

# Armenia's Strategic Dilemma: Geography versus History

Laura Linderman  
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## Executive Summary

Armenia faces significant challenges to its political stability and geopolitical security as it attempts a high-stakes strategic pivot<sup>1</sup> away from its traditional Russian security patron and toward the West—a reorientation driven not by choice but by necessity, as the country finds itself militarily inferior, diplomatically isolated, and abandoned by unreliable security guarantors.

This reorientation, catalyzed by Russia's failure to uphold its commitment to defending its Armenian ally from repeated Azerbaijani incursions into its territory,<sup>2</sup> has given way to internal political turmoil and external security vulnerabilities.<sup>3</sup> Most worryingly, this has created a dangerous feedback loop where the very concessions required for strategic survival generate domestic opposition that threatens to undermine the partnerships Armenia desperately needs. This piece argues that Armenia's polarized domestic political environment—with opposition to the government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan driven, primarily, by the trauma and insecurity

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<sup>1</sup> This pivot has been underway since the fall of 2022, when the European Civilian Mission was deployed on Armenia's border with Azerbaijan. Around the same time, the United States took on a greater role in Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations and Armenia's relations with Russia worsened considerably (Armenia went so far as to freeze its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization).

<sup>2</sup> Prior to the fall of 2022, the Armenian government was still seeking close cooperation with Russia. Even Armenia's military reforms, introduced following its defeat in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, were initially designed with cooperation with Moscow in mind. The Russian refusal to provide military support to Armenia to "restore [its] territorial integrity" following the advance of Azerbaijani troops miles into Armenian territory, even after Armenia appealed to Article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty, changed the equation.

<sup>3</sup> "Pashinyan: Azerbaijan Has Established Control over a Certain Territory," *News.am*, September 14, 2022. (<http://news.am/eng/news/720173.html>)

of abandoning historical narratives, territorial claims, and institutional protections—both results from and impedes its geopolitical realignment, creating a vicious cycle where external security pressures exacerbate internal divisions, which, in turn, trouble the country's moves toward a closer partnership with the West. Recently, the government's pivot has mobilized a diverse opposition coalition, counting among its ranks clergy of the Armenian Apostolic Church, disillusioned oligarchs, the exiled leadership of the Republic of Artsakh, and ordinary citizens unwilling to accept that former enemies can become partners.

Despite such opposition, Armenia has achieved tangible results from Western engagement—including defense cooperation with France, weapons partnerships with India,<sup>4</sup> and security exercises and strategic partnership agreements with the United States. And, most significantly, the recently proposed “Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity” (TRIPP) would give the United States exclusive development rights to a transit route straddling Armenia's southern border—a transit route which would transform regional connectivity by linking former adversaries (that is, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey) to one another in a mutually beneficial economic arrangement. Yet, each concession required to pull off the pivot (especially those surrounding normalization with Azerbaijan and Turkey) provides ammunition for opposition mobilization and risks electoral backlash.

The 2026 elections will provide the definitive test as to whether or not Pashinyan's government can break the feedback loop. For a small state facing existential pressures, failure to do so could result in democratic backsliding (risking alienating Western partners), subordination to hostile

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<sup>4</sup> John DiPirro, “Armenia's Corridor Toward Regional Stability,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, July 25, 2025. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13883-armenias-corridor-toward-regional-stability.html>)

neighbors, or even further territorial losses. Indeed, as Armenia contends with an assertive Azerbaijan, hostility from erstwhile ally Russia, pushback from Iran over the prospect of increased American influence in the region, and its own tumultuous domestic politics, it must tread carefully if it wishes to avoid such a fate.

Of course, this moment is not just one characterized by existential danger. For Armenia, it presents an unprecedented opportunity to emerge on the world stage—to resolve its longstanding grievances with neighboring Turkey and Azerbaijan, to establish fruitful economic partnerships with countries around the world, and to finally break free of its stifling dependence on Russia and Iran. For the United States and its Euro-Atlantic allies, meanwhile, Armenia holds considerable value as a stable partner in the strategically vital South Caucasus region. Success could see a sovereign, stable, and democratic Armenia contribute significantly to broader regional stability and prosperity, perhaps even serving as a bastion against adverse influence from nearby Russia and Iran.

## Regional Context

Armenia's transformation since 2018 has unfolded against a backdrop of considerable regional upheaval that has fundamentally reshaped the strategic landscape in the South Caucasus. The Velvet Revolution brought to power a government with a strong vision to address the country's many challenges, but this democratic awakening coincided with the collapse of traditional security arrangements that had long anchored Armenia's foreign policy. While the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 altered regional dynamics, it was Azerbaijan's repeated military incursions into Armenia's sovereign territory in 2022—combined with Russia's failure to fulfill its obligation to assist in defending Armenia under the Collective Security Treaty—that decisively pushed Yerevan away from Moscow. Russia's increasingly accommodating stance toward Azerbaijani and Turkish regional ambitions, exemplified by its inaction during attacks on undisputed Armenian territory and its withdrawal from Nagorno-Karabakh ahead of schedule, exposed the weakness and untrustworthiness of Moscow's security guarantees and accelerated Armenia's urgent search for alternative partnerships. Yet, because Armenia lacks the military strength to defend itself independently, it has since had to pursue diversified strategic partnerships and, more painfully, *détente* with its former enemies to ensure its security.

Already, Armenia has begun to see tangible results that demonstrate the practical benefits of its strategic reorientation. Landmark defense cooperation with France includes air defense systems and armored



vehicles,<sup>5</sup> while extensive partnerships with India made Armenia the largest foreign recipient of Indian weapons by 2020,<sup>6</sup> providing artillery, drones, and anti-tank missiles. Unprecedented security engagement with the United States, meanwhile, has opened channels that were unimaginable during the era of exclusive Russian dependence, including joint exercises like “Eagle Partner”<sup>7</sup> and substantial support for border security modernization.<sup>8</sup> Most recently, the proposed “Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity” (TRIPP) agreed upon at the August 8 summit between Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, and U.S. President Donald Trump, indicates that Armenia has attracted considerable foreign interest in investing in its infrastructure. With interest comes strong assurances from investors, chief among them, the United States, that such infrastructure—and, critically, the territory upon which it rests—will remain safe and secure.

Rather controversially, however, successful diversification ultimately depends on normalizing relations with Armenia’s historical adversaries. Indeed, for TRIPP to work, Armenia must first settle its differences with Azerbaijan and Turkey—a process that Pashinyan has begun, visiting

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<sup>5</sup> Ilham Karimli, “France Prepares Next Shipment of Bastion Armored Vehicles for Armenia,” *Caspian News*, February 11, 2025. (<https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/france-prepares-next-shipment-of-bastion-armored-vehicles-for-armenia-2025-2-10-0/>)

<sup>6</sup> Syed Fazl-e-Haider, “India Becomes Armenia’s Largest Defense Supplier,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 21 Issue: 131, September 12, 2024. (<https://jamestown.org/program/india-becomes-armenias-largest-defense-supplier/>)

<sup>7</sup> “Eagle Partner 2025,” *U.S. Embassy in Armenia*, August 2, 2025. (<https://am.usembassy.gov/eagle-partner-2025/>)

<sup>8</sup> This partnership was paused shortly after President Trump took office, but the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the U.S. and Armenia signed at the August 8 summit effectively restored it.; Onnik James Krikorian, “New Armenia-U.S. Partnership on Pause,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 22 Issue: 27, March 3, 2025. (<https://jamestown.org/program/new-armenia-u-s-partnership-on-pause/>).

Istanbul<sup>9</sup> to meet with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in June of 2025 and meeting with Aliyev multiple times<sup>10</sup> prior to the August 8 summit. Yet, this prospect requires Armenian society to accept that former enemies can become partners—a psychological shift that challenges foundational narratives about Armenian victimhood and, conversely, Azerbaijani and Turkish culpability in crimes against the historical and contemporary Armenian nation. It also requires several tangible concessions, including forfeiting all territorial claims on Azerbaijan and amending the Armenian constitution to reaffirm this.<sup>11</sup> For a country still relatively isolated diplomatically and facing potential Azerbaijani demands for further territorial concessions,<sup>12</sup> dropping grievances and accepting limited concessions<sup>13</sup> may represent the only way to avoid further—and likely greater—losses while also building sustainable prosperity within its existing borders.

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<sup>9</sup> “Nikol Pashinyan and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Meet in Istanbul.”

(<https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2025/06/20/Nikol-Pashinyan-Recep-Tayyip-Erdogan/>)

<sup>10</sup> Joshua Kucera, “Leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan Meet, Agree to Work Bilaterally,” *Eurasianet*, Nov 26, 2021. (<https://eurasianet.org/leaders-of-armenia-azerbaijan-meet-agree-to-work-bilaterally>)

<sup>11</sup> Sossi Tatikyan, “Conditioning Peace on Constitutional Change: Impact on Armenia’s Sovereignty and Identity,” *EVN Report*, July 11, 2025.

(<https://evnreport.com/politics/conditioning-peace-on-constitutional-change-sovereignty-identity/>)

<sup>12</sup> That is, the so-called “Zangezur Corridor.” Notably, however, since both Armenia and Azerbaijan affirmed their commitment to making TRIPP a reality at the August 8 summit in Washington, Azerbaijan has effectively forfeited its territorial claims on Armenia, settling for an American-developed route through Armenian territory.

<sup>13</sup> Most notably, as previously mentioned, accepting Nagorno-Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan.

## Domestic Political Dynamics

These troubles abroad have transformed Armenia's domestic politics into a debate over the country's place in the world. Indeed, the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and the break with Russia have not simply created external challenges—they have fractured Armenian society along lines that mirror the country's geopolitical dilemma. On one side stands Pashinyan's Civil Contract government, attempting to implement his vision for a "Real Armenia" by building a strong state capable of providing for its people and guaranteeing its own sovereignty—even if it means breaking with traditional Armenian foreign policy by diversifying its foreign relations to reduce dependence on a single power and, more controversially, abandoning irredentist claims on (and historical grievances with) neighboring Turkey and Azerbaijan to do so.<sup>14</sup> On the other side sits a fragmented but persistent opposition that clings to the promise of Russian protection and restored Armenian glory through the reclamation of lost land, despite mounting evidence that such an arrangement is no longer viable on terms acceptable to Armenia—and, even more importantly, that territorial restoration may no longer be possible at all.

These political divisions reflect more than mere ideological differences about foreign policy. Indeed, they represent fundamentally different assessments of Armenia's strategic position. Pashinyan's approach acknowledges that Armenia no longer possesses the military strength to

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<sup>14</sup> Nikol Pashinyan, "The Ideology of the Real Armenia: The Statement of the Prime Minister in [an] Address to the Nation," February 19, 2025. (<https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2025/02/19/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/>)

pursue traditional territorial claims or the diplomatic leverage to secure favorable arrangements through confrontation. His opponents, by contrast, advocate policies that would require capabilities Armenia no longer possesses, from military dominance in the region to reliable external patronage willing to bear the costs of Armenia's territorial ambitions.<sup>15</sup>

### **State-building Under Pressure**

Since the 2018 Velvet Revolution, Armenia has undertaken an ambitious program of state-building. Under Pashinyan and his Civil Contract party, Armenia has had free elections, and has, relative to the preceding government, strengthened the rule of law, fostered greater government transparency, fought corruption, and encouraged an active civil society. Yet, these achievements remain fragile, as the government grapples with persistent institutional weaknesses, corruption, and the demands of a politically disillusioned electorate—all amidst a profoundly challenging strategic environment.

Pashinyan's government has made its most notable strides in reform in tackling corruption and fostering a more open political environment, as documented by leading U.S. and European watchdogs<sup>16</sup> and governmental assessments.<sup>17</sup> Importantly, these reforms are not just about good governance—they are understood to be essential for building a strong state, working with a competent and reliable bureaucracy and a consistently trustworthy flow of information. Even so, the ultimate implementation of

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<sup>15</sup> Something, it should be noted, that not even the Russians were willing to do by the time the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War pitted Armenia and its satellite, the Republic of Artsakh, against Azerbaijan.

<sup>16</sup> "Armenia Country Report 2024," *BTI Transformation Index*, 2024. (<https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/ARM>)

<sup>17</sup> "2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Armenia," *U.S. Department of State*, 2024. (<https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/armenia/>)

these reforms has been uneven. Certain instances of executive overreach, such as efforts to influence judicial independence or suppress dissenting voices, have sparked concerns among both domestic critics and international observers. While the government frames these actions as necessary to uproot systemic corruption and inertia, critics contend that they risk undermining Armenia's democratic legitimacy. These challenges underscore the complexity of Pashinyan's reformist agenda and the tensions between achieving progress and ensuring that institutional checks and balances are respected.

As Civil Contract reaches its seventh year in government, public trust in the democratic process has been tempered by frustration over unfulfilled promises, economic stagnation, and most importantly, Armenia's continued vulnerability to external threats. A 2021-2022 survey of Armenians found that 50 percent of respondents—just barely an absolute majority—deemed democracy the most preferable type of government,<sup>18</sup> while this figure dropped to just 36 percent by 2024.<sup>19</sup> As of 2025, Armenia retains its designation as a “semi-consolidated democracy” according to Freedom House, reflecting both the progress made and the significant challenges that remain in consolidating norms and governance during a period of strategic transition.<sup>20</sup>

## A Scattered Opposition

The institutional opposition to Pashinyan's government is, meanwhile, fragmented and weak—something owed to the near-total delegitimization of the former ruling party, the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) in the

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<sup>18</sup> “Armenia Country Report 2024,” *BTI Transformation Index*, 2024. (<https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/ARM>)

<sup>19</sup> “Caucasus Barometer 2024: Armenia” *Caucasus Research Resource Center*, 2024. (<https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024am/ATTDEM/>)

<sup>20</sup> “Armenia: Nations in Transit 2024,” *Freedom House*, 2024. (<https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=nit&year=2024>)

aftermath of the Velvet Revolution. This has benefited Pashinyan's political position significantly, preventing the emergence of a unified alternative capable of capitalizing on public dissatisfaction. Indeed, although the political environment is pluralistic, opposition forces have largely struggled to coalesce around coherent policy proposals or compelling alternative leadership.

Instead, many opposition figures have relied on vague rhetoric that channels public dissatisfaction with Armenia's perceived decline, particularly following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and subsequent Azerbaijani territorial gains. This dissatisfaction, coupled with disillusionment in some segments of society over Pashinyan's handling of the war and subsequent peace negotiations, has fueled an opposition narrative centered on "national honor" and "sovereignty," promoting a more assertive foreign policy and a more muscular theory of national security, which often explicitly or implicitly articulates a preference for the *status quo ante* of the pre-revolutionary Sargsyan<sup>21</sup> period of Armenian strategic ascendance and seemingly ironclad security guarantees within the Russian security architecture. Of course, this ignores the fact that regional power dynamics and security arrangements have changed considerably since 2018; Azerbaijan is now considerably stronger than Armenia, and Russia has proven itself an unreliable ally. This focus on geopolitical grievance and nostalgia for an irretrievable past reflects the opposition's inability to reckon with Armenia's strategic weakness.<sup>22</sup> Their alternatives—renewed Russian alignment or more assertive foreign policy—would require military capabilities and diplomatic leverage that Armenia no

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<sup>21</sup> President of Armenia from 2008 to 2018.

<sup>22</sup> John DiPirro, "Armenia's Corridor Toward Regional Stability," *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, July 28, 2025.  
([https://www.cacianalyst.org/resources/Armenias\\_Corridor\\_Toward\\_Regional\\_Stability\\_Updated.pdf](https://www.cacianalyst.org/resources/Armenias_Corridor_Toward_Regional_Stability_Updated.pdf))

longer possesses, making their critique of Pashinyan's concessions essentially a demand for policies that are strategically impossible.

Institutional obstacles also contribute to the dim prospects of Armenia's opposition. Key opposition groups—including the aforementioned RPA and a second party, Dashnaktsutyun (ARF)—have achieved representation in the Armenian National Assembly,<sup>23</sup> but, as of 2025, their share of the body remains minuscule, at only 38<sup>24</sup> out of 107 seats (compared to the government's 69).<sup>25</sup> Armenia's Electoral Code sets a threshold of four percent of votes for parties (and six percent for alliances) to gain seats in parliament under Armenia's system of proportional representation.<sup>26</sup> Originally justified as a means to ensure stability, the threshold was modeled after the Italian system and said to ensure that only serious parties attained representation. Yet, these obstacles have proven nearly insurmountable in a political sphere littered with small parties that struggle to gain even 1-3 percent of the vote.<sup>27</sup> In fact, in the 2021 election, 19.72 percent of votes went to political parties that failed to secure seats. Additionally, Armenia's stable majority provision calls for a second round of voting if no party wins a parliamentary mandate, after which the party with the most votes will be granted enough seats to surpass the 52% majority threshold. This provision warps voter representation and could

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<sup>23</sup> That is, the parliament.

<sup>24</sup> And this is after some post-election shuffling. The initial result, in 2021, was 35 seats.

<sup>25</sup> "Armenia: Civil Contract Party Retains Parliamentary Majority; Gets 71 Mandates," *Hetq.am*, June 27, 2021. (<https://hetq.am/en/article/132734>); "National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia Official Web Site." (<http://www.parliament.am/deputies.php?sel=factions&lang=arm>)

<sup>26</sup> Gor Madoyan, "David and Goliath: Small Political Parties in Armenia," *Heinrich Boell Foundation*, April 28, 2025. (<https://ge.boell.org/en/2025/04/14/davitn-ow-gogiate-pokr-kowsaktowtyownnere-hayastanowm>)

<sup>27</sup> "Armenian Parliamentary Election Results," *Statista*, June 21, 2021. (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1245467/armenia-parliamentary-election-results/>)

grant a party majority power despite gaining as little as 25 percent of first-round voter support.<sup>28</sup>

## **An Appeal to Russia**

Despite their fragmentation and limited parliamentary representation, opposition factions have coalesced around one central argument: That Armenia's security and regional interests can only be guaranteed through the full restoration of its security partnership with Russia. This appeal to Russian protection, however, faces fundamental obstacles that reflect both Russia's changing strategic priorities and Armenia's diminished value as a strategic asset—obstacles that opposition leaders largely ignore or dismiss. Armenia's military weakness and diplomatic isolation have reduced its bargaining power with Moscow to near zero, making any renewed partnership contingent on acceptance of subordinate status that would likely be much more constraining than arrangements with Western partners.

For decades, Russia benefited significantly from its role as Armenia's primary security guarantor, using the frozen Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to maintain regional leverage, preserve its military base at Gyumri, and secure its connection to Iran. Indeed, Russia's interest in extending security guarantees to Armenia in the first place was not a sentimental preference for Armenian preponderance, but rather, a desire to secure its own regional and global interests. Moscow's unwillingness to intervene on Yerevan's behalf in 2022, then, when Armenian sovereign territory was being threatened, reflected a strategic recalculation of these interests against the costs of maintaining them—specifically, Russia's prioritization of military resources for its conflict in Ukraine over its obligations in the South Caucasus. This

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<sup>28</sup> Hranoush Dermoyan, "Stable Majority Clause 'Endangers Parliamentary Rule in Armenia'", *EVN Report*, February 19, 2025. (<https://evnreport.com/politics/stable-majority-clause-in-armenia/>)



pattern of strategic retrenchment, also evident in Russia's abandonment of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024, suggests that Moscow's commitments to peripheral allies are increasingly subordinated to its core strategic priorities. And indeed, with both the recent Armenian-Azerbaijani joint peace declaration (signed in Washington) and the Tajik-Kyrgyz border delimitation (signed in Bishkek) achieved without Russian involvement, it appears that many in the region have taken notice that Moscow cannot be relied on—nor even trusted as a neutral arbiter.<sup>29</sup> Even in such a role, it looks out for its own interests first and foremost.

Moreover, even if Russia were to return to the South Caucasus with renewed capacity, it has demonstrated a clear strategic preference for Azerbaijan<sup>30</sup> over Armenia. Russia's strategic priorities have become evident through its actions, as Moscow has consistently prioritized Azerbaijan's materially superior strategic profile. This preference is highlighted by Russia's strategic partnership, arms trade, and alliance agreement with Baku signed just hours before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022,<sup>31</sup> its accommodation of Azerbaijani military gains after

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<sup>29</sup> According to a Gallup poll conducted in early May, only 60 percent of Armenians supported continued Russian involvement in Armenian-Azerbaijani peace negotiations. Though a majority, for a country that was once the primary guarantor of Armenian security, this is an astoundingly low number.; “Порядка 60% Граждан Армении Не Хотят Вытеснения России Как Посредника в Армяно-Азербайджанских Переговорах – Опрос” [About 60% of Armenian Citizens do not Want Russia to be Displaced as a Mediator in Armenian-Azerbaijani Negotiations – Poll], *Newsarmenia.am*, June 5, 2025. (<https://newsarmenia.am/news/armenia/poryadka-60-grazhdan-armenii-ne-khotyat-vytesneniya-rossii-kak-posrednika-v-armyano-azerbaydzhanskikh/>)

<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that “relations between Azerbaijan and Russia have become unprecedentedly strained lately,” complicating somewhat Russia's ability to act on this strategic preference.; Bashir Kitachaev, “Why Is Azerbaijan Ramping Up Tensions with Russia,” *Carnegie Politika*, July 7, 2025. (<https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/07/azerbaijan-russia-arguments?lang=en>)

<sup>31</sup> Olesya Vartanyan, “Nagorno-Karabakh and the Collapse of Russia's Peacekeeping Mission: What Weak Mandates and Absent Guarantees Can Teach Us,” *London School of Economics Democratic Security Institute*, July 30, 2025.

2020, its denial of Armenian appeals to the Collective Security Treaty Organization's Article 4 mutual defense clause in 2021 and 2022, and its operational complicity during Azerbaijan's blockade and takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh, which led to the flight<sup>32</sup> of the Armenian population in 2023. Russian peacekeepers subsequently departed from the region far ahead of their contracted date—a significant departure from Russia's traditional policy of maintaining peacekeepers past agreed-upon dates to preserve influence.<sup>33</sup>

This pattern reveals that any return to a Russia-centric security framework would likely require Armenia's acceptance of subordinate status (or outright vassalization, as is the case with Belarus)<sup>34</sup> rather than genuine partnership—otherwise, it simply could not make a more compelling offer for an alliance than Azerbaijan. The opposition's faith in renewed Russian protection thus rests on an outdated understanding of Armenia's value to Moscow—one that fails to recognize that, given Russia's overstretch and

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(<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2025/07/30/nagorno-karabakh-and-the-collapse-of-russias-peacekeeping-mission-what-weak-mandates-and-absent-guarantees-can-teach-us/>)

<sup>32</sup> The exodus has been characterized by some legal experts and NGOs as meeting the conditions for “deportation or forcible transfer” under international law; “Why Are There No Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh? - Fact-Finding Report,” *Freedom House*, November 11, 2024. (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2024/why-are-there-no-armenians-nagorno-karabakh>); Talin Hitik and Andrew Devedjian, “Indigenous Displacement: Legal Pathways for Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians and Displaced Indigenous Communities,” *Loyola Journal of Public Interest Law* Vol 26, May 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Joshua Kucera, “One Winner of the Ukraine War is Azerbaijan,” *Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty*, April 23, 2024. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-winner-caucasus-ukraine-war-russia-relations/32917647.html>)

<sup>34</sup> The Armenian government seems to be aware of this. In the fall of 2024, it arrested individuals who it believed were connected to an attempt to “overthrow Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government and installing a more Kremlin-friendly leadership in Yerevan.”; Ani Avetisyan, “Armenia Breaks up Alleged Russian-Inspired Coup Attempt,” *Eurasianet*, Sep 19, 2024. (<https://eurasianet.org/armenia-breaks-up-alleged-russian-inspired-coup-attempt>)

competing global commitments, Moscow may not have much interest in or capacity for deeper involvement in Armenia.

Some members of the opposition, faced with Russia's clear unwillingness or inability to adhere to its allied security obligations toward Armenia, have turned to increasingly desperate alternatives, including proposals for a close defense alliance with Iran.<sup>35</sup> Such suggestions reveal the strategic bankruptcy of the opposition's position: The only alternatives to Pashinyan's pivot that they have raised would restore dependency—either on an unreliable Russia or another regional power whose interests may ultimately conflict with Armenian sovereignty. And indeed, even in such a relationship, it is unlikely that Russia, Iran, or any other regional power would stand behind an Armenia with grievances against—and perhaps even designs on—states like Turkey and Azerbaijan, with whom they would prefer to maintain good relations.

The opposition's strategic incoherence ultimately serves Pashinyan's political interests. By focusing on symbolic grievances and nostalgia for a previous era of Russian patronage, the opposition has struggled to present a realistic roadmap for Armenia's future, damaging their credibility in the eyes of the Armenian public. The leadership of the ARF have even taken part in independent bilateral meetings with Russian officials.<sup>36</sup> The opposition thus finds itself trapped in a contradiction of its own making—criticizing Pashinyan's concessions while offering no viable alternatives that could reduce Armenia's need to make them.

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<sup>35</sup> "Armenian Opposition Party Calls for Defense Alliance with Iran" *Azatutyun*, March 10, 2025. (<https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33343087.html>)

<sup>36</sup> "Armen Rustamyan and Ishkhan Saghatelyan discussed the Armenian-Russian bilateral relations with the representatives of the Russian State Duma political forces," *Tert.am*, July 9, 2025. (<https://tert.am/en/news/2025/07/09/armenia-russia/4236531>)

## **New Developments for the Opposition: The Church, Oligarchs, and Exiles**

While the RPA and ARF remain<sup>37</sup> the largest opposition factions in the National Assembly, a more formidable challenge to Pashinyan's government has emerged from the convergence of traditional Armenian power centers feeling increasingly threatened and disturbed by his "Real Armenia" ideology.<sup>38</sup> This new opposition coalition counts among its ranks clergymen of the Armenian Apostolic Church (including Catholicos Karekin II), oligarchs, those displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh, and prominent diaspora<sup>39</sup> groups. It also includes, of course, the many ordinary Armenians who agree with them. This coalition's emergence reflects not just resistance to Pashinyan's policies, but fundamental denial of the strategic constraints that necessitate them. Their mobilization around border demarcation and territorial concessions ignores the basic reality that Armenia lacks the military strength to prevent such concessions or the external support necessary to reverse them through diplomatic means.

The roots of this coalition trace back to 2018, when tensions between Pashinyan's government and the Armenian Apostolic Church first surfaced. Almost immediately after the Velvet Revolution, a civic initiative called "New Armenia, New Catholicos" began demanding the resignation of Catholicos Karekin II, accusing him of corruption and ties to criminal

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<sup>37</sup> As of fall 2025, prior to the 2026 elections.

<sup>38</sup> Nikol Pashinyan, "The Ideology of the Real Armenia: The Statement of the Prime Minister in [an] Address to the Nation," February 19, 2025. (<https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2025/02/19/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/>)

<sup>39</sup> Armenia's influential international diaspora, which often represents descendants of Armenians fleeing Anatolia during the Genocide, maintain different connections to present-day Armenia than the current population, leading to surprising divergences and even open criticism of Yerevan that external observers unfamiliar with Armenian politics often miss. This dynamic adds another layer of opposition pressure that the government must navigate.

networks. While Pashinyan himself initially maintained a cordial relationship with the Church, after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, the church increasingly criticized government policies on national mourning, military service, and social unity.<sup>40</sup>

The confrontation reached a breaking point in 2024, when Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan launched the “Tavush for the Homeland” movement. Initially focused on opposing the government’s border demarcation process, which transferred four Armenian villages in the Tavush region to Azerbaijan, the movement evolved into a broader anti-government campaign dubbed the “Holy Struggle.” Drawing support from nationalist groups, the Armenian Apostolic Church, and citizens disaffected by territorial concessions, the movement mobilized over 30,000 protesters in Yerevan in late May 2024, mounting the most significant challenge to Pashinyan’s rule since 2021.<sup>41</sup> Galstanyan even asked the Church to “freeze [his] spiritual service of thirty years” so that he could run for prime minister.<sup>42</sup> The Church agreed, and shortly thereafter, many clergy, including Karekin II, began to lend their support to Galstanyan and “Holy Struggle.”<sup>43</sup> The government responded forcefully, arresting hundreds of

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<sup>40</sup> “Explainer: What’s behind Armenia’s Church-State Conflict,” *OC Media*, July 25, 2025. (<https://oc-media.org/explainer-whats-behind-armenias-church-state-conflict/>)

<sup>41</sup> Krzysztof Strachota, “The Archbishop’s Revolt: The Culmination of Anti-government Protests in Armenia,” *Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)*, May 28, 2024. (<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-05-28/archbishops-revolt-culmination-anti-government-protests-armenia>)

<sup>42</sup> “Galstanyan Suspends Priesthood to Run for Prime Minister in Armenia,” *OC Media*, May 27, 2024. (<https://oc-media.org/galstanyan-suspends-priesthood-to-run-for-prime-minister-in-armenia/>)

<sup>43</sup> “Explainer: What’s behind Armenia’s Church-State Conflict,” *OC Media*, July 25, 2025. (<https://oc-media.org/explainer-whats-behind-armenias-church-state-conflict/>)

activists including lawmakers<sup>44</sup> and clergy on coup-plotting charges, going so far as to designate some as foreign agents.<sup>45</sup>

What followed was an extraordinary escalation of church-state conflict conducted largely through social media. Pashinyan launched a series of crude Facebook attacks on church leadership, using language so inflammatory that some posts were blocked by the platform. In one post, he declared: "The House of Christ is now occupied by an anti-Christian, adulterous, anti-national, and anti-state group. That house must be liberated. And I will lead the liberation."<sup>46</sup> The Church's Supreme Spiritual Council condemned this "anti-church campaign" as a threat to Armenian statehood and national unity.<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, these attacks, while politically damaging to Pashinyan, reflect the reality that a strategically vulnerable state facing external threats might not be able to afford to have major domestic institutions actively undermining government authority during a precarious transition.

The stakes became even higher when Russian-Armenian oligarch Samvel Karapetyan announced his public support for the church in June 2025, declaring that "a small group, forgetting the history of the Armenian nation and the millennia-old history of the Armenian Church, has launched an

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<sup>44</sup> Most recently, the Armenian parliament voted to prosecute MP Artur Sargsyan for allegedly constructing explosives, recruiting 2,000 people, and planning to attack transportation and infrastructure systems in a coup attempt foiled by the state security service. See: "Armenian Parliament Votes for Criminal Prosecution and Arrest of MP Artur Sargsyan," *Massispost*, July 8, 2025. (<https://massispost.com/2025/07/armenian-parliament-votes-for-criminal-prosecution-and-arrest-of-mp-artur-sargsyan/>)

<sup>45</sup> Jean-François Ratelle, "Armenia's Current Political Crisis and the Implications for Democratic Consolidation," *Russia Post*, July 17, 2025. ([https://russiapost.info/politics/armenias\\_political\\_crisis](https://russiapost.info/politics/armenias_political_crisis))

<sup>46</sup> "Explainer: What's behind Armenia's Church-State Conflict," *OC Media*, July 25, 2025. (<https://oc-media.org/explainer-whats-behind-armenias-church-state-conflict/>)

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

attack on the church and the people.”<sup>48</sup> He continued, “I have always stood by the church and the people. If the politicians fail, we will have our own way of participating in all this.”<sup>49</sup> Karapetyan’s house was raided the next day, and he was arrested and charged with “public calls for the usurpation of power, the violation of territorial integrity, or the violent overthrow of the constitutional order.”<sup>50</sup> Shortly thereafter, Pashinyan posted on social media that he would “deactivate [Karapetyan and the Church] forever,” later claiming that with those who “threatened Armenia,” he would take “the strongest and strictest measures.”<sup>51</sup> Since then, the government has raided, fined, and taken steps to nationalize one of Karapetyan’s businesses, Electric Networks of Armenia (ENA), the country’s sole electricity distributor.<sup>52</sup> Less consequentially, the Food Safety Inspection Body also carried out searches in all 30 branches of Tashir Pizza, a popular pizza chain belonging to Karapetyan, shutting down several branches for “gross violations of sanitary and hygienic standards.”<sup>53</sup> Karapetyan has not given up, though, pledging to create a “fundamentally new political force” through which he could cooperate with “like-minded people.”<sup>54</sup> It appears that he is attempting to position this “new political force” as the most viable opposition to Pashinyan ahead of the 2026 elections, distancing his movement from the existing parliamentary opposition—but not its ideas.

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<sup>48</sup> Explainer: What’s behind Armenia’s Church-State Conflict,” *OC Media*, July 25, 2025. (<https://oc-media.org/explainer-whats-behind-armenias-church-state-conflict/>)

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> “Billionaire Samvel Karapetyan Charged with ‘Usurping Power’ Following pro-Church Statement,” *OC Media*, June 18, 2025. (<https://oc-media.org/billionaire-samvel-karapetyan-charged-with-usurping-power-following-pro-church-statement/>)

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*; “Pashinyan Says Business Tycoon’s Comments Constitute Threats, Vows Crackdown,” *Armenpress*, June 18, 2025. (<https://armenpress.am/en/article/1222615>)

<sup>52</sup> “Billionaire Samvel Karapetyan Charged with ‘Usurping Power’ Following pro-Church Statement,” *OC Media*, June 18, 2025. (<https://oc-media.org/billionaire-samvel-karapetyan-charged-with-usurping-power-following-pro-church-statement/>)

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> “Detained Russian–Armenian Billionaire Karapetyan to Found New ‘Political Force,’” *OC Media*, July 14, 2025. (<https://oc-media.org/detained-russian-armenian-billionaire-karapetyan-to-found-new-political-force/>)

While figures like Galstanyan, Karekin II, and Karapetyan all have clear reasons to oppose Pashinyan's government (especially since coming into open conflict with him), perhaps no one has a greater grievance against it than the displaced leadership of the former Republic of Artsakh (and their former constituents),<sup>55</sup> whose opposition stems from both policy disagreements and bitter personal recriminations. Indeed, while the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh resulted primarily from Azerbaijan's overwhelming military superiority and Russia's abandonment of Armenia, the exile community has directed its anger at Pashinyan's government rather than these broader geopolitical realities.<sup>56</sup>

Pashinyan has himself exacerbated these tensions through inflammatory rhetoric that shifts responsibility for Nagorno-Karabakh's fall onto the exiled leadership itself, accusing them of deliberately refusing to fight Azerbaijan's September 2023 offensive in order to force the population's exodus to Armenia and topple his government (presumably at Russia's behest). At one point, on the floor of the National Assembly, he went so far as to call them "cowardly deserters."<sup>57</sup> This inflammatory rhetoric reflects Pashinyan's attempt to shift responsibility for Nagorno-Karabakh's loss away from his own policies and onto the exiled leadership (the inverse, it should be noted again, of what the exiled leadership of Artsakh has done, placing all the blame on Pashinyan so as to bear none of it themselves). For the exile community, then, Pashinyan's "abandonment" of the Republic of

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<sup>55</sup> "More than 100,000 Refugees Arrive in Armenia as Exodus Swells," *Reuters*, September 30, 2023. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/more-than-100000-refugees-arrive-armenia-exodus-swells-2023-09-30/>)

<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the exile community's expectations of military resistance to Azerbaijan's 2023 offensive ignored the fundamental—if painful—reality that Armenia lacked both the military capacity to defend the territory and the external support necessary to sustain such resistance.

<sup>57</sup> Shoghik Galstian, "Pashinian Again Threatens to Crack Down on Karabakh Leaders," *Azatutyun*, June 14, 2024. (<https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32993389.html>)



Artsakh, followed by his public humiliation of its defenders, represents the ultimate betrayal of the Armenian nation.

The government's crackdown on exile participation in protests has only deepened these grievances. Audio recordings revealed former Artsakh officials organizing rally attendance and paying modest sums to encourage participation—actions that led to arrests of several mayors, including Stepanakert's Davit Sargsian and Askeran's Hayk Shamiryan, on fraud and forgery charges.<sup>58</sup> Shahramanian condemned these prosecutions as "political persecution," while former Artsakh premier Artak Beglarian accused Pashinyan of spreading "hate speech against the Karabakh Armenians" that "offends not only the people of Artsakh but also a large part of the Armenian people for whom Artsakh is one of the important pillars of identity."<sup>59</sup>

Ultimately though, despite their institutional influence, financial resources, and claims to represent a "new political force," this anti-Pashinyan coalition remains fundamentally reactive, offering passionate criticism of territorial concessions, détente with Azerbaijan and Turkey, and the pivot to the West without presenting viable alternatives for ensuring Armenian security in the current geopolitical environment. A May 2025 survey by the Caucasus Research Resource Center illustrated this well: Even though support for Civil Contract has declined, a majority of Armenians see no viable alternative, with the "Tavush for the Homeland" movement failing to capture widespread public trust despite its mobilization success.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> "Galstanyan Suspends Priesthood to Run for Prime Minister in Armenia," *OC Media*, May 27, 2024. (<https://oc-media.org/galstanyan-suspends-priesthood-to-run-for-prime-minister-in-armenia/>)

<sup>59</sup> Shoghik Galstian, "Pashinian Again Threatens to Crack Down on Karabakh Leaders," *Azatutyun*, June 14, 2024. (<https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32993389.html>)

<sup>60</sup> Alexander Pracht, "Support of Ruling Party Declines as More Armenians Feel Unrepresented, Survey Shows," *CivilNet*, May 22, 2025. (<https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/952253/support-of-ruling-party-declines-as-more-armenians-feel-unrepresented-survey-shows/>)

## The Feedback Loop

Armenia's political divisions and external pressures trap the country in a vicious cycle. The government's strategic pivot creates—or further inflames—domestic opposition that refuses to accept why such changes are necessary. This opposition then undermines the very partnerships Armenia needs for survival by destabilizing the country, polarizing its democracy to a dangerous degree, and even risking the toppling of the Pashinyan government and the likely ascendance of the pro-Russian opposition. This dynamic is unsustainable, and risks the reversal—or outright failure—of Armenia's pivot. Thus, as scholar Huseyin Nurlu argues, “peace will require more than vision. It demand[s] public consent. Any lasting agreement cannot be imposed from above.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, “without societal buy-in, even the boldest agreements will be fragile and reversible. A future government, less pragmatic and more ideologically driven, could easily undo years of progress.”<sup>62</sup> Without breaking this cycle, Armenia risks either democratic backsliding under opposition pressure, potentially delegitimizing the government and pushing away partners in the West, or subordination (or worse) due to failed partnerships.

## The Pain of Letting Go

The psychological dimension of Armenia's transition drives this dynamic with particular intensity. Even policies that achieve their strategic

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<sup>61</sup> Huseyin Nurlu, “A Nation at the Crossroads: Pashinyan's ‘Real Armenia’ and What It Means for the Caucasus,” *TRT World*, August 19, 2025.

(<https://www.trtworld.com/article/48f4d42c64a5>)

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

objectives—such as diversifying security partnerships or normalizing relations with neighbors—carry profound emotional costs that provide continuous ammunition for opposition mobilization. Armenians may rationally understand the necessity of accepting current borders and building relationships with former enemies, but the grief associated with abandoning historical narratives of resistance and victimhood ensures that such policies remain politically contentious regardless of their practical success.

This emotional dimension manifests in seemingly symbolic but deeply meaningful policy changes. For example, starting November 1, 2025, the Armenian passport stamp will no longer feature an image of Mount Ararat—one of the most important national symbols in Armenian history and culture. It is considered to be a sacred mountain by many Armenians, and it was mentioned in the Bible as the resting-place of Noah's Ark and thus, per the biblical account, the point of origin of renewed life on Earth following the Great Flood.<sup>63</sup> In the nineteenth century, it came to symbolize the historical center of the Armenian nation and, aspirationally, the Armenian nation-state. And after independence, in the twentieth century, as Armenian anthropologist Levon Abrahamian noted, "Ararat is [still] visually present for Armenians in reality (it can be seen from many houses in Yerevan and settlements in the Ararat plain), symbolically (through many visual representations, such as on Armenia's coats of arms), and culturally — in numerous and various nostalgic poetical, political, architectural representation."<sup>64</sup> The first three postage stamps issued by Armenia after it achieved its independence from the Soviet Union depicted Mount Ararat, and even the logo of Pashinyan's own Civil Contract party was originally designed to resemble the silhouette of the mountain.<sup>65</sup> Yet, because Ararat

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<sup>63</sup> Genesis 8:4.

<sup>64</sup> "Mount Ararat," *Wikipedia*. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount\\_Ararat#](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Ararat#))

<sup>65</sup> "Mount Ararat," *Wikipedia*. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount\\_Ararat#](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Ararat#));

Arshaluys Barseghyan, "Armenia Removes Ararat from Border Crossing Stamp," *OC*

lies in modern-day Turkey, its removal from official documents like the passport stamp represents a necessary step toward normalization for Pashinyan and, likely, his Turkish negotiating partners—one that his opponents frame as surrendering not just territorial claims but cultural and historical identity itself.<sup>66</sup>

More substantively, Armenia's September 2025 agreement to jointly dissolve the OSCE Minsk Group encapsulates the psychological burden of trading existing institutional protections and frameworks (no matter how dysfunctional) for uncertain future arrangements, all while formally closing the book on Nagorno-Karabakh forever. For over three decades, the Minsk Group provided Armenia<sup>67</sup> with something tangible—formal international recognition of its position, written mandates acknowledging its rights, and institutional procedures meant to constrain unilateral action. However flawed or ineffective, the Minsk Group represented something that Armenia could point to when facing pressure. By agreeing to the Minsk Group's dissolution—without securing a signed peace agreement in return—Pashinyan has essentially placed a high-stakes bet that informal Western

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*Media*, September 15, 2025. (<https://oc-media.org/armenia-removes-ararat-from-border-crossing-stamp/>)

<sup>66</sup> Given the fact that Ararat serves as a powerful reminder of the fact that the mountain was, prior to the Armenian Genocide, the “center” (geographic, political, historical, spiritual, etc.) of the Armenian nation.

<sup>67</sup> It should be noted that both Armenia and Azerbaijan found the Minsk Group frustrating, though for different reasons and at different times. Azerbaijan consistently criticized the group's perceived bias due to large Armenian diasporas in co-chair countries and Russia's strategic alliance with Armenia, with this criticism dating back to the Heydar Aliyev era and intensifying under his son Ilham. While Azerbaijan engaged with the mediation process throughout this period—arguably because the group represented their best avenue for challenging Armenia's stronger position on the ground—Baku's skepticism about impartiality remained constant. After Azerbaijan's military victories in 2020 and 2023 fundamentally altered the balance of power, Baku's position shifted from questioning the group's fairness to declaring the conflict “resolved” and the Minsk Group obsolete—a position Armenia eventually accepted in August 2025

partnerships and verbal assurances will prove more reliable than formal institutional frameworks. But perhaps more psychologically devastating, the dissolution formally accepts that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is over, that Armenia lost, and that the 100,000 displaced Karabakh Armenians no longer have any international forum through which to advance their interests or rights.<sup>68</sup> This creates profound psychological anxiety on multiple levels: Armenia now operates without written security commitments from Russia, without any binding guarantees that its new Western partners will intervene if Azerbaijan escalates demands, without the Minsk Group, and without any mechanism to advocate for displaced Armenians who still hope for eventual return. The opposition can legitimately ask what happens if the Trump administration changes priorities, if France reduces its support, or if Azerbaijan simply ignores informal arrangements—questions that haunt any strategy dependent on goodwill rather than binding commitments. For ordinary Armenians, this represents a terrifying leap into the unknown: Surrendering imperfect but tangible protections for the promise of better relationships that exist largely on paper and in diplomatic rhetoric rather than treaty obligations, while simultaneously accepting that an entire chapter of Armenian national struggle has been permanently closed.

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<sup>68</sup> It is worth noting that Karabakh Armenians were not themselves represented through the Minsk Group; it was a forum for Armenia and Azerbaijan to work with one another (and other participating states, like the United States, Russia, and France) to resolve the conflict.

## Conclusion: Breaking the Feedback Loop

Despite this emotional resistance, emerging public opinion data suggests that Armenian society may be more receptive to strategic reorientation than opposition rhetoric indicates. The polling reveals a complex but potentially promising landscape for Pashinyan's approach. Trust in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union has collapsed to just 38 percent in 2025, while confidence in the European Union has risen to 62 percent.<sup>69</sup> Even more tellingly, 75 percent of Armenians believe the European Union should play a greater role in strengthening Armenia's defense, and a June 2025 IRI poll revealed that 49 percent would vote for EU membership—remarkable figures for a country that was firmly within Russia's sphere of influence just years ago.<sup>70</sup>

This shift in public opinion reflects, in part, tangible Western engagement that has resonated with growing segments of Armenian society who see closer ties with the West as pathways to greater security and prosperity. U.S. and European efforts to support Armenia have produced concrete results, such as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's interventions in late 2022 during Azerbaijani attacks on undisputed Armenian territory in its Syunik, Gegharkunik, and Vayots Dzor provinces.<sup>71</sup> These interventions demonstrated Western willingness to actively support Armenian sovereignty in ways that Russia had refused to do, aligning with Yerevan's

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<sup>69</sup> "Annual Survey 2024: Armenia," *EU Neighborhood East*, November 1, 2024. (<https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/annual-survey-2024-armenia/>)

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Matthew Lee, "Blinken Hosts Armenia, Azerbaijan FMs in Bid to Boost Peace," *CNN*, September 19, 2022. (<https://apnews.com/article/un-general-assembly-blinken-armenia-azerbaijan-028d52b5f3cacc9dd0af3d81297573a1>)

strategic calculations about the value of Western partnerships. However, these engagements have also highlighted the central challenge facing Pashinyan's approach: While Western support has been meaningful, it has neither fully resolved Armenia's strategic anxieties nor has it yet produced a final, binding peace settlement with Azerbaijan.<sup>72</sup> This partial success feeds the opposition narrative that frames the West as unreliable and incapable of addressing Armenia's existential threats, creating the very uncertainty that drives domestic resistance to strategic reorientation.

This dynamic reveals why the challenge lies not just in demonstrating Western support, but in creating new forms of institutional certainty to replace what Armenia has lost. Indeed, while Armenians increasingly distrust Russia and favor Western partnerships, they remain deeply uncomfortable with operating in the diplomatic void left by dissolved frameworks like the Minsk Group, and episodic Western interventions—however successful—cannot substitute for systematic institutional protections. They want the West to step in. Breaking the feedback loop, therefore, requires addressing both the emotional and institutional dimensions of Armenia's strategic transition.

Institutionally, rather than simply defending unpopular concessions, Pashinyan's administration must systematically build visible, binding commitments that provide the institutional security Armenians crave. This means pursuing more formal defense cooperation agreements with France, codified security partnerships with India, and written guarantees from the United States regarding infrastructure protection—not just informal assurances and photo opportunities. The August 8 summit and TRIPP represent important steps in this direction, offering concrete evidence that Armenia's pivot attracts significant foreign investment and security commitments that Russia never provided. But the government must follow through, pushing for new institutional frameworks that provide the

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<sup>72</sup> As of September 2025, such a settlement is growing nearer, but has not arrived.

predictability and protection that the old arrangements offered, however imperfectly. This could include advocating for Armenia's inclusion in EU security initiatives or establishing a permanent American security presence tied to infrastructure development.

Equally crucial is addressing the psychological burden of identity transformation more thoughtfully. Rather than asking Armenians to simply abandon historical narratives, the government must construct a compelling alternative vision of Armenian identity that incorporates both loss and renewal. This means acknowledging grief over Nagorno-Karabakh while still emphasizing that preserving Armenia proper requires some pragmatism. It means recognizing the pain of removing Mount Ararat from passports while framing this as securing Armenia's actual territory rather than chasing impossible dreams. The "Real Armenia" ideology upon which Civil Contract bases its governance acknowledges such grief and pain, but as Pashinyan has grown increasingly frustrated with the attempts of the opposition to stifle or obstruct his plans, he has forgotten this. Instead of calling the leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh "cowardly deserters," Pashinyan might try striking a more conciliatory tone (no matter what they may think of him or his government), recognizing the deep hurt that accompanies losing one's homeland, even if, or perhaps *especially* if, that homeland may never be recovered. He might also try to lower the temperature on his criticism of the Church and its supporters in the interest of national unity, even if he maintains a hard line against those who seek to destabilize the country, overthrow the government, or establish ties with foreign powers to accomplish such goals.

The 2026 elections will provide the definitive test of whether or not Armenia can break this cycle. In those elections, the ordinary citizens of the villages and cities of Armenia—not those in the halls of power in Washington, Moscow, Brussels, Ankara, or Baku—will decide through the democratic



process if the promise of new partnerships and prosperity justifies the pain and uncertainty of abandoning familiar but failed arrangements and postures. If Pashinyan's government can point to successful implementation of major infrastructure projects, strengthened security partnerships, and a signed peace agreement with Azerbaijan—or even just further movement towards one following the August 8 summit—it may be able to demonstrate that its pivot has delivered, and will continue to deliver, results that opposition nostalgia cannot match. The key is ensuring that abstract promises become concrete realities that ordinary Armenians can observe in their daily lives—from improved border security to economic opportunities to reduced fear of renewed conflict. Conversely, if the pivot fails to produce tangible benefits, the feedback loop could strengthen opposition forces, undermine Armenia's credibility with partners, and reverse years of strategic progress. Indeed, the stakes extend far beyond electoral politics. A reversal of Armenia's strategic reorientation would likely leave the country more vulnerable than before, having burned bridges with Russia without successfully establishing alternative partnerships. For a small state facing existential pressures, the margin for error is minimal. Indeed, then, breaking the feedback loop may be the most critical challenge facing Armenian democracy and sovereignty in the coming years.

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