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Legitimacy Beyond Performance: Trust, Accountability, and Executive Authority in Transitional Regimes

Marina Margaryan[*] ID
Yerevan State University

Abstract

The article analyzes the issues of institutional legitimacy in transitional regimes, the effective solutions of which depend not only on the stability of the political system, but also on the level of technical performance. This article examines how the legitimacy of the executive branch is formed through the complex interaction between institutional effectiveness and perceived effectiveness. Based on legitimacy theory and comparative analysis methodology, the article concludes that the performance-legitimacy relationship is mediated by three important factors: trust, accountability, and communication. Despite the governance reforms implemented in the political system of the Republic of Armenia after 2018, including the Open Government Partnership initiatives and anti-corruption measures, legitimacy remains fragile when the above-mentioned mediating factors are weak. The article uses comparative cases from Georgia, France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom to reveal how institutional cultures and political events mediate the effectiveness-legitimacy nexus, pointing to comprehensive governance strategies focused on legitimacy for transitional states.

The Crisis of Executive Legitimacy in Transitional States

In many contemporary states, especially in transitional and semi-democratic systems, the executive branch faces a fundamental paradox that strikes at the heart of democratic consolidation and state stability. Despite measurable improvements in institutional capacity, administrative competence, and policy delivery, public trust in government remains fragile, volatile, or actively declining. This disconnects between governance output and legitimacy poses profound questions for reformers, policymakers, and citizens who invested hope in political transformation but find themselves disappointed by its outcomes (Hilbrich 2024; Norris 2011).

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[*] **Marina Margaryan** is a PhD candidate of the Chair of Political Science of the Faculty of International Relations at Yerevan State University. Email: mmargaryan@ysu.am. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6904-7467.

Legitimacy, as we employ the term here, refers to the normative belief that a ruler or institution possesses the right authority to govern and that citizens have corresponding obligations to obey (Beetham 1991; Stehle, Lührmann and Uth 2025). True legitimacy involves an internalized acceptance that power is exercised appropriately, fairly, and in ways that respect both procedural norms and substantive values. When legitimacy is strong, citizens obey it not because they fear punishment or expect rewards, but because they believe obedience is right. When legitimacy is weak or absent, even technically proficient governments struggle to govern effectively, as every policy initiative encounters resistance, evasion, or indifference.

The critical insight that motivates this article is that legitimacy cannot rest solely on performance outcomes or technocratic efficiency. A government may deliver excellent public services, maintain fiscal discipline, and achieve impressive development indicators while still failing to secure robust legitimacy. This is because legitimacy depends equally—perhaps primarily—on how citizens perceive, interpret, and internalize state action within their lived political reality. The gap between objective institutional performance and subjective legitimacy perceptions represents one of the central challenges for governance in the twenty-first century, particularly in states undergoing political and economic transformation (Hilbrich 2024).

Armenia offers a particularly compelling case for examining this paradox. The Velvet Revolution of April-May 2018 peacefully removed the long-standing Republican Party from power through massive street protests led by opposition politician Nikol Pashinyan. The new government quickly embarked on an ambitious reform trajectory, launching numerous initiatives to professionalize the executive apparatus, inject transparency into government operations, combat endemic corruption, and enhance citizen participation in policy processes (Ishkanian 2015; Broers 2019). Yet despite these institutional advances, popular trust in government institutions has remained fragile and subject to sharp fluctuations, shaped by persistent legacies of Soviet-era governance cultures, endemic corruption, weak horizontal accountability, and most dramatically, the catastrophic 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war with Azerbaijan (Grigoryan and Khachatryan 2020; Nikoghosyan and Ter-Matevosyan 2023).

This article addresses these questions by developing a theoretical framework that distinguishes between institutional effectiveness (objective state performance) and perceived effectiveness (citizen judgments about performance), and by identifying three critical mediating factors that link the two: trust, accountability, and communication. We argue that the relationship between executive effectiveness and legitimacy is not direct but rather operates through these mediating channels. The article proceeds through six integrated sections that build this argument systematically, concluding with concrete policy pathways for strengthening legitimacy in transitional contexts.

Building on the central argument outlined above, this article adopts a qualitative, theory-driven, and comparative methodological approach to investigate how institutional performance translates into executive legitimacy — or fails to do so — in transitional political systems. The analysis is structured around a dual objective: first, to refine the conceptual understanding of legitimacy by distinguishing between

institutional and perceived effectiveness; and second, to empirically trace how this distinction manifests in the Armenian case and comparable contexts.

The study uses a comparative case study design, which is well suited for identifying causal mechanisms and contextual factors shaping legitimacy dynamics. Armenia serves as the primary case because of its post-2018 revolutionary transformation, ambitious governance reforms, and persistent legitimacy challenges. To provide analytical depth and external validity, Armenia's trajectory is contrasted with several secondary cases — including Georgia, France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom — which represent diverse regime types, institutional capacities, and political-cultural contexts.

Empirical evidence is derived from a wide range of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed scholarship, policy analyses, governance indicators (such as the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index), official government documents, Open Government Partnership reports, and public opinion surveys. These materials are supplemented by qualitative assessments of media discourse and government communication strategies. By integrating theoretical synthesis with structured comparative analysis, the methodology enables a comprehensive exploration of how mediating mechanisms — trust, accountability, and communication — shape the translation of state performance into perceived legitimacy.

Theoretical Framework: From Classical Theory to Institutional vs. Perceived Effectiveness

The modern study of political legitimacy has evolved considerably from its classical foundations. Max Weber's foundational typology identified three ideal types of legitimate authority: traditional (based on inherited status), charismatic (based on exceptional personal qualities), and rational-legal (based on impersonal rules and procedures). Weber's framework emphasized that legitimacy is fundamentally about belief rather than material interest or coercion. However, his categories have been criticized for their static quality and limited applicability to hybrid or transitional regimes that combine elements of multiple legitimation strategies (Ignácz 2024).

Seymour M. Lipset extended legitimacy analysis by explicitly linking it to regime stability and economic performance, establishing what would become a persistent theme in legitimacy research: the performance-legitimacy connection. However, Lipset's framework was criticized for overemphasizing stability and consensus while underplaying how legitimacy is contested and how democracies can maintain legitimacy even during poor performance (Viviani 2024). David Easton's systems theory introduced a crucial distinction between specific support (satisfaction with policies or leaders) and diffuse support (generalized attachment to the political system), helping explain how democratic regimes can maintain legitimacy even when citizens are disappointed with specific governments or policies (Bang 2020).

David Beetham's seminal work *The Legitimacy of Power* (1991) fundamentally challenged performance-centered conceptions by arguing that legitimate authority requires three distinct criteria: conformity to established rules (legality), justifiability of rules according to shared beliefs (normative validity), and evidence of consent through

actions expressing acceptance. Crucially, Beetham demonstrated that effectiveness or performance is neither necessary nor sufficient for legitimacy. A regime can be highly effective but illegitimate, or ineffective but legitimate. This framework proved particularly influential for analyzing transitional contexts, where new democratic institutions might struggle with performance but could draw legitimacy from their normative superiority over authoritarian predecessors.

Recent scholars have expanded legitimacy analysis in several important directions. Fritz Scharpf's (1999) influential distinction between input legitimacy (derived from democratic participation), throughput legitimacy (based on quality of governance processes), and output legitimacy (grounded in policy effectiveness) has become standard in analyzing complex governance systems. Tom Tyler's research on procedural justice theory demonstrates that people are more likely to view authorities as legitimate when they perceive fair treatment and respectful processes, even when outcomes are unfavorable (Stehle, Lührmann and Uth 2025). This has profound implications for understanding legitimacy in contexts of scarcity or limited state capacity. Recent studies have also examined legitimacy in the context of new governance challenges posed by digitalization (Mazepus, Veenendaal, McCarthy-Jones and Trak Vásquez 2016; Erkkilä 2014), multi-level governance systems (Alıca and Schakel 2025), and the role of communication and narrative in legitimacy construction (Stehle, Lührmann and Uth 2025; Iazzolino and Stremlau 2019).

Post-Soviet states present distinctive legitimacy challenges. The collapse of Soviet legitimacy formulas created profound legitimacy vacuums that new independent states struggled to fill (Fish 1995; Egamberdiev, Bobojonov and Kuhn 2025). Weak state capacity, economic dislocation during transition, persistent corruption, and manipulation of democratic forms while maintaining authoritarian practices undermined confidence in democratic institutions. In this context, many post-Soviet regimes pursued hybrid legitimation strategies combining democratic rhetoric with authoritarian governance, appeals to national identity, and promises of economic development (Levitsky and Way 2010; Gel'man 2015).

Institutional vs. Perceived Effectiveness: The Core Distinction

To understand the legitimacy paradox in transitional states, we must distinguish carefully between institutional effectiveness and perceived effectiveness. Institutional effectiveness refers to the objective, measurable performance of state institutions in fulfilling their designated functions—policy implementation capacity, administrative competence, resource management efficiency, regulatory quality, and effective provision of public goods and services (Tu 2025; Fukuyama 2013). This can be measured through budget execution rates, service delivery statistics, infrastructure quality metrics, corruption indices, and expert evaluations such as the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators.

Perceived effectiveness represents something fundamentally different. It refers to citizens' subjective judgments about whether and how well state institutions are performing, judgments shaped by multiple factors extend well beyond objective performance metrics. Direct personal experience with government services powerfully shapes individual assessments, precisely because vivid experiences often dominate

perception formation even when unrepresentative of overall system performance. Beyond direct experience, perceived effectiveness is heavily influenced by information circulated through social networks, where people trust personal sources more than official communications and negative stories spread more readily than positive ones (Levi and Stoker 2000). Media framing plays an equally crucial role in constructing public understanding of government performance (Dancy and Thoms 2025).

Perceived effectiveness also depends heavily on historical comparisons and counterfactual expectations. Citizens do not evaluate current performance in a vacuum but rather against memories of how things used to be and beliefs about how they could or should be. In post-Soviet contexts, older citizens may compare current conditions to mythologized memories of Soviet stability, while younger citizens compare them to idealized Western standards (Marsh 2025; Levitsky and Way 2010). When expectations exceed capacity, whether those expectations are realistic or not—dissatisfaction results even when objective performance is good.

Critically, perceived effectiveness incorporates normative dimensions that may not appear in technical performance metrics. Citizens care deeply about whether processes and outcomes are perceived as fair, whether they are treated respectfully by officials, and whether marginalized groups are included in benefits and decision-making (Stehle, Lührmann and Uth 2025). A government program may be technically efficient but still fail on perceived effectiveness if it distributes benefits unfairly or implements policies disrespectfully. This symbolic dimension of effectiveness, while difficult to quantify, is constitutive of good governance rather than epiphenomenal to it.

The gap between institutional and perceived effectiveness creates the performance-legitimacy paradox observed across transitional states. This gap arises from information asymmetries, attribution problems (where citizens credit external factors rather than government competence), rising expectations that outpace capacity improvements, temporal misalignment between slow institutional reforms and rapid legitimacy crises, distributional conflicts where concentrated losers mobilize against broadly beneficial reforms, and legacy effects from historical patterns creating deep skepticism that persists even after genuine reforms (Rose and Mishler 2010; Marsh 2025; Mao, Lu and Sullivan 2023).
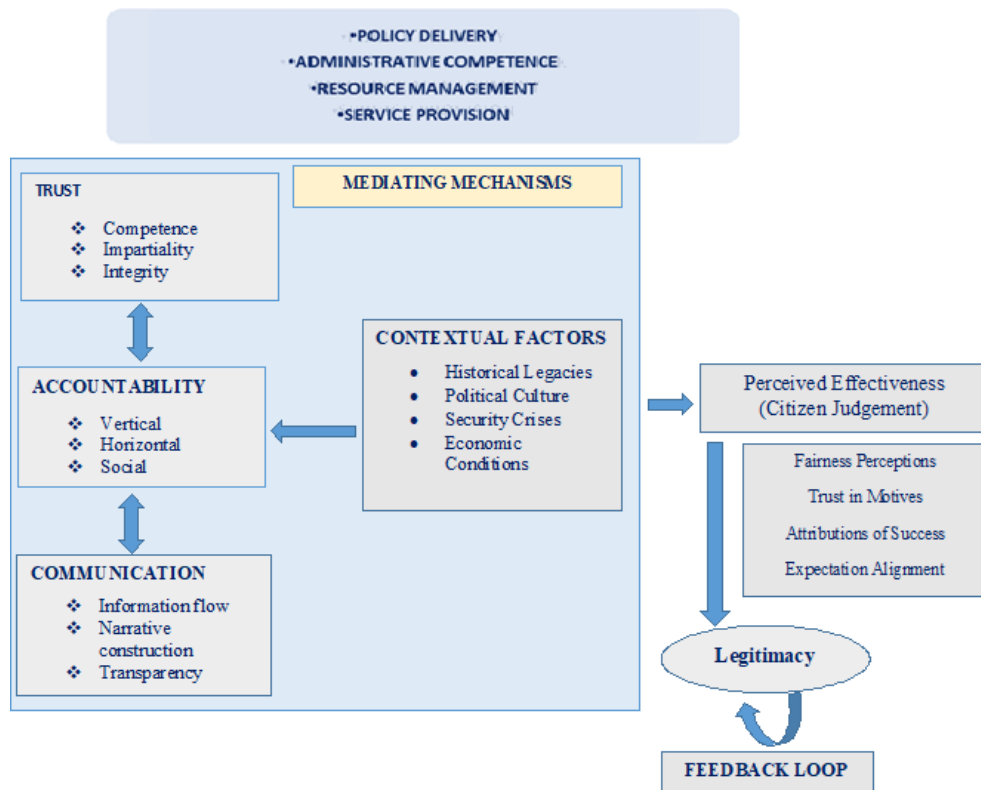
Figure 1. Conceptual Model: The Performance-Legitimacy Nexus

Figure 1 shows that this model illustrates how institutional effectiveness does not automatically translate into legitimacy, but must pass through three mediating mechanisms—trust, accountability, and communication—which are in turn shaped by contextual factors. The perceived effectiveness that results from this mediation process then forms the basis for legitimacy judgments (see Figure 1). Importantly, legitimacy (or its absence) feeds back to affect both institutional effectiveness and the mediating mechanisms themselves, creating either virtuous or vicious cycles.

Mediating Factors and Legitimacy Dynamics: Trust, Accountability, Communication, and When Performance Fails

The translation from institutional effectiveness to perceived effectiveness, and ultimately to legitimacy, is mediated by three critical factors that constitute the relational and interpretive infrastructure through which state performance becomes meaningful to citizens. These factors—trust, accountability, and communication—are not simply additional variables but represent fundamental dimensions of the state-citizen relationship that either enable or obstruct legitimacy formation.

Trust: The Relational Foundation

Trust represents the core relational foundation between state and citizen, the essential precondition for legitimacy in any political system. Political trust operates through two distinct but interconnected mechanisms: as rational calculation (citizens forming expectations about whether government will perform competently) and as a social relationship based on shared values and emotional bonds that transcend simple calculation (Levi and Stoker 2000). Political trust operates at multiple levels that shape legitimacy differently: personal trust in specific leaders (most volatile), institutional trust in particular government bodies (more stable), regime trust in the fundamental political system (changes slowly), and systemic trust representing broader confidence in the political community's capacity for collective action (Dancy and Thoms 2025).

Research has identified several mechanisms through which governments can build political trust in transitional contexts (Ali, Verma and Hamdan 2025). Consistent competence in delivering promised services builds confidence over time. Impartiality in treating all citizens regardless of political affiliation proves especially important—when citizens believe government plays favorites, trust collapses even when government performs well for preferred constituencies.

Transparency through open access to information enables citizen monitoring and reduces suspicion. Responsiveness demonstrates that government listens to citizen concerns. Integrity involves visible commitment to ethical standards and genuine accountability when officials violate norms. Finally, consistency in behavior creates predictability that allows citizens to plan and reduces uncertainty about government intentions.

In transitional contexts like Armenia, trust-building faces distinctive challenges rooted in historical legacies. Soviet-era governance deliberately cultivated generalized distrust of official institutions, teaching citizens that public pronouncements were propaganda, that success required informal connections, and that state institutions served party elites rather than ordinary people (Rose and Mishler 2010; Marsh 2025). Endemic corruption in the post-independence period reinforced expectations that officials inevitably serve private interests. Overcoming these legacy effects requires sustained, visible commitment to trust-building mechanisms over extended periods sufficient for citizens to unlearn old lessons and internalize new patterns.

Accountability: The Institutional Scaffolding

If trust represents the relational foundation of legitimacy, accountability provides its institutional scaffolding—the structural mechanisms ensuring that powerholders face consequences for their actions and must justify decisions to citizens and other institutions. Without accountability, even initially high trust will erode as power concentrates and officials escape consequences for failures or abuses (Boos 2024; Leotta, Rizza, Ruggeri and Messina 2025).

Accountability takes multiple forms that operate through different channels. Vertical accountability flows through electoral mechanisms allowing citizens to reward or punish governments. However, elections alone are insufficient. Horizontal accountability operates through checks and balances between co-equal branches of

government. Effective horizontal accountability requires genuine institutional independence, adequate resources, and political culture supporting oversight rather than collusion. Social accountability involves oversight by civil society organizations, media, and citizen groups who monitor government and mobilize public pressure for reform (Smulovitz and Peruzzotti 2000). Diagonal accountability combines elements through mechanisms like participatory budgeting and public hearings, enabling direct citizen-state interaction. Finally, upward accountability refers to obligations toward international organizations, particularly relevant in aid-dependent transitional states.

Effective accountability systems typically combine multiple dimensions rather than relying on any single mechanism, creating redundancy that ensures abuses are more likely to be detected even when some channels fail. However, accountability systems can also malfunction—excessive requirements can paralyze decision-making, mechanisms can be weaponized for partisan advantage, and accountability without capacity for responding to identified problems generates cynicism rather than confidence.

Communication: The Interpretive Framework

The third mediating factor—strategic communication—has received less systematic attention than trust or accountability but proves increasingly crucial in contemporary governance contexts (Stehle, Lührmann and Uth 2025). Government communication influences citizens' views of state performance and legitimacy.

Government communication serves several distinct functions relevant for legitimacy. Information provision ensures citizens have accurate knowledge about government activities.

Expectation management helps citizens develop realistic understandings of what government can accomplish within constraints—politically difficult because it requires admitting limitations rather than promising miracles, but essential for sustainable legitimacy. Narrative construction involves building coherent stories about government purpose and trajectory that resonate with citizen identities. Process explanation makes transparent the decision-making procedures behind policies. Achievement recognition ensures genuine accomplishments become visible rather than invisible or credited to others. Finally, problem acknowledgment through openly admitting failures builds credibility more effectively than defensive denial.

Effective government communication in transitional contexts faces formidable obstacles. Credibility deficits from decades of propaganda make citizens skeptical of all official communications. Media fragmentation makes consistent messaging difficult. Digital divides create sharp disparities in access. Political polarization means identical messages are interpreted through radically different partisan filters. Capacity constraints mean governments often lack professional communications staff or strategic planning capacity. These obstacles require deliberate strategy, adequate resources, and sustained commitment to communication as a core governance function.

Trust, accountability, and communication do not operate independently but interact in complex ways. Trust enables accountability by making citizens willing to engage with accountability mechanisms. Accountability builds trust by demonstrating that institutions function as promised. Communication facilitates both by making

government actions transparent and meaningful. These positive interactions can create virtuous cycles, but negative feedback loops are equally possible and often more powerful, creating vicious cycles where trust, accountability, and communication simultaneously deteriorate, producing cascading legitimacy collapse.

When Performance Fails to Produce Legitimacy

Understanding why and when institutional performance improvements fail to generate enhanced legitimacy reveals several common failure modes essential for designing effective interventions. The efficiency trap occurs where states achieve high technical competence while remaining fundamentally illegitimate because they lack democratic accountability or respect for rights. Authoritarian developmental states like Singapore illustrate how performance-based legitimation has limits—citizens may value prosperity but simultaneously desire political voice and dignity (Ignácz 2024). This pattern manifests in transitional states when reforming governments emphasize technocratic competence while neglecting political inclusion.

Attribution problems occur when institutional improvements are incorrectly attributed to factors other than government competence—external aid, economic booms, or international interventions—preventing performance from translating into legitimacy (Knack 2001). Citizens may credit foreign donors or luck rather than domestic government. Politicians in resource-rich countries face asymmetric attribution where government receives credit for nothing positive but blame for everything negative.

Overcoming attribution problems requires deliberate communication strategies, but such communication faces credibility challenges because it appears self-serving.

The expectation spiral creates perverse dynamics where objectively better performance produces lower satisfaction because subjective expectations outpace objective achievements (Pietsch 2025; Mao, Lu and Sullivan 2023). The government that reduces corruption from endemic to merely serious faces citizens who expected complete elimination. This is particularly acute in post-revolutionary contexts where publics expect rapid transformation. Managing expectation spirals requires careful communication about realistic timelines and honest acknowledgment of constraints, which conflicts with political incentives to promise dramatic change.

Distribution dilemmas arise when broadly beneficial policies generate negative perceptions because costs are concentrated while benefits are diffuse. Economic reforms may devastate industries while raising average incomes. Concentrated losers organize effectively to protest while diffuse beneficiaries often remain unaware or fail to organize politically. This creates systematic bias where government hears primarily from those harmed by reforms. Navigating distribution dilemmas requires compensation schemes, reform sequencing, and communication strategies, though none offer simple solutions.

Finally, trust deficits rooted in historical patterns create situations where citizens simply do not believe government claims about improved performance, even when supported by objective evidence (Rose and Mishler 2010; Marsh 2025). Deep skepticism produces automatic discounting of official communications. Overcoming deep trust deficits requires sustained demonstration of integrity over extended

periods—extraordinarily challenging because it demands patience precisely when governments face immediate crises and any failures during trust-building reinforce rather than challenge skeptical priors.

These failure modes demonstrate that legitimacy rests on more than performance outcomes, directing attention to alternative or complementary legitimacy sources. Procedural legitimacy derived from fair, inclusive, and transparent processes proves particularly important during crises when governments cannot deliver desired substantive outcomes (Stehle, Lührmann and Uth 2025; Saracino 2024). Identity-based legitimacy from symbolic representation of national values can sustain governments through difficult transitions but carries risks of exclusion and nationalism. Legal-constitutional legitimacy based on adherence to constitutional principles establishes authority independent of policy performance (Beetham 1991). Paradoxically, legitimacy can be strengthened through demonstrated tolerance for opposition and dissent, signaling confidence and respect for democratic norms.

Armenia's Post-Revolutionary Legitimacy Quest

Armenia's experience since the 2018 Velvet Revolution provides rich empirical material for examining how transitional states struggle to translate institutional reforms into robust legitimacy, illustrating with clarity the dynamics discussed theoretically above.

The historical context shaping Armenia's legitimacy challenges reaches back through the Soviet period and turbulent post-independence decades. Soviet governance cultivated specific pathologies that persist despite regime change—clientelism rooted in personalistic networks, suspicion of formal institutions understood as facades for real power operating behind scenes, and expectations that success requires informal connections rather than following official channels (Ishkanian 2008). These deeply internalized patterns did not disappear with Soviet collapse but intensified during chaotic transitions. Post1991 independence brought cascading crises: economic collapse, the Nagorno-Karabakh war, energy crises, and mass emigration that demonstrated widespread lack of confidence in Armenia's future.

Early democratic experiments gave way increasingly to authoritarian consolidation. The regimes maintained democratic in forms but actual governance was characterized by electoral manipulation, endemic corruption, oligarchic capture, and selective repression (Broers 2005; APRI Institute 2025). By 2018, this hybrid regime had delivered modest economic growth but was widely perceived as fundamentally corrupt, serving elite interests while offering ordinary citizens few pathways for success (Transparency International 2018, 2024).

The Velvet Revolution emerged from this legitimacy exhaustion. In spring 2018, Sargsyan's attempt to extend his rule triggered massive street protests. The notably peaceful transition distinguished Armenia's revolution from violent upheavals elsewhere and generated enormous optimism (Broers 2021). Pashinyan embodied rupture with the old elite, emphasizing fighting corruption, establishing rule of law, and enabling merit-based success. Parliamentary elections in December 2018 gave his party an overwhelming majority, providing democratic mandate for reforms.

The post-revolutionary government moved quickly to implement institutional reforms addressing the most visible legitimacy deficits. Armenia had joined the Open Government Partnership in 2011, but implementation was superficial. The new government developed ambitious action plans dramatically expanding accessible government data through enhanced data.gov.am portal, increased budget transparency, improved legislative transparency through live streaming and draft law publication, and expanded e-governance initiatives (Armenia OGP Action Plans, 2018-2020; 2020-2022). These initiatives represented genuine institutional improvements measurable through international assessments.

Anti-corruption efforts targeted what had been the most resented aspect of the previous regime. The government launched a beneficial ownership register exposing ultimate company owners, strengthened asset declaration requirements, empowered the Anti-Corruption Committee with increased independence and resources, initiated judicial reform through vetting procedures, and emphasized electronic procurement systems (Transparency International Armenia 2024; BTI 2024). These reforms produced some notable symbolic victories including investigations of formerly untouchable officials, but implementation proved uneven.

Participatory governance mechanisms represented efforts to build legitimacy through inclusion. Participatory budgeting was piloted in several municipalities, public consultation requirements expanded, and citizen assemblies were convened on specific issues (Paturyan and Melkonyan 2024). However, these initiatives remained limited in scope and often lacked resources or genuine commitment necessary for meaningful impact.

Despite these institutional improvements, the post-2018 government struggled with persistent legitimacy challenges. Political polarization intensified rather than healed, with supporters viewing Pashinyan as a democratic hero and opponents seeing him as a dangerous populist (Nikoghosyan and Ter-Matevosyan 2023; Caucasus Watch 2025). This polarization meant identical government actions were interpreted through radically opposed frames—supporters saw heroic reform while opponents saw selective prosecution and performative gestures.

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war proved catastrophic for government legitimacy in ways that completely overshadowed governance reforms. The 44-day war resulted in military defeat, approximately 4,000 casualties, and humiliating territorial losses (Grigoryan and Khachatryan 2020). This security failure created an immediate legitimacy crisis despite having little connection to domestic governance reforms. The war shifted political discourse almost entirely from governance questions to existential survival debates, making economic development and anti-corruption seem secondary or irrelevant.

Capacity constraints and implementation gaps created growing divergence between reform rhetoric and lived reality (Broers 2021). The beneficial ownership register looked impressive on paper but produced few concrete results because using it effectively required sophisticated capacities that did not exist. Participatory budgeting covered only tiny fractions of spending. E-governance platforms sometimes functioned poorly. These gaps created cognitive dissonance for citizens encountering familiar dysfunction despite constant reform rhetoric.

Communication failures compounded these problems. The government struggled to effectively communicate achievements, explain constraints, or build narratives resonating beyond core supporters (Ishkanian 2015). Pashinyan's combative rhetoric often alienated opponents. Complex reforms were poorly translated into accessible narratives. Opposition media effectively spread counter-narratives. The fragmented information environment meant government communication reached primarily those already supportive.

Elite resistance and institutional capture limited reform implementation despite revolutionary rhetoric. The revolution removed top political leadership but left much administrative apparatus intact with many bureaucrats having stakes in existing systems. Business elites retained economic power and resisted threatening reforms. The judiciary remained problematic. This partial capture created a 'captured state' where revolutionary governments controlled formal authority, but inherited infrastructure continued operating according to old logic.

Socioeconomic challenges shaped legitimacy perceptions regardless of governance reforms. Many citizens faced continued economic hardship, limited employment opportunities, and stagnant wages. Youth emigration continued at alarming rates. These material conditions created perception that government was out of touch with ordinary people's needs and receptivity to opposition narratives blaming government for hardship.

Comparative Insights

Georgia's Rose Revolution provides instructive parallels. Like Armenia, Georgia experienced peaceful regime change and emphasized anti-corruption reforms. Georgia achieved notable successes reducing petty corruption through radical restructuring (Kukhianidze 2009), generating genuine legitimacy returns from visible improvements. However, the Saakashvili government was criticized for authoritarian tendencies, and the 2008 war with Russia created security failure undermining legitimacy despite domestic achievements (Gel'man 2015). Georgia's trajectory suggests performance improvements in some domains cannot compensate for legitimacy deficits in others.

France has experienced recurring legitimacy crises despite being a wealthy democracy with capable institutions. The Yellow Vest movement revealed that when citizens feel unheard or disrespected, legitimacy can erode regardless of technical governance quality (Abrial, Alexandre, Bedock et al. 2022; Yildiz 2024). Sweden represents a case where strong performance has historically translated into robust legitimacy because of complementary strengths in trust, accountability, and communication built over generations (Ali, Verma and Hamdan 2025). The UK's Brexit experience demonstrates how misleading narratives can override objective performance assessments and that legitimacy requires ongoing cultivation even in established democracies (Jin 2025).

These comparisons reinforce that institutional performance improvements are necessary but insufficient for legitimacy, that trust built over long periods provides resilience, that communication profoundly shapes how performance is perceived, and that legitimacy requires attention to multiple dimensions simultaneously. For Armenia, while institutional reforms were necessary and valuable, they were never sufficient

given weak trust, limited accountability, poor communication, and catastrophic security failure.

Integrated Strategies: Measurement and Policy Pathways for Strengthening Legitimacy

Effective strategies for strengthening legitimacy require both robust measurement approaches and comprehensive policy interventions that address institutional effectiveness, perceived effectiveness, and the mediating mechanisms linking them.

Measuring institutional effectiveness requires combining multiple data sources capturing different performance dimensions. Governance indicators like the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators provide comparative assessments, though they should be complemented by more specific metrics tailored to national contexts (Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi 2011). Administrative data on service delivery provides concrete evidence—education metrics, healthcare data, infrastructure measures, and public financial management indicators reveal whether institutions function effectively. Process indicators documenting whether institutions follow proper procedures capture dimensions crucial for legitimacy but not reflected in outcome metric legislative transparency, procurement transparency, judicial independence, and anti-corruption measures.

Measuring perceived effectiveness requires systematic collection of citizen perception data. Large-scale representative surveys remain the primary tool, including both evaluative questions about satisfaction and normative questions about rightful authority. Longitudinal tracking reveals trends and allows assessment of intervention effects. However, surveys have limitations requiring complementary methods. Focus groups and in-depth interviews provide richer qualitative understanding of how citizens think about government and what shapes legitimate judgments. Ethnographic observation documents actual experiences shaping perceptions. Media content analysis and social media monitoring provide additional windows into public discourse, though requiring careful interpretation because these sources are not representative and can be manipulated.

Integrating institutional and perception data requires analytical approaches tracing causal pathways. Structural equation modeling provides techniques for testing theoretical models of how performance, trust, accountability, communication, and perceived effectiveness interact to produce legitimacy. Time-series analysis examines how changes in institutional performance preceded or follow changes in trust and legitimacy. Cross-national comparative analysis identifies universal versus context-dependent relationships. Mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data provide both breadth and depth of understanding, capturing legitimacy's complexity better than either approach alone.

Practical implementation faces challenges including resource constraints, political sensitivities, and data quality concerns. However, systematic measurement remains essential for evidence-based legitimacy-building strategies. Investment in measurement capacity represents investment in effective governance itself, and when measurement systems are transparent and accessible, they themselves contribute to legitimacy by demonstrating government commitment to evidence-based governance.

Policy Pathways for Strengthening Legitimacy

Strengthening accountability institutions represents a crucial foundation. This requires investing in independent oversight institutions with adequate budgets, professional staff, legal authority, and protection from political interference. Judicial reform to enhance independence, competence, and integrity proves particularly important. Legislative capacity building enables parliaments to effectively oversee executives through professional staff, committee resources, and investigative powers. Civil society strengthening provides crucial social accountability through protecting freedom, facilitating NGO operation, building capacity, and protecting whistleblowers and journalists.

Enhancing transparency and access to information makes government actions visible through comprehensive freedom of information laws, implementation mechanisms, proactive disclosure programs, open data initiatives, and technology platforms. However, transparency requires complementary investments in citizens' capacity to understand and use information through media literacy programs and civic education.

Participatory mechanisms expanding citizen voice can strengthen both accountability and procedural legitimacy. Participatory budgeting with adequate resources and genuine decision-making authority has shown promise when carefully implemented (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2016; Babeck 2025). Public consultation processes should occur early enough to influence decisions and demonstrate how input shaped outcomes. Digital participation platforms must be designed accessibly and complemented by offline engagement.

Building trust through consistent integrity requires sustained commitment to ethical governance. Leadership must set strong ethical tone through personal example. Codes of conduct, asset disclosure, and meritocratic hiring demonstrate fairness while improving capacity. Fair treatment of political opponents and peaceful power transfers show that government operates according to principles. Delivering on commitments builds trust through demonstrated reliability, while realistic promising avoids expectation spirals.

Strategic communication must transform from broadcasting to dialogic engagement incorporating citizen feedback. Professional communications capacity including trained staff, clear strategies, and adequate resources enables effective outreach. Message development should emphasize accessibility, honesty about constraints, and narrative coherence. Multi-channel strategies reach diverse audiences through appropriate media. Feedback mechanisms enable citizens to raise concerns and see responses. Proactive achievement communication makes accomplishments visible while managing expectations.

Managing crises effectively proves crucial because crises test legitimacy most severely. This requires honest, timely communication, transparency about problems, demonstrating competence, showing compassion, and learning from crises. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated how crisis management profoundly affects legitimacy (Bol, Giani, Blais et al. 2020).

Addressing socioeconomic concerns remains fundamental because material conditions shape legitimacy perceptions. While governments cannot always quickly

transform economic conditions, transparent acknowledgment of challenges, fair distribution of resources, and demonstrable efforts to improve conditions matter as much as absolute performance.

Sequencing and pacing reforms appropriately prevents overload. Identifying high-impact reforms producing visible results relatively quickly can build momentum for longer-term transformations. However, sequencing must balance quick wins against addressing fundamental structural problems. Communicating realistic timelines prevents expectation spirals.

Adapting strategies to context while learning from comparative experience requires balancing universal principles with local realities. Armenia's post-revolutionary context creates distinctive opportunities and constraints. Learning from comparative experience should involve identifying underlying principles rather than mechanically copying institutional designs. Pilot programs allow adaptation based on local experience. Iterative reform processes enable learning and adjustment.

Toward a Legitimacy-Centered Governance Paradigm

This article argued that legitimacy in transitional regimes depends on far more than institutional performance or technical governance capacity. While effective institutions are necessary, they are insufficient for building robust legitimacy that can withstand crises and sustain democratic consolidation. The Armenian case demonstrates clearly the limits of performance-focused reform when trust remains shallow, accountability mechanisms remain weak, and communication fails to make reforms visible and meaningful to citizens. Despite genuine institutional improvements across transparency, anti-corruption, and participation after the 2018 Velvet Revolution, legitimacy remained fragile and vulnerable to shocks including catastrophic security failure.

The theoretical framework developed here distinguishes between institutional effectiveness and perceived effectiveness, showing how the gap between them creates the performance-legitimacy paradox observed across transitional states. Institutional performance does not automatically translate into perceived effectiveness because perception depends on trust, accountability, communication, historical legacies, and contextual factors extending well beyond technical capacity. Three mediating mechanisms prove crucial: trust as the relational foundation between state and citizen, accountability as the institutional scaffolding ensuring responsiveness and consequences, and communication as the interpretive framework through which government action becomes meaningful. These mediators either enable or obstruct the translation from performance to legitimacy.

Understanding when and why performance fails to produce legitimacy reveals several common failure modes. The efficiency trap shows that technical competence without democratic accountability generates incomplete legitimacy. Attribution problems prevent performance improvements from building legitimacy when citizens credit external actors. Expectation spirals create perverse dynamics where better performance produces lower satisfaction because expectations outpace achievements. Distribution dilemmas generate political opposition from concentrated losers even when policies benefit society overall. Deep trust deficits from historical legacies

prevent citizens from believing government claims even with objective evidence. These failure modes suggest that building legitimacy requires simultaneously improving institutional performance while addressing trust, accountability, and communication.

Comparative analysis reveals how institutional cultures, historical trajectories, and political contexts mediate the effectiveness-legitimacy linkage differently across countries. Georgia's post-revolutionary experience shows both the potential for performance-based legitimacy and its limits when security fails, or authoritarianism emerges. France demonstrates that even wealthy established democracies face legitimacy challenges when citizens feel excluded or disrespected despite strong institutional capacity. Sweden illustrates how deep trust built over generations creates virtuous cycles sustaining legitimacy through challenges.

The UK's political volatility shows that legitimacy is never permanently secured and that communication failures can enable populist challenges even in strong institutions. For Armenia, these comparisons suggest that institutional reforms must be complemented by sustained trust-building, accountability strengthening, and communication improvement.

The argument presented here has implications extending beyond Armenia to transitional states globally and even to established democracies facing populist challenges. The performance-legitimacy gap reflects fundamental tensions in modern governance between technical expertise and democratic accountability, between efficiency and inclusion, between elite decision-making and popular sovereignty (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2023). Across diverse contexts, citizens increasingly demand not just effective governance but governance they can trust, hold accountable, and understand. Performance metrics alone cannot capture these multidimensional demands.

This suggests need for a broader paradigm shift in how we think about governance and legitimacy. Rather than treating legitimacy as automatic byproduct of good performance, we should recognize it as distinct governance dimension requiring explicit attention and deliberate cultivation. Rather than assuming technical reforms will naturally generate political support, we should design reforms that simultaneously build capacity and legitimacy. Rather than separating governance effectiveness from political legitimacy as distinct domains, we should integrate them in legitimacy-centered governance approaches attending equally to institutional capacity, trust, accountability, and communication.

Such legitimacy-centered governance has practical implications for policy design and implementation. Reforms should be evaluated not only on technical merit and expected performance improvements but also on legitimacy impacts including effects on trust, implications for accountability, communication feasibility, and distributional consequences. Capacity-building should encompass not just technical skills but also relational skills for trust-building and communicative skills for citizen engagement. Governance indicators should measure legitimacy dimensions alongside performance metrics. International assistance should support legitimacy-building broadly rather than narrow technical reforms. Political leadership should understand legitimacy as strategic priority rather than assuming performance suffices.

For Armenia specifically, moving forward requires learning from post-revolutionary experience while avoiding both uncritical optimism and defeatist pessimism. The institutional reforms undertaken since 2018 represent genuine achievements that should be preserved and deepened rather than abandoned. However, these reforms must be complemented by sustained work on trust-building through demonstrated integrity, accountability-strengthening through functional oversight, and communication improvement to make reforms meaningful. Recovering from the trauma of the 2020 war requires time and cannot be rushed, but governance improvements can contribute to broader national healing by demonstrating government commitment to serving all citizens fairly. Managing ongoing security challenges while pursuing domestic reforms demands difficult balancing but proves necessary for both national survival and democratic consolidation.

More broadly, the Armenian case offers lessons about realistic expectations for transitional governance. Revolutionary moments generate euphoria and unrealistic hopes for rapid transformation, but building legitimate democratic institutions requires decades not years. Setbacks and crises are inevitable and should be expected rather than treated as evidence that reform is impossible. Partial progress is better than none even when falling short of ideals. Comparative perspective shows that all countries, including wealthy established democracies, struggle with legitimacy challenges in different ways—Armenia's struggles are not evidence of unique failure but of common difficulties that transitional states face.

The path forward requires patience, persistence, and realistic assessment of both possibilities and constraints. Legitimacy cannot be achieved overnight or secured permanently but rather must be cultivated continuously through consistent commitment to effective, fair, transparent, responsive, and accountable governance. This cultivation requires attention to multiple dimensions simultaneously improving institutional capacity, building trust through integrity, strengthening accountability through oversight, and communicating effectively with citizens. When governments approach legitimacy with this comprehensive perspective, treating it as central to governance rather than byproduct of performance, they create foundations for democratic consolidation and political stability even amid inevitable challenges and setbacks.

The legitimacy crisis facing executives in many transitional states is profound but not insurmountable. By understanding legitimacy's multidimensional nature, by recognizing the mediating roles of trust, accountability, and communication, by learning from comparative experience while adapting to local contexts, and by pursuing comprehensive strategies addressing performance and perception simultaneously, transitional states can build robust legitimacy sustaining democratic governance through inevitable difficulties ahead. This legitimacy-centered approach offers hope for democratic consolidation in Armenia and beyond, transforming legitimacy from chronic vulnerability into strategic asset supporting effective governance and citizen wellbeing.

Conclusion and discussion

The modern world is characterized by a diversity of forms of social and political organization, which determine unique relationships between those who govern and

those who are governed. The diversity of cultural and civilizational forms determines specific ways of organizing and operating government, distributing authority among state bodies, utilizing electoral procedures specific to these cultural types, and so on. In modern political discourse, the rules and procedures necessary for effective governance are inextricably linked to the concept of legitimacy. Moreover, Western political theory defines legitimacy as the primary criterion for democratic governance and the rule of law, through the prism of which the structure and operation of various mechanisms of interaction between society and the state are assessed. However, even in states that consider themselves developed and democratic, society views politicians, political parties, and political institutions with a fair degree of mistrust. Where once, upon the advent of democratic governments, public support and approval were expected, citizens now question the very foundations of representative democracy, much less the forms and methods of its implementation. At the same time, in some countries, legitimacy is used as a political tool to justify premature changes of government, political regimes, or the pursuit of policies contrary to national interests. The situation is complicated by the fact that no normative act in public international law defines what legitimacy should be. Legitimacy criteria for political institutions such as the head of state, political parties, government bodies, the electoral system, the political elite, and others remain undefined.

The concept of legitimacy is a product of Western political philosophy, which is commonly used as a benchmark in modern political science. However, given the recent challenges outlined above, it is important to take a closer look at the factors and circumstances underlying the development and ideological and theoretical justification of legitimacy concepts by Western scholars. Building on and taking into account the specific features of legitimacy concepts in Western political discourse highlighted in this study, it will be possible to further understand the idea of legitimacy and apply it to the political environment at a new, meaningful level.

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