It also made a preliminary assessment of the possibility of opening a new link between Vanadzor and Fioletovo, shortening the current route between Yerevan and Tbilisi by around 100 km.

It was found that €640-800 million were necessary for the modernization of the railway lines.

“It is a very high figure,” says Uffe Holst Jensen, “but transport infrastructure is important as it will better connect Armenia to the neighbouring countries. My view is that it links to the opening of borders, facilitating the EU aim to promote regional development and cross-border cooperation.”

Gagik Grigoryan, head of foreign relations at the Ministry of Transport and Communication, explains that “the number of damaged parts and those not meeting the minimum security standards is high.” He said the studies showed the maximum investments needed and “now we can negotiate with donor companies and the concession operator”.

Ashot Melikyan, of the ‘South Caucasian Railway’ company, says the studies show what can be financed by donors but can also act as a guide for further actions.

### Railway: the citizens’ choice

The feasibility study allows potential investors, such as IFIs, immediately to start work that will help provide passengers with faster and more secure railway links, eventually increasing the use of trains over the present-day fixed-run taxis (marshrutkas), the electric line trains or buses. They would be more comfortable, safer and time-saving, and also enable people to carry more.

According to Murad Aleksanyan, head of Gyumri station, the Yerevan-Gyumri 154km railway takes 4.5 hours, when a marshrutka takes 1.5 hours, therefore people prefer the latter. “But in case of high speed, the train will gain advantage over marshrutkas, as they will be more comfortable and you can carry more.” Even today, the Yerevan-Tbilisi (12.5 hours) and Yerevan-Batumi (19 hours) trains are a more convenient choice compared to buses and marshrutkas and are largely full over summer.

Many people and especially students prefer the Armavir-Yerevan electric train to get to Yerevan in 40 minutes and more comfortably than in buses and marshrutkas, however as Karine Khanoyan, 19, a student from Armavir says “it’s a pity the trains are few in a day.” Departing from Armavir for Masis by electric train, 63-year-old vine grower Vladimir Melkumyan, from Metsamor, says “I prefer the train, as it is comfortable and we can get to the place quicker than by marshrutkas.”

The train is also more convenient for people taking their harvest to the Yerevan markets. Rustam Sultanyan, 53, who lives in Artashar and works on his garden plot says: “We can’t carry more than a little package by bus or marshrutka, but by train we can transport a lot more goods.”



■ Gagik Grigoryan

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■ Railway stations in Armavir, Araks, Qober and Alaverdi



The environmental factor should be part of the equation, says Michal Nekvasil, Deputy Head of Operations of EU Delegation to Georgia. In his words, "It is crucial to rehabilitate the Tbilisi-Yerevan railway as soon as possible, ideally before the road connection between the two capitals is modernised. Why? Because today most of the goods and many passengers, especially between Yerevan and the Black Sea coast, are transported by the railway, an environmentally friendly means of transport. A potential shift to the roads would have a damaging impact on the environment."

■ A railway map of the CIS



There is also a security issue today. "When we are travelling with our family we have no

alternative to using a train. It is hard for children to be in a car. It will be better if the train moves faster but we know the railway is not in a good condition," says mother of two Taguhi Harutyunyan, from Yerevan.

Considering all these factors, the improvement of this railway link will definitely make it more competitive to other transport means.

**Offering faster and more secure railway links will definitely increase the use of trains over the present-day fixed-run taxis (marshrutkas), the electric line trains or buses.**

## Rehabilitation of Railway between Tbilisi and Yerevan project

### Participating countries

Armenia, Georgia

### Objective

To rehabilitate the direct railway line between Tbilisi and Yerevan as well as the alternative railway link between Yerevan and Tbilisi via Azerbaijan so it can function as a safe and reliable link for goods and passenger transport for land-locked Armenia reducing journey times to a level that makes it competitive to other transport means. The project aims at defining, arranging and estimating the global cost of the execution of works and supplies for rehabilitation.

### Timeframe

From October 2008 for 12 months

### Budget

€ 579,700.00

### Find out more

EU Delegation in Armenia [www.delarm.ec.europa.eu](http://www.delarm.ec.europa.eu)

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