



Nagorno-Karabakh and the Power of Leadership

The Identity of the National Leader in Shaping the Defense of National Interest

Oleg Grunda

Master's student, International Relations Department, Tsinghua University

Abstract: This study examines the role of leadership in shaping Armenia's national trajectory through an analysis of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's rise to power and the subsequent loss of Nagorno-Karabakh. It argues that the 2018 Velvet Revolution, while framed as a democratic breakthrough, produced a leadership style that weakened Armenia's strategic position and accelerated national vulnerability. Drawing on realist concepts of balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging, as well as constructivist insights into identity and historical memory, the article explores how Pashinyan's foreign policy decisions disrupted Armenia's security architecture and eroded its sovereignty. The case demonstrates how small states operating in high-risk environments are especially sensitive to leadership miscalculation, particularly when domestic legitimacy, geopolitical alignment, and national identity are mismanaged. Ultimately, the study contends that Armenia's defeat was not merely the result of external pressure, but of internal strategic failure rooted in personal leadership dynamics and policy incoherence.

Keywords: *Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, Leadership, Hedging, alignment strategy*

Introduction

The Nagorno-Karabakh region holds immense historical and cultural significance for Armenians, as it is a symbol of its identity. However, under the leadership of Nikol Pashinyan, Armenia has witnessed a profound shift that culminated in the loss of this pivotal region that was an integral part of the collective memory. This chronicle explores the role of Pashinyan's personality and decisions in shaping Armenia's national interests, focusing on how a leader's actions can alter the course of history, often to the detriment of the nation he is meant to protect. While the "Velvet" revolution promised democratic reform, it ultimately gave rise to a leader whose choices undermined Armenian sovereignty. By examining Pashinyan's rise to power, his governance and the implications for Armenia's identity, this case aims to demonstrate how the dynamics of leadership, rather than ushering in positive change, can actually exacerbate national vulnerabilities. Drawing on theories of international relations such as balancing, bandwagoning, constructivism and hedging, this case study highlights the interplay between national leadership and identity, and how a leader's missteps can irreparably affect the security and future of a nation.

Armenia's Velvet Revolution

Nationalist sentiments have always occupied an important place in Armenian society. Their origins go back to the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These ideas have influenced the formation of a collective identity and ideology, in relation to both themselves and the world around them.¹ As an example, in Armenia, a common belief becomes more popular, saying that Lenin and Stalin are responsible for the terms of the 1920 Treaty of Alexandropol, which ended the Armenian-Turkish war. Although the defeat in the war was the result of the actions of the "Dashnaktsutyun" (Armenian Revolutionary Federation), over time the blame was shifted to Soviet Russia. However, without the intervention of the Soviet Union, modern Armenia, in its present borders, might not have existed. Nevertheless, Armenia's independent path of development began in 1991 with its own successive leaders.

¹ Melikyan, Aren, Jeyhun Veliyev, Katie Sartania, and Saadat Abdullazade. "The Rise of New Nationalism in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s." *The Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation*. March 4, 2018. <https://caucasusedition.net/the-rise-of-new-nationalism-in-armenia-azerbaijan-and-georgia-in-the-late-1980s-and-early-1990s/>.

April 2018 in Armenia was marked by the start of the “My Step Alliance” protest movement directed at the capital. The mass demonstrations followed a classic scenario of people’s mobilization, blocking of transport hubs and public facilities, intensification of rallies and growth of protest sentiments. The main causes of public discontent were the country’s industrial degradation, high unemployment, lack of social security, mass labor migration and excessive concentration of the population in the capital, where half of the country’s population lived.

Nikol Pashinyan, leading the protests, emerged as a central figure of the opposition challenging the government. Being formerly a member of Levon Ter-Petrosian’s pro-Western party and editor of an opposition newspaper, criticizing corruption and low levels of trust in law enforcement and the judiciary, Pashinyan was arrested and convicted for his participation in the 2008 protests. He was granted amnesty in 2011 and returned to political activity, drastically gaining popularity ever since.

During the 2018 protests, Pashinyan actively used the image of a victim, appearing in public with a bandaged hand, which evoked associations with Karabakh war-hero Monte Melkonyan. This strategy resonated with nationalist circles and reinforced the perception of Pashinyan as a fighter against an internal enemy: the ruling elite, whom he accused of betraying the national interest. The symbolic image of Pashinyan with a beard, in a camouflaged shirt with a bandaged hand became recognizable among the protesters (Figure 1). He actively appealed to public discontent, which was rooted in the belief that members of the parliament did not represent the views of the people. As a result, he called for the blockade of strategically important facilities, including the airport and initiated negotiations with the authorities. Yet, despite initial statements of readiness for dialogue, the ultimate goal remained the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan.^{2 3}

Serzh Sargsyan, Armenia’s third president, and a politician with a Karabakh background, was closely associated with the region, as was his predecessor Robert Kocharian. Born in Karabakh’s capital, Stepanakery, both politicians paid close

² Sirekanyan, Tigran. “We Are Ready for Negotiations – Nikol Pashinyan Gives Speech at Republican Square.” *Armenpress*. April 25, 2018. <https://armenpress.am/en/article/931464>.

³ Krikorian, Onnik James. “Pashinyan’s Moment of Reckoning.” *Yorktown Institute*. August 13, 2025. <https://yorktowninstitute.org/pashinyans-moment-of-reckoning/>.

attention to the Karabakh issue, which remained central to Armenian domestic politics. However, Sargsyan's domestic policies focused more on consolidating personal power, including the establishment of a bipartisan system. Despite its close partnership with Russia, Armenia also tried to establish contacts with NATO and Turkey, which provoked mixed reactions in society.

Pashinyan's popularity was not a direct consequence of Sargsyan's unpopularity, but he was able to capitalize on the wave of public discontent. With the help of the "My Step" March he succeeded to mobilize the critical mass of frustration that had accumulated over a decade, which was rooted in Armenia's oligarchic political system, endemic corruption and stagnant economic prospects.⁴ The end of Sargsyan's second presidential term in 2018 was accompanied by a constitutional reform that transformed Armenia into a parliamentary republic. Shortly after, Sargsyan ended up reelected as head of government, sparking public outrage. Sargsyan's narrative of explanation was based around the idea that the new 2018 term is his first term, not third, and turning the country into a parliamentary republic gave birth to a new "collective" leadership of a country.⁵ Under pressure from the protests however, he was compelled to resign. The scale of the pressure forced Sargsyan's parliamentary supporters to back Pashinyan's candidacy in order to reduce the intensity of the protests.

Nikol Pashinyan positioned himself as a leader free of ideological frameworks, emphasizing no geopolitical orientation and independence from Russia, the EU or the US, prioritizing the national and state interests of Armenia above all else.⁶ This course was perceived as challenging, given the importance of maintaining balance in foreign policy. On the Karabakh issue, Pashinyan initially favored a continuation of Petrosian's policy (a former Armenian head of state whose party Pashinyan used to be a member of), who aimed to achieve a compromise where the Armenian side would

⁴ Paul, Amanda. "Armenia's 'Velvet Revolution': Time is Pashinyan's Worst Enemy." European Policy Center. May 30, 2018. <https://www.epc.eu/publication/Armenias-Velvet-Revolution-Time-is-Pashinyans-worst-enemy-1e7abc/>.

⁵ National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia. "Serzh Sargsyan Elected RA Prime Minister at RA National Assembly Special Sitting." April 17, 2018. http://www.parliament.am/news.php?cat_id=2&NewsID=10227&lang=eng.

⁶ Nikoghosyan, Hovhannes, and Vahram Ter-Matevosyan. "Post-Revolution and War, Armenia Must Find a Geopolitical Balance." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. March 9, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2021/03/post-revolution-and-war-armenia-must-find-a-geopolitical-balance?lang=en>.

consent to formally depart Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijan, meanwhile the counterpart would concede to provide Karabakh a status higher than the nominal autonomy.⁷ Nevertheless, by 2022 despite his narrative becoming more rigid after the election, his position had changed and unilaterally recognized Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, a major blow to Armenian policy in recent decades.

The War in Nagorno-Karabakh

The Karabakh conflict has a profound impact on Armenian national consciousness and plays a key role in shaping the country's political identity. The origins of the territorial disputes date back to 387 AD, when the Armenian kingdom was divided between Byzantium and Persia. As a result, Nagorno-Karabakh came under Persian control and became a center of resistance to the occupation forces. In the following centuries, the region repeatedly became an area of struggle against Mongol and Turkic invasions. The establishment of the Karabakh Khanate by the Ottomans in 1747 increased the pressure on the local Armenian population, which led to a mass exodus of native Armenians. However, during the period of the Russian Empire, the process of the return of Armenians to the region began.

After the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, the conflict resumed, but was temporarily resolved by 1936, when Armenia and Azerbaijan became part of the USSR. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union again exacerbated tensions in the region. In 1988, against the background of the weakening of the central power of the USSR, a mass movement to join Armenia began in the autonomous district of Karabakh. The referendum on independence from Azerbaijan confirmed the desire of the majority of the population for reunification with Armenia, having over 99% voting in favor.⁸ This period became the beginning of a new stage of the Karabakh conflict.

In 1992-1994, Azerbaijan attempted to regain control over the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR). Because of the First Karabakh War, Armenian forces took control of several districts of Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, some territories remained under Baku's control. This victory strengthened the position of Yerevan,

⁷ Libaridian, Gerard. "That Elusive 'Right Formula' at the 'Right Moment': A Historical Analysis of the Official Peace Process". Accord 17. Translated from Russian. https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Accord17_p34_right_formula.pdf.

⁸ U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. *Report on the Armenian Referendum on Independence*. October 1, 1991. <https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Report-on-the-Armenian-Referendum-on-Independence.pdf>.

which actively supported the region economically and militarily. It was only through the efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group that a cessation of hostilities was achieved. Despite the truce, intermittent armed clashes continued. An important milestone was the escalation of the conflict in 2016, known as the “April War”, when Azerbaijan used drones for the first time in its conduct of a military warfare.⁹ The fighting lasted four days and was mediated by the OSCE and Russia.

After receiving the legitimacy, Nikol Pashinyan repeatedly declared that the disputed territory cannot be other than Armenia. Despite initially favoring a constructive conflict resolution approach, Pashinyan gradually embraced irredentist rhetoric, a shift reportedly made to appease and win over nationalist elements within Armenia.¹⁰ This change culminated in August 2019 with the potent declaration, “Artsakh is Armenia, and that’s it,” an outright call for unification between Armenia and Karabakh.¹¹ Nevertheless, in 2020, during the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan regained control over significant territories around Nagorno-Karabakh and part of the region itself. By agreement of the two parties, Russian peacekeepers were stationed in the region, although their presence was not officially mandated, meaning they had no right to use military weapons other than for the purposes of self-protection. Armenia’s vulnerability in 2020 forced Yerevan to accept the peacekeepers’ terms, which strengthened Azerbaijan’s regional position. The ceasefire agreement signed in 2020 was seen by many as Armenia’s capitulation.¹²

In October 2022, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev unexpectedly signed a statement in Prague recognizing Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity based on the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration.¹³ The

⁹ Hecht, Eado. “Drones in the Nagorno-Karabakh War: Analyzing the Data.” *Military Strategy Magazine* 7, no. 4 (Winter 2022): 31–37. <https://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/drones-in-the-nagorno-karabakh-war-analyzing-the-data/>.

¹⁰ Huseynov, Rusif, and Gulkhanim Mammadova. “The Evolution of Armenian Discourse on Karabakh.” *Topchubashov Center*. May 29, 2023. <https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3515/the-evolution-of-armenian-discourse-on-karabakh>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Losh, Jack, and Andrew Roth. “Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Deal Brokered by Moscow Prompts Anger in Armenia.” *The Guardian*, November 10, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/10/nagorno-karabakh-armenia-pm-signs-deal-to-end-war-with-azerbaijan-and-russia>.

¹³ Huseynov, Vasif. “In Prague, Armenia and Azerbaijan Make a Critical Move Toward Peace.” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 19, no. 153 (October 17, 2022). <https://jamestown.org/program/in-prague-armenia-and-azerbaijan-make-a-critical-move-toward-peace/>.

Alma-Ata Declaration implies the recognition of the territories of the CIS countries within the borders they had during the USSR. The statement stressed that they recognized the sovereignty of Azerbaijan within the framework of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, part of which included the Karabakh region. This step factually confirmed Nagorno-Karabakh's belonging to Azerbaijan. Later in October 2023 in Granada, Spain, a declaration was made stating a confirmation of Azerbaijani territory to be 86,600 km², reaffirming the Nagorno-Karabakh being included within Azerbaijan's sovereign territory.¹⁴ The statement was concluded under the auspices of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, European Council President Charles Michel and French President Emmanuel Macron. On September 19 2023, Azerbaijan regained full control over Nagorno-Karabakh, ending the longest conflict in the post-Soviet space.

Theoretical Framework

Analyzing the international system through the lens of realism highlights its anarchic nature, where national security is at the center of any state's agenda. In a self-organizing system, small states, such as Armenia, are at a disadvantage, especially when faced with stronger and potentially threatening neighbors, as in the case of Azerbaijan. Realism offers two basic approaches to responding to such threats. These approaches include "balancing" and a "bandwagoning" strategy. Balancing can entail enhancing a state's internal military capabilities or forming alliances with external powers, thus mitigating threats and bolstering its autonomy. On the other hand, bandwagoning refers to submitting to a dominant or threatening power, which may reduce the risk of conflict.

However, it often comes at the cost of compromising the state's interests or autonomy. Both strategies carry risks as balancing can lead to an inefficient redistribution of domestic resources and the risk of involvement in conflict, while accession risks a loss of sovereignty and dependence on a stronger partner.¹⁵ Both balancing and bandwagoning involve a clear choice of aligning with one power over

¹⁴ European Council. "Statement by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia, President Michel of the European Council, President Macron of France and Chancellor Scholz of Germany." October 5, 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/05/statement-by-prime-minister-nikol-pashinyan-of-armenia-president-michel-of-the-european-council-president-macron-of-france-and-chancellor-scholz-of-germany/>

¹⁵ Wang, T. Y., and Alexander C. Tan. "Balancing, Bandwagoning or Hedging: Taiwan's Strategic Choices in the Era of a Rising China." *Political Science* 73, no. 1 (2021), p.2.

another; committing straightforward actions either to counter a threat through balancing or maximize gains through bandwagoning and fully committing to the chosen power's side.¹⁶

It can also be argued that the balancing and bandwagoning are not applicable to the case of Armenia and instead, the state, being in a complex geopolitical situation, demonstrates a pattern of behavior known as hedging. Hedging is defined as a “hybrid strategy” that combines elements of balancing and bandwagoning to counter a threat while simultaneously engaging with it.¹⁷ It is best understood as “insurance-seeking behavior” adopted under situations of high stakes and high uncertainty.¹⁸ By refusing to take sides or be locked into a rigid alignment, a hedging state cultivates a fallback position. In the case of Armenia, this could be evident in the desire to maintain relations with both Russia and Western bloc, thus diversifying its political and economic ties. Other than the two blocs, Armenia can try to maintain policies of appeasement and resistance towards Azerbaijan.

It is important to note that hedging is particularly characteristic of small states, which often prefer to describe their policies as “neutral,” “non-aligned,” or “equidistant” to avoid unwanted pushback from competing big powers.¹⁹ This policy preference was reflected in the initial rhetoric of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan following his election, who similarly articulated a position of non-alignment. Hedging seeks to cultivate strong relationships with both competing powers, possibly resulting in pro-Western and pro-Russian factions, in order to mitigate various risks in uncertain circumstances and preserve flexibility by keeping all options available. However, the Pashinyan government period has shown so far a lack of concrete steps to implement a hedging strategy, leaving Armenia vulnerable to growing challenges and uncertainty.

Constructivism as a theory of international relations also provides important tools for analyzing Armenian foreign policy. Unlike realism, constructivism emphasizes the role of identity, perception and historical memory in shaping foreign

¹⁶ Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. “Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective.” *China International Strategy Review* 3, no. 2 (2021), p.302.

¹⁷ Wang, T. Y., and Alexander C. Tan. “Balancing, Bandwagoning or Hedging: Taiwan’s Strategic Choices in the Era of a Rising China.” p.3.

¹⁸ Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. “Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective.” p.300.

¹⁹ Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. “Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective.” p.301.

policy decisions. For Armenia, issues of identity and self-determination play a key role in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In the Armenian scope or framework, constructivism has a separate significance in analyzing the state that gained its independence and identity after the collapse of the USSR, which correlates with the idea of “Me/Us” and “the Others”. One of the main concepts is the collective understanding of what is “Us” and what is “the Others” at the micro level (within the state) and at the macro level (on the international arena at the state level). Thus, the social nature of each is different, making it possible to understand the internal motivations behind the behavior of large or small powers.

Unlike structuralists, who try to explain why systems of international relations are transforming, constructivists try to explain the internal processes of these changes, which are mostly created by ideas and narratives promoted by national leaders. In relation to Armenia, this lies in the narrative and explanation of what Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia and the collective Western countries are for Armenians. Armenia’s foreign policy is fundamentally shaped by a “foreign policy identity” rooted in collective memory, where the historical narrative of Turkey and Azerbaijan as “foes” often limits diplomatic flexibility, while the perception of Russia as a security guarantor and the West as a civilizational aspiration creates a constant duality between security dependence and value-based integration.²⁰ Thus, the changes in Yerevan’s policy after 2018 reflect not only external challenges but also the country’s internal transformation regarding statehood and memory, which emphasizes the importance of analyzing identity and social constructs in international relations.²¹

Western Reaction and the Limits of Support

The reaction from the West to Pashinyan’s expectations is ambivalent. Armenia has traditionally been seen as an important partner, due to the strong Armenian lobby in France, the US and Turkey. By 2023, the European Parliament’s Committee of Foreign Relations published reports on the “Common Security and Defense Policy”, as well as a report on the implementation of “Common Foreign and

²⁰ Terzyan, Aram. "The Evolution of Armenia’s Foreign Policy Identity: The Conception of Identity Driven Paths. Friends and Foes in Armenian Foreign Policy Discourse." In *Values and Identity as Sources of Foreign Policy in Armenia and Georgia*, Universal, 2016, 145–183.

²¹ Zolyan, Mikayel. “National Identity Rethink Confronts Armenians With Hard Truths.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. December 10, 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/11/armenia-new-national-identity?lang=en>.

Security Policy”.²² These reports condemned Azerbaijan’s aggressive actions and systematic military campaign against Nagorno-Karabakh. The European Parliament proposed to impose sanctions on the Azerbaijani authorities responsible for repeated ceasefire violations by stopping the gas imports, as well as to suspend the “Memorandum of Understanding” with Baku.²³ The call to criticize Turkey for supplying arms to Azerbaijan is also present.²⁴ Against the backdrop of continued violence by Baku and a humanitarian crisis in the form of refugee flows, Brussels formed a consensus on the need to support Yerevan.

In 2024, the European Parliament called for the withdrawal of all Azerbaijani troops from Armenia’s sovereign territory, underlining Europe’s desire for increased diplomatic pressure.²⁵ This all came alongside the calls to reduce the European dependence on Azerbaijani gas, which Baku also buys from Moscow. In parallel, EU diplomatic chief Josep Borrell condemned the escalation of tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh and called on Azerbaijan to stop military action.²⁶ Officials in Yerevan received similar assistance from the head of the EU delegation to Armenia, Vasilis Maragos, who declared that “in the interests of peace for all citizens of the South Caucasus, the European Union continues to monitor the situation in the region and to finance Armenia to support democracy.”²⁷

Nevertheless, despite statements of support, in practice, the interests of the European Union are still largely determined by energy factors. Azerbaijan remains a

²² European Parliament. *Report on the Implementation of the Common Security and Defence Policy*. A9-0403/2023. December 6, 2023. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0403_EN.html, European Parliament. *Report on the Implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy*. A9-0389/2023. December 4, 2023. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0389_EN.html.

²³ European Parliament. “MEPs Denounce Violations of Human Rights and International Law by Azerbaijan.” October 24, 2024. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20241017IPR24740/meps-denounce-violations-of-human-rights-and-international-law-by-azerbaijan>.

²⁴ European Parliament. “Nagorno-Karabakh: MEPs Demand Review of EU Relations with Azerbaijan.” October 5, 2023. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230929IPR06132/nagorno-karabakh-meps-demand-review-of-eu-relations-with-azerbaijan>.

²⁵ European Parliament. “MEPs Denounce Violations of Human Rights and International Law by Azerbaijan.”

²⁶ European Union External Action Service. “Nagorno Karabakh: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Borrell in the EP Plenary.” October 3, 2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/nagorno-karabakh-speech-high-representativevice-president-borrell-ep-plenary_en

²⁷ Armenia News - NEWS.am. “Head of EU Delegation to RA: We Will Unlock the Full Potential of Armenia-EU Relations.” October 12, 2024. <https://news.am/eng/news/847010.html>.

key gas supplier to the EU, as emphasized by the extension of the “Strategic Energy Partnership Roadmap with the EU” by Azerbaijani Energy Minister Parviz Shahbazov for an additional five years in 2023.²⁸ The document, signed by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and the head of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, demonstrated that real steps to impose sanctions or refuse gas imports are overshadowed by the need to ensure the energy security of EU countries. As a result, the European ambivalence is manifested in its support for two contradictory principles: the right of nations to “self-determination”, enshrined in the EU-Armenia Action Plan and “the territorial integrity” of states, enshrined in the EU-Azerbaijan Action Plan.²⁹³⁰ As a result, Brussels’ policy has appeared to be blending moral imperatives with pragmatic economic interests.

Realizing the limitations of Russian support, Nikol Pashinyan diversified on cooperation with the United States. In September 2023, he publicly acknowledged Armenia’s strategic mistake of overdependence on Moscow in the security sphere.³¹ The statement was accompanied by practical steps to distance Armenia from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), including the withdrawal of the country’s permanent representative to the organization.³² Joint US-Armenian military exercises at the same time became a symbol of growing engagement with the West, even though at this time, the demand for the resignation of Pashinyan was taking place in Yerevan.³³³⁴ Nevertheless, seemingly Washington did not fulfill Yerevan’s hopes. In 2023 at the UN General Assembly, the American President Joe Biden stressed the

²⁸ The Turan News Agency. “Azerbaijan-EU to Update Strategic Energy Partnership Roadmap.” December 4, 2023. <https://turan.az/en/politics/azerbaijan-eu-to-update-strategic-energy-partnership-roadmap>.

²⁹ European Union External Action Service. *EU/Armenia Action Plan*. 2006. https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/armenia_enp_ap_final_en.pdf.

³⁰ European Union External Action Service. *EU/Azerbaijan Action Plan*. 2016. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/au-az_action_plan_azerbaijan.pdf.

³¹ Osborn, Andrew. “Armenian PM Says Depending Solely on Russia for Security was ‘Strategic Mistake’.” *Reuters*, September 3, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/armenian-pm-says-depending-solely-russia-security-was-strategic-mistake-2023-09-03/>.

³² TASS Agency. “Armenia Recalls Its Envoy to CSTO, Appoints Him Ambassador to the Netherlands.” September 5, 2023. <https://tass.com/world/1670235>.

³³ Al Jazeera. “US Completes Joint Military Exercise in Armenia.” September 20, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/20/us-completes-joint-military-exercise-in-armenia>.

³⁴ Light, Felix. “Armenian Protesters Demand Pashinyan Ouster.” *Reuters*, September 21, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/several-hundred-protesters-gather-armenian-capital-after-karabakh-surrender-2023-09-20/>.

importance of defending the principles of the UN Charter, on the same day Azerbaijan launched a new attack on Nagorno-Karabakh.³⁵ In contrast to the statements on readiness to protect small states from aggressors, the US continued to ignore the aggravation of the situation, prioritizing energy agreements with Baku. With the lack of the decisive steps to prevent the crisis, the US government contributed to the consolidation of Azerbaijan's position, which was made possible by its longstanding alliance with Turkey. The US has not only ignored Azerbaijani attempts to control the Armenian people but has also consistently supported its coercive diplomacy and avoided holding it accountable for the blockade.³⁶

With the Biden administration coming to the end of its term, the Armenian National Committee of America criticized the results of the passive policies of the US and the EU. In their statement it was noted that the Biden administration "failed to take meaningful steps to hold Azerbaijan accountable", and criticised "the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) failure to provide urgently needed humanitarian assistance to the over 120,000 Armenian refugees".³⁷ Pashinyan's mistake was to overestimate the Western willingness to come to Armenia's help despite transparent signals of support for Azerbaijan. The refusal in 2023 to participate in CSTO exercises against the backdrop of Azerbaijani military equipment moving towards the conflict zone the same year was a clear indication that Yerevan overlooked the need to assess the threat in time and mobilize the necessary resources to defend itself.

Although this doesn't argue for Azerbaijan's intention at the time to start a war, Azerbaijan showed that it was determined and aimed at political-military blackmail to force Armenia to sign "the transfer of the Karabakh" agreement. While the West limited itself to condemning Baku's actions, Pashinyan by continuing to distance himself from Russia, found himself in a position where Armenia was left virtually

³⁵ The White House. "Remarks by President Biden Before the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly | New York, NY." September 19, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/09/19/remarks-by-president-biden-before-the-78th-session-of-the-United-nations-general-assembly-new-york-ny/>.

³⁶ Galitsky, Alex, and Gev Iskajyan. "The U.S. Keeps Failing Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh." *Time*, September 20, 2023. <https://time.com/6316001/us-failures-nagorno-karabakh/>.

³⁷ Armenian National Committee of America. "ANCA Gives Biden-Harris Administration Failing Grade on Artsakh Policy." July 30, 2024. <https://anca.org/press-release/anca-gives-biden-harris-administration-failing-grade-on-artsakh-policy/>.

without any external security guarantees. This policy, in spite of its inherent shortcomings, is rarely criticized inside Armenia, as Pashinyan prefers to place responsibility on Moscow. Nonetheless, an objective analysis of the situation shows the need for a diversified approach and a more balanced foreign policy capable of taking into account the interests of both the West and Russia. Meanwhile, whatever claims may be voiced about the double standards of certain actors involved in the Armenian-Azerbaijani agenda, the most important question remains: what has the Armenian leadership done on its side to protect its people from the hostility?

Pashinyan's Policy Failures and Strategic Missteps

The initial events in Armenia could be described as a classic example of a color revolution. Such processes in international practice often end with negative consequences for the state. Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan each experienced deep political polarization or even armed conflict and unrest in the aftermath of these changes. In the course of revolutions, political figures whose level of competence is questionable come to power and countries rarely see any drastic improvement. They are elected due to the minority's social pressure and prove incapable of effectively governing the country. As a result, Nikol Pashinyan initiated a social split and polarization, putting different segments of the population against each other.³⁸ This scenario has been evident in similar events on the post-Soviet space in Georgia (2003), Kyrgyzstan (2004), with the failed uprisings in Belarus (2006, 2020) and Kazakhstan (2022).

In the wake of the protests, Pashinyan positioned himself as a fierce nationalist, as the process of national identity construction began to change the society after Armenia's independence in 1991. Once in power, however, he failed to garner significant support from the opposition. Although he was perceived as a symbol of change and hope for a better future during the period of political instability, this credibility was not subsequently realized. Pashinyan's rise to approval cannot be attributed directly to the crisis of confidence in the previous leadership under Sargsyan. He managed to mobilize public discontent against the previous government, but he failed to accumulate and reaffirm the same masses to support his own political narrative.

³⁸ Arsenyan, Magda. "Political Polarization and Hate Speech in Armenia after the Velvet Revolution." *Caucasus Watch*. April 21, 2020. <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/political-polarization-and-hate-speech-in-armenia-after-the-velvet-revolution.html>.

In the mass consciousness, political leaders continued to be associated with the previous regimes, which limited Pashinyan's ability to consolidate his position.

The war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 negated many of the democratic initiatives implemented by Yerevan since Pashinyan came to power. Internal political instability, Pashinyan's conflict with the army representatives and the lack of political competition have only worsened in comparison to the previous years of Sargsyan's rule. Consequently, Pashinyan's leadership began to mirror his predecessors, marked by populism and power centralization. The question of a repeated change of power became less urgent, despite the social unrest. The early parliamentary elections in 2021 were realized as Pashinyan's government was at question for the failed policy. However, a low turnout of 49% demonstrated the high level of social apathy and fatigue in society, which hindered the realization of conducting a political change again.³⁹

During the first years of his rule, Pashinyan failed to build effective mechanisms to respond to key national security challenges. It could be argued that Armenia's security policy should have focused on modernizing the military while rekindling alliances with Russia and other strategic partners. Russia has played and continues to play a critical role in maintaining Armenian defense capability, as the armed forces of the two countries are integrated under bilateral agreements. The Russian military base on Armenian soil, as well as regular joint exercises within the CSTO, served as a guarantee of a minimum level of combat capability for Armenian troops. However, interaction with the Russian side has gradually decreased in intensity.⁴⁰ As a result "balancing" doesn't describe Armenia's behavior, as internal military capabilities weren't mobilized to the fullest, nor have the alliances with the foreign actors, including receiving clear support from the West, been achieved, but in contrary disintegrated.⁴¹

In domestic policy, the need to ensure national sovereignty remained a key challenge. The years of Pashinyan's rule saw an increase in the assistance of foreign-

³⁹ International Foundation for Electoral Systems. "Armenia." Election Guide. <https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/12/>.

⁴⁰ Anahit Shirinyan, "Armenia's Foreign Policy Balancing in an Age of Uncertainty," Chatham House, March 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-03-14-Armenia3.pdf>.

⁴¹ Haberman, Joe, and Paul Cormarie. "The U.S. Can't Guarantee Armenia's Security, Despite Azerbaijan's Threats, but It Can Help." RAND Corporation. March 14, 2024. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/03/the-us-cant-guarantee-armenias-security-despite-azerbajans.html>.

funded NGOs and funded Civil Society Organization projects.⁴² These structures are crucial in areas like human rights, free speech, education and democratic development. Grants provided by the United States Agency for International Development and the European Union, were actively invested in projects aimed at strengthening civil society, fighting corruption and supporting the rule of law.⁴³ Unlike the US, Georgia or Russia, Armenia doesn't have strict legislative measures to regulate the activities of foreign-funded NGOs.

The introduction of such restrictions seems unlikely, as this could negatively affect the freedom of their activities and lead to a deterioration of relations with the West. Nevertheless, one of the largest international donors to NGOs in Armenia, the USAID, has provided significant amounts of funding. In 2021 alone, the US allocated over \$70 million to projects focused on strengthening civil society, human rights, and judicial reform.⁴⁴ This support greatly contributes to the organization's efforts aimed at weakening Armenia's integration into the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

This assistance has had little effect on speeding up the national economy. Armenia's economic weakness, which increased because of the conflict in 2020, was only a continuation of a long-term trend. After the collapse of the USSR, the national economy was never modernized. Destructive changes led to the dismantling of the Soviet industrial infrastructure, the degradation of scientific institutions and a decline in the quality of education. The accumulation of these processes caused structural problems, including low productivity, chronic unemployment and rising poverty rates.⁴⁵

The example of Armenia reflects the general difficulties of most post-Soviet countries, which have failed to develop an independent development trajectory. One of

⁴² Isanians, Verej. "After USAID: Armenian Civil Society at a Crossroads." *Caucasus Watch*. August 14, 2025. <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/after-usaid-armenian-civil-society-at-a-crossroads.html>., Barseghyan, Arshaluys. "USAID Doubles Aid Package to Armenia to \$250 Million." *OC Media*. September 6, 2024. <https://oc-media.org/usaid-doubles-aid-package-to-armenia-to-250-million/>., European Union External Action. *EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in Armenia 2021-2027*. Updated June 2025. Accessed December 12, 2025.

⁴³ Alioghlu, Elchin. "NGOs and Power: New Battleground in South Caucasus." *Trend News Agency*, October 18, 2024. <https://en.trend.az/scaucasus/georgia/3958648.html>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Cheterian, Vicken. "Is the Republic of Armenia a Viable State?" *CivilNet*, June 23, 2023. <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/742721/is-the-republic-of-armenia-a-viable-state/>.

the reasons for this state may be psychological dependence on the dominant state (Russia, its predecessors and others) and long existence in the status of a subsidized region.⁴⁶ This creates a tendency to attribute successes to internal efforts and failures to external actors. The dynamic is visible in the rhetoric of Pashinyan, who attributed the loss of control over Nagorno-Karabakh to insufficient support from Russia and the CSTO.⁴⁷

Other than the question of ensuring national security for its domestic policy, the Karabakh conflict remained to be a key challenge. The events of 2020 were a turning point and it is argued the war could have been avoided. Had the conflict been prevented, it would have avoided the signing of an agreement perceived as capitulation.⁴⁸ According to information that emerged later, Pashinyan was given the opportunity to stop the war in 2020 twice.⁴⁹ Both times, the Prime Minister rejected the General Staff's recommendation for a ceasefire, as he was concerned that accepting it would lead the public to perceive him as a "traitor".

This episode demonstrates significant shortcomings in Pashinyan's leadership. Governing a country with unresolved international conflicts requires from the head of state a high degree of responsibility and willingness to compromise in the interests of the nation. On the contrary, as events have shown, the Prime Minister was focused on holding on to power, ignoring calls from the opposition and former leaders of Armenia and Karabakh to reconsider his decisions. By 2016, it became evident that drones would play a crucial role in future conflicts, as was demonstrated by Azerbaijan's military actions. In response to this emerging threat, Armenia was compelled to invest in drone countermeasures and other defense systems. Despite the existence of agreements with

⁴⁶ Giragosian, Richard. "Paradox of Power: Russia, Armenia, and Europe after the Velvet Revolution." European Council on Foreign Relations. August 7, 2019. https://ecfr.eu/publication/russia_armenia_and_europe_after_the_velvet_revolution/.

⁴⁷ ArmenPress. "Pashinyan Accuses Russia of Failing Peacekeeping Mission, Warns of Int'l Legal Order Crisis, Ukraine Cause-and-Effect." September 2, 2023. <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1118667>., Barseghyan, Arshaluys. "Pashinyan: Armenia Has 'Frozen' Its Participation in the CSTO." OC Media. February 24, 2024. <https://oc-media.org/pashinyan-armenia-has-frozen-its-participation-in-the-csto/>

⁴⁸ Losh, Jack, and Andrew Roth. "Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Deal Brokered by Moscow Prompts Anger in Armenia."

⁴⁹ The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia. "Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Speech at the Commission Investigating the Circumstances of the 44-Day War." June 20, 2023. <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2023/06/20/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/>.

Russia to supply arms, the agreement was revised after Pashinyan came to power, preferring the purchase of aircrafts.⁵⁰

The lack of effective counter-drone warfare capabilities in 2020 significantly reduced the combat capability of the Armenian army. While previously Armenia was technologically advanced, Azerbaijan's asymmetric investments in weapons outnumbered Armenia in terms of drones and significantly modernized its armed forces.⁵¹ The distribution of blame between previous governments and the government of Pashinyan may remain open. Nevertheless, the fact remains that there were opportunities to prepare, and Pashinyan's failure to act in 2020 once again raises questions about his leadership capacity and emphasizes the influence of the personal factor on key state decisions. One may argue for his efforts to counterbalance Azerbaijan by buying the military equipment, however personal character of relying on his own knowledge and estimations has led to poor preparation in the sphere he previously had no expertise in.

As of 2024, Nikol Pashinyan has also expressed dissatisfaction with the country's state emblem, which embodies his desire to rethink and "create" a new republic.⁵² Under the rhetoric of slogans about democratization, fighting corruption and eliminating clans, treaties such as the Treaty of Alexandropol are being symbolically revised. The principle of restarting the political process through a border resolution serves as a tool to realize the idea of a neutral 'Real Armenia' and seeking partnership with Azerbaijan for the sake of the protectorate and access to economic benefits that can be gained with the help of Turkey and, indirectly, access to European markets.⁵³ At

⁵⁰ Stepanian, Ruzanna. "Yerevan Confirms Purchase of Russian Fighter Jets." *Azatutyun*, February 4, 2019. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29750802.html>, The Eurasian Times. "Armenia Acquired Russia's Su-30 Fighter Jets Without Missiles Prior to War with Azerbaijan.", March 21, 2021. <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/armenia-purchased-russias-su-30-fighter-jets-without-missiles-in-2020-pm-pashinyan/>.

⁵¹ Shaikh, Shaan, and Wes Rumbaugh. *The Air and Missile War in Nagorno-Karabakh: Lessons for the Future of Strike and Defense*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. December 8, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/air-and-missile-war-nagorno-karabakh-lessons-future-strike-and-defense>, Wezeman, Pieter D., Alexandra Kuimova, and Jordan Smith. "Arms Transfers to Conflict Zones: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh." Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). April 30, 2021. <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2021/arms-transfers-conflict-zones-case-nagorno-karabakh>.

⁵² Sassounian, Harut. "PM Pashinyan Disparages Armenia's Coat of Arms and National Anthem." *The Armenian Weekly*, June 20, 2023. <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/06/20/pm-pashinyan-disparages-armenias-coat-of-arms-and-national-anthem/>.

⁵³ Barseghyan, Arshaluys. "Armenia Removes Ararat from Border Crossing Stamp." *OC Media*. September 15, 2025. <https://oc-media.org/armenia-removes-ararat-from-border-crossing-stamp/>.

the same time, the course of abandoning the CSTO is often criticized as lacking a clear strategic foundation. Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan's foreign policy has been more balanced and consistent. Although the desire to distance itself from Russia is evident, Azerbaijani leaders (being a ruling dynasty) have always stressed the importance of maintaining friendly relations and pragmatic dialogue. The formation of Azerbaijani identity within the framework of building a nation was largely constructed around the Karabakh conflict, which helped to rally society around a common goal. Unlike Baku, Pashinyan failed to consider the potential of the Karabakh issue as an instrument of national consolidation and unification. Armenia's tactical scope of analysis provided Azerbaijan with an opportunity to legitimize its territorial claims using arguments of historical affiliation and national unity by institutionalizing the "Western Azerbaijan" narrative and promoting a cult of victory through the element of "Iron Fist" and the idea of the "Victorious Nation".^{54 55}

Russia's Role and Armenia's Misplaced Expectations

Since 2018, calls to abandon the strategic partnership with Russia have started to spread in Armenian society. In parallel, calls for ending integration with Armenia appeared in the Russian expert environment. Nevertheless, even amidst this rising sentiment of disengagement, Russia and the EAEU continued to serve as Armenia's paramount economic partners. Agricultural products formed the basis of Armenian exports and Russia was the guarantor of Armenia's energy security, including the operation of the country's only nuclear power plant. However, despite the benefits of trade, economic and defense cooperation, the anti-Russian orientation of the new government undermined the existing security balance, which primarily harmed Armenia itself.⁵⁶

As noted earlier, the activities of Western-funded NGOs in Armenia contribute to the formation of specific narratives that explain Russian inactivity on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. These narratives make it possible to identify several main areas of

⁵⁴ Regional Centre for Strategic Policy (RCSP). "Azerbaijan's Territorial Claims Against Armenia: The Institutionalization of Narratives." April 30, 2025. <https://rcsp.am/en/entry/7213/azerbajians-territorial-claims-against-armenia-the-institutionalization-of-narratives/>.

⁵⁵ Samadov, Bahruz. "In the Beginning Was the Violence." *New Eastern Europe*. August 9, 2023. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/08/09/in-the-beginning-was-the-violence/>.

⁵⁶ Keghart. "Pashinyan is Reducing Russian Influence in Armenia." September 23, 2024. <https://keghart.org/davidian-pashinyan-russia/>.

interpretation of Russian-Armenian relations. First, much of the criticism focuses on the CSTO activities and the lack of official statements condemning Azerbaijan's actions. The Armenian authorities claim the CSTO is obliged to protect Armenian territorial integrity after the incursions of Azerbaijani troops. As a consequence, Armenia boycotted CSTO activities. Moreover, arguments were made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister himself against the Russian peacekeeping contingent, which, according to the Armenian side, should have resisted Azerbaijani offensives.⁵⁷ Lastly, despite official statements by the Russian government confirming allied relations with Armenia, the public discourse in Russia expresses a lack of understanding of Yerevan's anti-Russian rhetoric. This mood is employed by pro-Western NGOs, constructing an image of Russia as an unreliable partner and contributing to the spread of its negative perception.

Armenia with Pashinyan at its head has exposed an inherent inconsistency in its approach in demands for CSTO to support its territorial integrity, despite the fact that Yerevan has never officially recognised Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Armenian territory. Pashinyan, speaking at an extraordinary session of parliament in 2023, recalled the 1996 OSCE summit in Lisbon, which he said was a turning point. According to him, the international community stated that the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh should be decided within the framework of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.⁵⁸ Two key conclusions follow from this: first, the CSTO had no legal grounds to intervene, as there was no attack on recognised Armenian territory. Second, Pashinyan's position reflects an attempt to place responsibility on both Russia and the international community, which emphasizes the inconsistency of his rhetoric.

Criticism of Russia also concerns its peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh, but Armenian representatives have often misinterpreted the scope of Russian peacekeepers' responsibilities, failing to distinguish between a peacekeeping

⁵⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. "Comment of the Spokesperson of MFA of Armenia Regarding the Statement of the Official Representative of the MFA of Russia." August 31, 2023. https://www.mfa.am/en/interviews-articles-and-comments/2023/08/31/spox_comment/12172., "Armenia: Russia's Peacekeepers Failed Mission in Nagorno-Karabakh." *Al Jazeera*, December 22, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/22/armenia-russias-peacekeepers-failed-mission-in-nagorno-karabakh>.

⁵⁸ Arka News Agency. "The Prime Minister Explained Why Armenia Did Not Recognize Artsakh." April 21, 2023. https://arka.am/news/politics/premer_obyasnil_pochemu_armeniya_ne_priznala_artsakh/.

contingent and armed force. Under international law, the mandate of Russian peacekeepers is limited to monitoring the ceasefire and their role is to maintain peace by ensuring the protection of the civilian population, not engaging in hostilities by taking anyone's side. During the second Karabakh war, the intervention of Russian peacekeepers was the decisive factor in ending the hostilities and facilitated agreements aimed at stabilizing relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Attempts to accuse of allowing 'ethnic cleansing' in the region were used as means to blame and discredit Russia's role in the region.⁵⁹ However, available objective data indicates that there have been no massacres or significant destruction of civilian infrastructure in Karabakh.⁶⁰ Data from international organizations also doesn't contain any evidence of mass crimes against civilians, which casts doubt on the credibility of such accusations.

Armenia's growing rapprochement with the West, coupled with Pashinyan's actions, significantly strained relations with Moscow, reducing the likelihood of close cooperation. Russia avoided engaging militarily, as such involvement would risk human casualties and stretch its resources, due to being wary of escalating tensions with Azerbaijan and Turkey, whose partnership it sought to preserve.⁶¹ Furthermore, with Armenian leadership failing to take constructive steps, Russia saw no commitment to Armenia's security, especially with the leader's inconsistent stance, marked by accusations against Russia and other post-Soviet states, worsening the situation further. Yerevan's desire to distance itself from traditional allies and pivot towards the West was perceived by Russia as detrimental to Armenia's own national interests, particularly given its own internal and external challenges.⁶²

The idea of distinguishing new "friends," "allies," "enemies," "rivals," or "competitors" in Armenian political discourse as part of constructivism theory, has taken them to a different path, which didn't meet the original requirements of their

⁵⁹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Excerpts from the Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, January 12, 2024. Statements by Armenian Politicians." January 12, 2024. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1925275/#Q2

⁶⁰ Shahverdyan, Lilit. "Russia Rejects Criticism of Peacekeepers in Karabakh." *Eurasianet*, January 15, 2024. <https://eurasianet.org/russia-rejects-criticism-of-peacekeepers-in-karabakh>.

⁶¹ Broers, Laurence. "Russia Concedes Karabakh for Stake in New Regional Order." Chatham House, October 9, 2023. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/09/russia-concedes-karabakh-stake-new-regional-order>.

⁶² TASS. "Russian Foreign Ministry: Yerevan Orients Itself Toward the West Often to the Detriment of Its Own Interests." July 1, 2025. Translated from Russian. <https://tass.ru/politika/24400321>.

identity. In the context of the Karabakh issue, Russian and Armenian interests and identification never contradicted each other, while Europe originally had nothing to offer Armenia. As a result, the shift in Russia's foreign policy in response to Armenian new self-recognition left Armenia's national interests vulnerable, illustrating the importance of Russian influence in maintaining stability in Nagorno-Karabakh, a region traditionally stabilized by Russian presence.

From Velvet to Void

It can be argued that the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia was part of a broader geopolitical context aimed at changing the balance of power in the region. In that geopolitical context, Israel was lobbying for the US to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran by presenting materials allegedly indicating Tehran's possession or development of nuclear weapons. In this context, the change of power in Armenia could be an element of the US strategy to isolate Iran. Under the previous leadership, led by Serzh Sargsyan, Yerevan and Tehran achieved an unprecedented level of cooperation. Of particular importance was the agreement to build Meghri hydroelectric power plants, which was expected to become the largest energy project in the South Caucasus.⁶³ These initiatives strengthened bilateral ties through infrastructure and economic projects. Although direct US intervention in the Armenian events remains only a hypothesis, Armenia's subsequent foreign policy reorientation indicates the significant influence of new actors. Pashinyan, who presented himself as an independent reformer seeking to build a new version of Armenia, has proven unable to implement the major projects initiated by his predecessor and ended up forming a new ideology of 'Real Armenia'. At the same time, Azerbaijan, pursuing a pragmatic development strategy, completed the construction of the Aras Dam hydroelectric power plant back in 1970.

The establishment of external governance, in which the country's interests are sidelined in favor of global strategic goals, often accompanies "velvet" or "color" revolutions, be that the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia or the 2014 Ukrainian Euromaidan. Armenia has traditionally linked its interests with Russia, especially in

⁶³ Avanesov, Alexandr. "Minister: Armenia Expects a Significant Breakthrough in the Construction of the Meghri Hydroelectric Power Station on the Border with Iran." *ArmInfo News Agency*, August 29, 2018. https://finport.am/full_news.php?id=35653&lang=3.

the context of the Karabakh conflict. The Karabakh issue was the foundation that kept Yerevan and Moscow allied. In the absence of this conflict, the ties between the two countries would inevitably weaken.

Armenia's leadership, led by Nikol Pashinyan, played a key role in the voluntary transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. Since 2020, when the outcome of the Second Karabakh War was a profound shock for Armenian society, the authorities have not taken any tangible steps to strengthen defense capabilities or advance diplomatic initiatives. Nor did Yerevan seek cultural or administrative autonomy for the region within Azerbaijan, indicating the inability of the Armenian leadership to use diplomatic tools in their own interests. Nikol Pashinyan's policy has demonstrated passivity. The leadership, marked by distancing Armenia from the Eastern bloc and from Iran, as well as conducting joint military exercises with the US, signaled a shift not only towards external powers but also a movement that undermined national sovereignty. The failure to take responsibility for strategic decisions, particularly in the wake of military defeats, has diminished Armenia's influence on the international stage, leaving it with little to offer in negotiations. From the onset of his tenure, Pashinyan misled the public regarding Karabakh future, by abandoning Armenia's multivector policy, neglected the nation's historical legacy and lacked a coherent vision for the identity.

Yerevan did have the opportunity to strengthen its position by mobilizing and organizing the defense of the region, however Nikol Pashinyan publicly renounced Karabakh in Prague and Granada. As a result, Stepanakert was left to negotiate without Armenian mediation.⁶⁴ In 2024, Pashinyan claimed that the leadership in Stepanakert was pro-Russian, making Armenia not able to provide them with support or asylum.⁶⁵

Historically, Armenian society has been accustomed to relying on external assistance. Throughout its independence, Armenia has received financial, military and diplomatic support from Russia or the Armenian diaspora abroad. Nonetheless, instead of using this support to strengthen its statehood, Yerevan has often only maneuvered in search of maximum benefit, which has become a peculiar political tradition. The

⁶⁴ Berikyan, Mane. "Pashinyan: Armenia Cannot Protect Karabakh's Population." *CivilNet*, July 26, 2023. <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/745607/pashinyan-armenia-cannot-protect-karabakhs-population/>.

⁶⁵ Avetisyan, Ani. "Pashinyan Puts Kibosh on Karabakh Government-in-Exile." *Eurasianet*, April 3, 2024. <https://eurasianet.org/pashinyan-puts-kibosh-on-karabakh-government-in-exile>.

dependence on one country for security has led to strategic miscalculations. As relations with Russia deteriorated after 2020, Armenia was unable to adapt and take responsibility for its own destiny. Western countries contributed to Yerevan's perception of Russia as an unreliable partner, which affected its actions within the CSTO framework and its decision to conduct joint military exercises with the US. As a result, Azerbaijan strengthened its geopolitical standing in the region and Armenia remained isolated, losing one of its few allies. Pashinyan, despite his leading post, did not recognize Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Armenia, which in the end predetermined the outcome of the conflict in Baku's favor.

The reasons for the ongoing changes in Armenia's policy could also be explained by the shift in the foreign policy vector, oriented towards rapprochement with the West, which manifested in the rejection of traditional allies and territorial interests. One of the most notable steps in this direction was the ratification in 2023 of the International Criminal Court Rome Statute. Officially, this decision was presented as a measure aimed at improving the country's security, as emphasised by Pashinyan.⁶⁶ However, the explanation is unconvincing, as the signing of such an international treaty, especially in the context of 'allied' relations with Russia, can't be considered as a practical measure to strengthen security.⁶⁷

The International Criminal Court, by its nature, is not a body capable of exerting a direct influence on the state's defense capacity or capability, nor preventing threats to its sovereignty. This indicated the political rather than strategic nature of the step, which can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture aimed at distancing itself from Russia or the CIS, as, with the exception of Tajikistan, no CIS country has ratified the Statute. The role of the national leader and interpersonal relations in the development of the countries that gained independence in the early 90s is particularly indicative of the post-Soviet space. Thus, a pattern can be traced, where temporary leaders came to power, seeking personal or political gain at the expense of citizens and to the detriment of the state.

In geopolitical terms, Armenia found itself in a position where significant

⁶⁶ ArmenPress. "Armenian Prime Minister Explains Reasons for Joining Rome Statute." February 12, 2024. <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1130069>.

⁶⁷ TASS. "Armenia's Accession to ICC Rome Statute 'Political Blindness' — Opposition." March 29, 2023. <https://tass.com/world/1595639>.

concessions were made to Azerbaijan and Turkey without clear gains for Armenia. Yerevan's foreign policy in recent years has led to a gradual loss of positions, which was in line with the interests of Baku. Nikol Pashinyan is shaping Armenia's new reality, marked by a weakened army, loss of national identity and unclear political direction. Unlike Azerbaijan, which has long strengthened its allied ties with Turkey, Armenia has deliberately weakened its relations with Russia. Its landlocked position, weak economy and reduced military capabilities have led to its marginalization in regional politics. If during the years of Serzh Sargsyan's rule the country was balancing on the brink of instability, the ascension of a leader lacking foreign policy expertise, as a result of the 2018 revolutionary processes, exacerbated the crisis. Following his election, parts of the population have been misguided in their understanding of national identity. As a candidate with no university degree and supported by local NGOs, Pashinyan was viewed as a conduit for foreign interests rather than the Armenian ones. This political transition can be seen as a strategic mistake that significantly limited Armenia's potential in the international arena and deprived it of real mechanisms for the defense of national interests.

Figure 1.



Monte Melkonyan on the left and Nikol Pashinyan on the right.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Starikov, Nikolai. "Armeniiia – zametki na poliakh" [Armenia – Notes in the Margins]. *Blog Nikolaja Starikova* [Nikolai Starikov's Blog]. May 17, 2018. <https://nstarikov.ru/armeniya-zametki-na-polyah-93405>.

Bibliography

- "Armenia: Russia's Peacekeepers Failed Mission in Nagorno-Karabakh." *Al Jazeera*, December 22, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/22/armenia-russias-peacekeepers-failed-mission-in-nagorno-karabakh>.
- Alioghlu, Elchin. "NGOs and Power: New Battleground in South Caucasus." *Trend News Agency*, October 18, 2024. <https://en.trend.az/scaucasus/georgia/3958648.html>.
- Al Jazeera. "US Completes Joint Military Exercise in Armenia." September 20, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/20/us-completes-joint-military-exercise-in-armenia>.
- Anahit Shirinyan, "Armenia's Foreign Policy Balancing in an Age of Uncertainty," Chatham House, March 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-03-14-Armenia3.pdf>.
- Arka News Agency. "The Prime Minister Explained Why Armenia Did Not Recognize Artsakh." April 21, 2023. https://arka.am/news/politics/premer_obyasnil_pochemu_armeniya_ne_priznala_artsakh/.
- Armenia News - NEWS.am. "Head of EU Delegation to RA: We Will Unlock the Full Potential of Armenia-EU Relations." October 12, 2024. <https://news.am/eng/news/847010.html>.
- Armenian National Committee of America. "ANCA Gives Biden-Harris Administration Failing Grade on Artsakh Policy." July 30, 2024. <https://anca.org/press-release/anca-gives-biden-harris-administration-failing-grade-on-artsakh-policy/>.
- ArmenPress. "Armenian Prime Minister Explains Reasons for Joining Rome Statute." February 12, 2024. <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1130069>.
- ArmenPress. "Pashinyan Accuses Russia of Failing Peacekeeping Mission, Warns of Int'l Legal Order Crisis, Ukraine Cause-and-Effect." September 2, 2023. <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1118667>.
- Arsenyan, Magda. "Political Polarization and Hate Speech in Armenia after the Velvet Revolution." *Caucasus Watch*. April 21, 2020. <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/political-polarization-and-hate-speech-in-armenia-after-the-velvet-revolution.html>.
- Avanesov, Alexandr. "Minister: Armenia Expects a Significant Breakthrough in the Construction of the Meghri Hydroelectric Power Station on the Border with Iran." *ArmInfo News Agency*, August 29, 2018. https://finport.am/full_news.php?id=35653&lang=3.
- Avetisyan, Ani. "Pashinyan Puts Kibosh on Karabakh Government-in-Exile." *Eurasianet*, April 3, 2024. <https://eurasianet.org/pashinyan-puts-kibosh-on-karabakh-government-in-exile>.
- Barseghyan, Arshaluys. "Armenia Removes Ararat from Border Crossing Stamp." *OC Media*. September 15, 2025. <https://oc-media.org/armenia-removes-ararat-from-border-crossing-stamp/>.
- Barseghyan, Arshaluys. "Pashinyan: Armenia Has 'Frozen' Its Participation in the CSTO." *OC Media*. February 24, 2024. <https://oc-media.org/pashinyan-armenia-has-frozen-its-participation-in-the-csto/>.
- Barseghyan, Arshaluys. "USAID Doubles Aid Package to Armenia to \$250 Million." *OC Media*. September 6, 2024. <https://oc-media.org/usaids-doubles-aid-package-to-armenia-to-250-million/>.
- Berikyan, Mane. "Pashinyan: Armenia Cannot Protect Karabakh's Population." *CivilNet*, July 26, 2023. <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/745607/pashinyan-armenia-cannot-protect-karabakhs-population/>.
- Broers, Laurence. "Russia Concedes Karabakh for Stake in New Regional Order." Chatham House, October 9, 2023. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/09/russia-concedes-karabakh-stake-new-regional-order>.

- Cheterian, Vicken. "Is the Republic of Armenia a Viable State?" *CivilNet*, June 23, 2023. <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/742721/is-the-republic-of-armenia-a-viable-state/>.
- European Council. "Statement by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia, President Michel of the European Council, President Macron of France and Chancellor Scholz of Germany." October 5, 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/05/statement-by-prime-minister-nikol-pashinyan-of-armenia-president-michel-of-the-european-council-president-macron-of-france-and-chancellor-scholz-of-germany/>
- European Parliament. *Report on the Implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy*. A9-0389/2023. December 4, 2023. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0389_EN.html.
- European Parliament. *Report on the Implementation of the Common Security and Defence Policy*. A9-0403/2023. December 6, 2023. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0403_EN.html.
- European Parliament. "MEPs Denounce Violations of Human Rights and International Law by Azerbaijan." October 24, 2024. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20241017IPR24740/meps-denounce-violations-of-human-rights-and-international-law-by-azerbaijan>.
- European Parliament. "Nagorno-Karabakh: MEPs Demand Review of EU Relations with Azerbaijan." October 5, 2023. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230929IPR06132/nagorno-karabakh-meps-demand-review-of-eu-relations-with-azerbaijan>.
- European Union External Action. *EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in Armenia 2021-2027*. Updated June 2025. Accessed December 12, 2025. <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025/documents/EU-CSO%20Roadmap%20Armenia%20UPDATE%20June%202025.pdf>
- European Union External Action Service. *EU/Armenia Action Plan*. 2006. https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/armenia_enp_ap_final_en.pdf.
- European Union External Action Service. *EU/Azerbaijan Action Plan*. 2016. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/a-u-az_action_plan_azerbaijan.pdf.
- European Union External Action Service. "Nagorno Karabakh: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Borrell in the EP Plenary." October 3, 2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/nagorno-karabakh-speech-high-representativevice-president-borrell-ep-plenary_en
- Galitsky, Alex, and Gev Iskajyan. "The U.S. Keeps Failing Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh." *Time*, September 20, 2023. <https://time.com/6316001/us-failures-nagorno-karabakh/>.
- Giragosian, Richard. "Paradox of Power: Russia, Armenia, and Europe after the Velvet Revolution." European Council on Foreign Relations. August 7, 2019. https://ecfr.eu/publication/russia_armenia_and_europe_after_the_velvet_revolution/.
- Haberman, Joe, and Paul Cormarie. "The U.S. Can't Guarantee Armenia's Security, Despite Azerbaijan's Threats, but It Can Help." RAND Corporation. March 14, 2024. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/03/the-us-cant-guarantee-armenias-security-despite-azerbaijans.html>.
- Hecht, Eado. "Drones in the Nagorno-Karabakh War: Analyzing the Data." *Military Strategy Magazine* 7, no. 4 (Winter 2022): 31–37. <https://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/drones-in-the-nagorno-karabakh-war-analyzing-the-data/>.
- Huseynov, Rusif, and Gulxanim Mammadova. "The Evolution of Armenian Discourse on Karabakh." *Topchubashov Center*. May 29, 2023. <https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3515/the-evolution-of-armenian-discourse-on-karabakh>.
- Huseynov, Vasif. "In Prague, Armenia and Azerbaijan Make a Critical Move Toward Peace." *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 19, no. 153 (October 17, 2022). <https://jamestown.org/program/in-prague-armenia-and-azerbaijan-make-a-critical-move-toward-peace/>.

- International Foundation for Electoral Systems. "Armenia." Election Guide. <https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/12/>.
- Isanians, Verej. "After USAID: Armenian Civil Society at a Crossroads." *Caucasus Watch*. August 14, 2025. <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/after-usaid-armenian-civil-society-at-a-crossroads.html>.
- Keghart. "Pashinyan is Reducing Russian Influence in Armenia." September 23, 2024. <https://keghart.org/davidian-pashinyan-russia/>.
- Krikorian, Onnik James. "Pashinyan's Moment of Reckoning." *Yorktown Institute*. August 13, 2025. <https://yorktowninstitute.org/pashinyans-moment-of-reckoning/>.
- Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. "Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective." *China International Strategy Review* 3, no. 2 (2021): 300–315. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42533-021-00089-5>.
- Libaridian, Gerard. "That Elusive 'Right Formula' at the 'Right Moment': A Historical Analysis of the Official Peace Process". Accord 17. Translated from Russian. https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Accord17_p34_right_formula.pdf.
- Light, Felix. "Armenian Protesters Demand Pashinyan Ouster." *Reuters*, September 21, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/several-hundred-protesters-gather-armenian-capital-after-karabakh-surrender-2023-09-20/>.
- Losh, Jack, and Andrew Roth. "Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Deal Brokered by Moscow Prompts Anger in Armenia." *The Guardian*, November 10, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/10/nagorno-karabakh-armenia-pm-signs-deal-to-end-war-with-azerbaijan-and-russia>.
- Melikyan, Aren, Jeyhun Veliyev, Katie Sartania, and Saadat Abdullazade. "The Rise of New Nationalism in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s." *The Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation*. March 4, 2018. <https://caucasusedition.net/the-rise-of-new-nationalism-in-armenia-azerbaijan-and-georgia-in-the-late-1980s-and-early-1990s/>.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. "Comment of the Spokesperson of MFA of Armenia Regarding the Statement of the Official Representative of the MFA of Russia." August 31, 2023. https://www.mfa.am/en/interviews-articles-and-comments/2023/08/31/spox_comment/12172.
- National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia. "Serzh Sargsyan Elected RA Prime Minister at RA National Assembly Special Sitting." April 17, 2018. http://www.parliament.am/news.php?cat_id=2&NewsID=10227&lang=eng.
- Nikoghosyan, Hovhannes, and Vahram Ter-Matevosyan. "Post-Revolution and War, Armenia Must Find a Geopolitical Balance." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. March 9, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2021/03/post-revolution-and-war-armenia-must-find-a-geopolitical-balance?lang=en>.
- Osborn, Andrew. "Armenian PM Says Depending Solely on Russia for Security was 'Strategic Mistake'." *Reuters*, September 3, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/armenian-pm-says-depending-solely-russia-security-was-strategic-mistake-2023-09-03/>.
- Paul, Amanda. "Armenia's 'Velvet Revolution': Time is Pashinyan's Worst Enemy." European Policy Center. May 30, 2018. <https://www.epc.eu/publication/Armenias-Velvet-Revolution-Time-is-Pashinyans-worst-enemy-1e7abc/>.
- Regional Centre for Strategic Policy (RCSP). "Azerbaijan's Territorial Claims Against Armenia: The Institutionalization of Narratives." April 30, 2025. <https://rcsp.am/en/entry/7213/azerbaijans-territorial-claims-against-armenia-the-institutionalization-of-narratives/>.
- Samadov, Bahruz. "In the Beginning Was the Violence." *New Eastern Europe*. August 9, 2023. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/08/09/in-the-beginning-was-the-violence/>.

- Sassounian, Harut. "PM Pashinyan Disparages Armenia's Coat of Arms and National Anthem." *The Armenian Weekly*, June 20, 2023.
<https://armenianweekly.com/2023/06/20/pm-pashinyan-disparages-armenias-coat-of-arms-and-national-anthem/>.
- Shahverdyan, Lilit. "Russia Rejects Criticism of Peacekeepers in Karabakh." *Eurasianet*, January 15, 2024. <https://eurasianet.org/russia-rejects-criticism-of-peacekeepers-in-karabakh>.
- Shaikh, Shaan, and Wes Rumbaugh. *The Air and Missile War in Nagorno-Karabakh: Lessons for the Future of Strike and Defense*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. December 8, 2020.
<https://www.csis.org/analysis/air-and-missile-war-nagorno-karabakh-lessons-future-strike-and-defense>.
- Sirekanyan, Tigran. "We Are Ready for Negotiations – Nikol Pashinyan Gives Speech at Republican Square." *Armenpress*. April 25, 2018. <https://armenpress.am/en/article/931464>.
- Starikov, Nikolai. "Armenia – zametki na poliakh" [Armenia – Notes in the Margins]. *Blog Nikolaja Starikova* [Nikolai Starikov's Blog], May 17, 2018,
<https://nstarikov.ru/armeniya-zametki-na-polyah-93405>.
- Stepanian, Ruzanna. "Yerevan Confirms Purchase of Russian Fighter Jets." *Azatutyun*, February 4, 2019.
<https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29750802.html>.
- TASS. "Armenia's Accession to ICC Rome Statute 'Political Blindness' — Opposition." March 29, 2023.
<https://tass.com/world/1595639>.
- TASS. "Russian Foreign Ministry: Yerevan Orients Itself Toward the West Often to the Detriment of Its Own Interests." July 1, 2025. Translated from Russian.
<https://tass.ru/politika/24400321>.
- TASS Agency. "Armenia Recalls Its Envoy to CSTO, Appoints Him Ambassador to the Netherlands." September 5, 2023.
<https://tass.com/world/1670235>.
- Terzyan, Aram. "The Evolution of Armenia's Foreign Policy Identity: The Conception of Identity Driven Paths. Friends and Foes in Armenian Foreign Policy Discourse." In *Values and Identity as Sources of Foreign Policy in Armenia and Georgia*, Universal, 2016, 145–183.
- The Eurasian Times. "Armenia Acquired Russia's Su-30 Fighter Jets Without Missiles Prior to War with Azerbaijan.", March 21, 2021.
<https://www.eurasiantimes.com/armenia-purchased-russias-su-30-fighter-jets-without-missiles-in-2020-pm-pashinyan/>.
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Excerpts from the Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, January 12, 2024. Statements by Armenian Politicians." January 12, 2024.
https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1925275/#Q2
- The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia. "Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Speech at the Commission Investigating the Circumstances of the 44-Day War." June 20, 2023.
<https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2023/06/20/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/>.
- The Turan News Agency. "Azerbaijan-EU to Update Strategic Energy Partnership Roadmap." December 4, 2023.
<https://turan.az/en/politics/azerbaijan-eu-to-update-strategic-energy-partnership-roadmap>.
- The White House. "Remarks by President Biden Before the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly | New York, NY." September 19, 2023.
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/09/19/remarks-by-president-biden-before-the-78th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-ny/>.
- U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. *Report on the Armenian Referendum on Independence*. October 1, 1991. <https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Report-on-the-Armenian-Referendum-on-Independence.pdf>.
- Wang, T. Y., and Alexander C. Tan. "Balancing, Bandwagoning or Hedging: Taiwan's Strategic Choices in the Era of a Rising China." *Political Science* 73, no. 1 (2021): 66–84.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00323187.2021.1967765>.

Wezeman, Pieter D., Alexandra Kuimova, and Jordan Smith. "Arms Transfers to Conflict Zones: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh." Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). April 30, 2021. <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2021/arms-transfers-conflict-zones-case-nagorno-karabakh>.

Zolyan, Mikayel. "National Identity Rethink Confronts Armenians With Hard Truths." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. December 10, 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/11/armenia-new-national-identity?lang=en>.