



Feature Article
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Between Brussels and Moscow: Armenia's Geopolitical Balancing Act

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Under Nikol Pashinyan, Armenia has started the process of seeking to undo decades of deepening dependence on Russia. This process, however, is not an easy one. Moscow still maintains control over Armenia's strategic industries, not least in the energy sector. It also has myriad ways of influencing Armenia, including through migrant workers and the influence of Russian media. Meanwhile, the EU and U.S. are preoccupied, including with deteriorating relations with neighboring Georgia. In the end, to escape dependence on Russia, the key for Armenia is the normalization of relations with Azerbaijan and Türkiye, a process that is nevertheless not moving fast enough. As Pashinyan's popularity wanes, Armenia's positions between Brussels and Moscow is precarious indeed.

Geography has not been kind to Armenia. Landlocked in the South Caucasus, the country is bordered by Azerbaijan, Georgia, Türkiye, and Iran.

Two of those borders – with Azerbaijan and Türkiye – remain closed. Although Armenia does not share a direct border with Russia, it has historically relied more on Moscow than its neighbors, Azerbaijan and Georgia, which do.



Nikol Pashinyan and Vladimir Putin. (Kremlin.ru)

That dynamic still holds, but since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has been attempting to reorient Armenia's foreign policy away from Moscow and more towards Brussels and Washington.

Such a process will take years if not decades, and is not guaranteed of success. It is also fraught with dangers and many obstacles

along the way, both geographically and geopolitically, as well as domestically. Unlike Georgia, the majority of Armenians have not harbored such a yearning to join either the EU or NATO, the latter of which has been seen as allied to member country Turkiye.

Though Armenia is unlikely to face the risk of military action aimed towards it if it moves away from Moscow too quickly – as there are actually few options for Moscow to do so in any substantive manner – Russia has many levers at its disposal to use domestically should it feel the need to do so. The reason for this is again mainly geographical.

Armenia's Dependence

When the former Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, escalating violence in the former Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), populated mainly by ethnic Armenians but situated within Azerbaijan, turned into full-scale war. Not only was Armenia's energy supply disrupted, passing through Azerbaijan as it did, but railway communication to Russia was disrupted by Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia,

through which it passed. Armenia's other connection with Russia through Azerbaijan also ceased to function because of the war. Turkiye also closed its border in 1993 following Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijan's Kelbajar region.

Since then, the country's railway infrastructure has been mainly used for domestic travel save for its sole international connection to the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. In 2008, South Caucasus Railway, owned by Russian Railways, took control of Armenian Railways in a deal controversially¹ set to last until 2038. There is no railway to Iran although one could operate via Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan Autonomous Oblast in the event of normalization between Baku and Yerevan. Given Russia's monopoly on the network, however, it remains unclear what role Russia would insist on in the event of Armenia establishing relations with Azerbaijan and Turkiye.²

Moscow could well stake claim under the agreement on that route too, as was the case in 2010.³ The Assets for Debt arrangement agreed with Moscow by the Kocharyan government is

¹ Emil Danielyan, "Russian-Armenian Dispute Over Railway 'Settled'," *Azatutyun*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30819063.html>

² Onnik James Krikorian, "Baku, Yerevan, and Moscow Clash Over Regional Transit," *Eurasia Daily*

Monitor, January 25, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/baku-yerevan-and-moscow-clash-over-regional-transit/>

³ "Armenia plans one-year restoration for Gyumri-Kars Railway," *PanArmenian.Net*, May 6, 2025, <https://panarmenian.net/m/eng/news/322192>

so extensive⁴ it will be difficult to renege on before its formal end in the future is reached. The outcome of that deal continues until this day. Moscow needs no elaborate plan to force the government to do its bidding. It already has total control over most of the country's strategic assets from trade infrastructure to energy.

This was the price for Russia alleviating Armenia's isolation and securing the presidencies of Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan before 2018 when ostensibly pro-western Nikol Pashinyan rose to power on the back of nationwide street protests to prevent Sargsyan from maintaining power after his second and final presidential term ended in early 2018.

Following the November 2020 trilateral ceasefire statement signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia to end the latest Karabakh war, a trilateral working group involving the deputy prime ministers of all three countries was established but has been dormant following the latest Russia-Ukraine war. Moscow, however, has made it clear that the format still exists and will likely attempt to resurrect it when required, especially to

remind Yerevan that this dependency still exists.⁵

In the early 1990s, wary of potential conflict with Turkiye, Armenia was unable to secure that border and also became dependent on Russia for its security. The smallest of the three South Caucasus republics, with much of its armed forces deployed to Karabakh, the seven surrounding regions, and on the border with its eastern neighbor itself, Armenia could hardly take responsibility for its borders with Iran and Turkiye. In 1992, Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) border guards were instead charged with doing so. Existing Soviet forces in Armenia also formally became the 102nd Russian Military base that same year and were widely seen as the main guarantor of the country's security.

Though Russia withdrew its FSB guards from Yerevan's Zvartnots airport in 2024⁶ and then at the checkpoint on the Iranian border the following year, they still nonetheless remain on the length of the border itself. When the FSB border guard service was withdrawn from the Armenia-Iran checkpoint, however, an

⁴ Emil Danielyan, "Russia Tightens Grip on Armenia with Debt Agreements," *Eurasianet*, May 7, 2003, <https://eurasianet.org/russia-tightens-grip-on-armenia-with-debt-agreements>

⁵ "Overchuk: Russia-Azerbaijan-Armenia working group not closed," *News.am*, March 18, 2025, <https://news.am/eng/news/872370.html>

⁶ Onnik James Krikorian, "Armenia Ends Russian Oversight at Yerevan Airport as Security Concerns Persist," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, August 15, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/armenia-ends-russian-oversight-at-yerevan-airport-as-security-concerns-persist/>

unknown number of Armenian National Security Service border guards joined those FSB personnel still on the length of the border, implying that at some point the intention will be to replace them entirely.

But as a result of a 1992 Inter-State Agreement, it remains unclear how such an arrangement can occur. The presence of Russian Border Guards at Yerevan's Zvartnots Airport was instead by informal agreement as was the agreement to have them also withdraw from the border with Azerbaijan last year.⁷

This comes as the Pashinyan government seeks greater integration with the European Union and elsewhere, including in terms of security. With Russia still engaged in Ukraine, it has been unable to supply weapons to Armenia, which instead now mainly makes purchases from India.⁸ It has also purchased weapons from France, though of a non-offensive nature unlikely to significantly bolster its military potential. Geography has hardly helped. India is convenient because weapons are delivered via Iran. That is not so simple from France, with

a hesitant Georgia not wishing to be dragged directly into the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

Though Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Yerevan charges that it failed to come to its defense during the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan war. That, however, was conducted within what is recognized internationally as Azerbaijani territory. Armenia had always mistakenly assumed that Russia would intervene. Only a few, such as Armenia's former national security advisor and chief negotiator with Azerbaijan in the early 1990s, Gerard Libaridian, warned that it would not.⁹ In 2010, Armenia extended its 1995 treaty on the 102nd military base in Gyumri with Russia until 2044. Nonetheless, attitudes have changed in Armenia and the current Pashinyan government maintains that its path away from Moscow continues. Most observers, however, believe that this is unlikely now or in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, pressing for closer relations could at least be positive for the country to diversify, Russia permitting. The

⁷ "Russia To Withdraw Troops From Armenian-Azeri Border," *Azatutyun*, May 9, 2024, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32939640.html>

⁸ Syed Fazl-e-Haider, "India Becomes Armenia's Largest Defence Supplier," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, September 12, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/india-becomes-armenias-largest-defense-supplier/>

⁹ "Former Official Downplays New Russian-Armenian Military Pact," *Radio Liberty*, August 18, 2010, https://www.rferl.org/a/Former_Official_Downplays_New_RussianArmenian_Military_Pact/2131488.html

deployment of the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) in 2023 has irked Moscow just as it has Baku and Tehran. However, as a civilian unarmed force of barely over 200 people, there is little it can offer by way of security although its presence does help Pashinyan domestically.¹⁰

Borders and Corridors

In 2017, the last year the poll was held before the 2020 war, 63 percent of respondents in Armenia believed that Russia was the main friend of Armenia¹¹ according to the Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC) Caucasus Barometer. That figure dropped to 14 percent in 2024.¹² Heading the list instead was France with 37 percent. In 2017, it was second with just five percent. This is likely because Paris has consistently showed its support for Armenia

during the negotiation process underway since the end of the war in 2020 as well as its delivery of an albeit small quantity of non-offensive weapons to Yerevan.¹³

Despite these developments, however, Armenia remains constrained by its geographical reality. In April 2025, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen pointed to the normalization of relations between Yerevan with Ankara and Baku as key and coincidentally a way for the European Union to expand its own connection through the South Caucasus from Europe to Central Asia.¹⁴ This has irked Baku with officials and analysts alike viewing the statement as a way to reduce Georgia's position as the main transit route in the region.¹⁵ Russia anyway has an interest in restoring railway and road connections through from Azerbaijan through

¹⁰ Onnik James Krikorian, "EU extends Armenia border mission amid Membership hopes," *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa*, February 3, 2025, <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Armenia/EU-extends-Armenia-border-mission-amid-membership-hopes-235945>

¹¹ Caucasus Barometer 2017, Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC), <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017am/MAINFRN/>

¹² Caucasus Barometer 2024, Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC), <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024am/MAINFRN/>

¹³ Ani Avetisyan, "French arms sale to Armenia fuels tension in Caucasus," *Eurasianet*, June 24, 2024,

<https://eurasianet.org/french-arms-sale-to-armenia-fuels-tension-in-caucasus>

¹⁴ Siranush Ghazanchyan, "Opening of Armenia's borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan will bring Europe and Central Asia closer – Von der Leyen," *Public Radio of Armenia*, April 4, 2025, <https://en.armradio.am/2025/04/04/opening-of-armenias-borders-with-turkey-and-azerbaijan-will-bring-europe-and-central-asia-closer-von-der-leyen/>

¹⁵ Mahammad Mammadov, "Azerbaijan got mixed signals from the first-ever EU-Central Asia summit, April 8, 2025, Topchubashov Center, <https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3738/azerbaijan-got-mixed-signals-from-the-first-ever-eu-central-asia-summit>

Armenia to Nakhichevan, as does Pashinyan who supported such a development in 2001¹⁶ but only if Armenia maintained full control over the strategic transport route.

According to the Moscow-brokered November 2020 trilateral ceasefire statement signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, the route between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan was meant to be overseen by Russian Federal Security Border (FSB) border guards, probably because they are already stationed directly in the area. Both Azerbaijan and Russia continue to raise this obligation that Armenia is keen to forget. Both countries can use the fact that it has still not been implemented in any form, other than perhaps for some AZAL flights across southern Armenia to and from Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, to either destabilize the country or keep it in semi-regional isolation.

Though Pashinyan has since come up with concept of a “Corridor of Peace”¹⁷ that could include the route via a reconstructed railway route, road passage might not prove so simple on what Azerbaijan and Turkiye refer to as the

“Zangezur Corridor.” The Biden administration supported Pashinyan’s concept but stressed that it would allow the U.S. to further lessen Russia’s role in Central Asia, something that Moscow would hardly welcome.

Perhaps the most obvious obstacle to reducing dependency on Moscow is in terms of the economy and energy.

Energy

Most recently, the local subsidiary of Russia’s Rosatom nuclear energy giant in December 2023 signed a contract with Armenia to modernize and extend Metsamor’s lifespan until 2036.¹⁸ The plant will continue to operate until a new nuclear power plant is expected to replace Metsamor. If Yerevan continues to work with Moscow in this sphere, Armenia’s turn to the West will continue to be stunted by its ties to Russia, especially in a sector as important as energy.

In addition to using Russian nuclear fuel flown in by air, the country imports 87.5 percent of its gas from Russia’s state-owned oil company, Gazprom. The remainder comes from Iran as a

¹⁶ Nikol Pashinyan, “We and Our Interests,” *Haykan Zhamanak*, May 23, 2001, <https://armtimes.com/hy/article/105002>

¹⁷ Onnik James Krikorian, “Baku, Yerevan, and Moscow Clash Over Regional Transit,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, January 25, 2024, Baku, Yerevan, and Moscow Clash Over Regional Transit

¹⁸ Onnik James Krikorian, “Armenia Looks West to reduce Nuclear Energy Dependency on Russia,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 22, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/armenia-looks-west-to-reduce-nuclear-energy-dependency-on-russia/>

part of a deal where Iran provides gas in exchange for electricity from Armenia, which has been extended to last until 2030. Additionally, Moscow has a monopoly on gas supply and distribution in Armenia until 2043 in an agreement signed between Yerevan and Moscow in 2013. Even back then, former foreign minister Alexander Arzumanyan warned that the arrangement would prevent Armenia from buying gas from any other country but Russia, including Azerbaijan in the event of normalizing relations in the future.¹⁹ In 2024, at a Helsinki Commission hearing on Armenia's Western aspirations, former U.S. Ambassador to the OSCE Dan Baer warned ominously that Armenians should prepare themselves for cold winters in such an eventuality.²⁰

Russia has also hinted at other possible actions.²¹ For example, it is the primary supplier of wheat, flour, and corn to the country.²²

As a result, Pashinyan has become increasingly cautious in public statements about European Union membership despite his desire for greater integration. He has only stated that Armenia is ready to "be as close to the European Union as the European Union considers possible." This approach may stem from an understanding that Armenia is unlikely to be granted accession in the foreseeable future, or at all, given the European Union's existing enlargement fatigue and challenges in general. Membership would also mean having to leave the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union,²³ a vital source of income for the otherwise cash-strapped country.

It should be noted that Armenia joined the Eurasian Economic Union under then President Serzh Sargsyan in 2014²⁴ after rejecting the opportunity to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union under

¹⁹ Artur Yernjakyan, "Armenian MP: Gazprom has received the sole right for gas supplies to Armenia until 2043," December 17, 2013, <https://arminfo.info/index.cfm?objectid=484BE3E0-6729-11E3-BC4E0EB7C0D21663>

²⁰ "Helsinki Commission expert Dan Baer on Armenians' aspirations for a Western future," YouTube, September 13, 2024,

²¹ "Russia MFA spox advises Armenia Security Council chief to think about food security," News.am, September 20, 2024, <https://news.am/eng/news/843437.html>

²² Alina Hovannisyan, "Russia remains the primary supplier of wheat, flour and corn to Armenia," ArmInfo, August 7, 2024, Russia remains the primary supplier of wheat, flour and corn to Armenia

²³ "Russia warns Armenia of high economic price if it pursues EU membership," Commonsense, <https://www.commonspace.eu/index.php/news/russia-warns-armenia-high-economic-price-if-it-pursues-eu-membership>

²⁴ Benyamin Poghosyan, "The Eurasian Economic Union: A View from Armenia," Italian Institute for International Political Studies ((ISPI), February 3, 2025, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/the->

pressure from Moscow. The situation has not changed today.²⁵

Armenia's foreign trade is heavily reliant on Russia, accounting for 42 percent of its turnover for the first nine months of 2024. In comparison, trade with the European Union constitutes only 7.3 percent.²⁶ Armenia's current economic growth is partly driven by the re-export of goods to and from Russia, circumventing international sanctions.²⁷ Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, trade between Armenia and Russia was valued at approximately \$2.5 billion annually, a figure that hit \$12 billion last year.²⁸ Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk has also warned that leaving the EAEU would result in

higher gas prices, increased costs for imported goods, and unemployment in Armenia.²⁹

Gagik Melkonyan, a parliament deputy for Pashinyan's Civil Contract faction, has dismissed such warnings.³⁰ Opposition figures, however, including prominent oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan, have expressed concerns that EU membership could lead to widespread economic hardships, including job losses, higher living costs, and the collapse of local businesses.³¹ Currently, Russia sells Armenia gas at subsidized rates, a privilege that could

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²⁵ Shoghik Galstian, "Minister Rules Out Armenia's Exit from Russian-Led Bloc," *Azatutyun*, May 22, 2025, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33421613.html>

²⁶ Artak Khulyan, "The government approved the draft law on the launch of Armenia's EU membership process," *Azatutyun*, January 9, 2025, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/karavaroutyouny-havanoutyounn-tvets-em-in-hayastani-andamak-tsoutyan-gortsyntatsi-meknarki-%D6%85renki-nakhagtsin/33269729.html>

²⁷ Seda Hergnyan and Andrei Zayakin, "Armenia: Re-exporting Billions of 'Dirty' Russian Gold," *Hetq*, November 23, 2024, <https://hetq.am/en/article/171035>

²⁸ Arshaluis Mgdesyan, "Trade Turnover Between Russia and Armenia Reaches \$12 Billion – Lavrov,"

Business Media, <https://bm.ge/en/news/trade-turnover-between-russia-and-armenia-reaches-12-billion-lavrov>

²⁹ Arman Hovhannisyan, "Moscow views Yerevan's discussion of EU accession process as the beginning of its exit from the EAEU," *Azatutyun*, January 9, 2025, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/moskvan-erevani-koghmits-em-in-andamaktsele-gortsyntatsi-qnnarkumy-ditarkum-e-ibrev-eatm-its-elqi-skizb-/33270213.html>

³⁰ "Russia needs us more than we need them," *News.am*, January 10, 2025, <https://news.am/arm/news/860972.html>

³¹ Shoghik Galstyan, "Tycoons Warn Against Armenia's Exit from Russia-Led Trade Bloc," *Azatutyun*, January 15, 2025, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33276831.html>

end if Armenia were to irk Moscow significantly.³²

Migrant Workers

There are also believed to be as many as 138,000 Armenian citizens registered as migrants in Russia, sending much needed money back to their families. Already facing economic pressures because of the influx of 100,000 ethnic Armenians from Karabakh in late September-early October 2023, the additional burden of their return would not only lead to economic woes but also potential domestic instability.

In the first ever public report³³ from Armenia's Foreign Intelligence Service in January 2025, a body believed to be established to move away from the traditional security services which maintained close connections with Russia, such unrest was mentioned as a potential threat as the next parliamentary elections approach. Operations aimed at internal destabilization would use political parties, activist groups, and youth or student

structures with the aim of forming a government "suitable" for foreign influence against national interests, it warned. This is considered a reference to Russia.

Some of those believed part of an alleged coup attempt were members of the Arbat Battalion blessed by Archbishop Yezras Nersessyan, head of the Russian Diocese of the Armenian Church and also brother of the Armenian Catholicos, Karekin II. In 2022 and 2024, Karekin II permitted some high level clergy to participate in and even lead street protests that aimed to overthrow the government. Both then and now, Pashinyan claimed the Armenian Catholicos was operating under Moscow's instructions.

On September 18, Armenian law enforcement announced the arrest of three individuals accused of forming an armed group to overthrow the government.³⁴ Four others are currently wanted by the police for recruiting people for three months of training in Russia, with a payment of 220,000 rubles (approximately \$2,360) for their participation.

³² Onnik James Krikorian, "Armenia-Azerbaijan Gas Co-operation: Pipe Dream or Reality?," Commonsplace, May 7, 2024, <https://www.commonspace.eu/node/12677>

³³ "Armenian Foreign Intelligence Service publishes 2025 external security risks report," ArmenPress, January 23, 2025, <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1210189>

³⁴ Onnik James Krikorian, "Militant Groups Resurface in Armenia's Struggle Against Radicalisation," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 7, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/militant-groups-resurface-in-armenias-struggle-against-radicalization/>

Five of the men are Armenian citizens while two are ethnic Armenians who were formerly residents of now-dissolved Karabakh.

Though Armenia-Russian relations appear to be improving, especially since the return of U.S. President Donald Trump to the White House, that is not to say that this will continue. In the last days of the Biden administration, Armenia and the United States appeared to rush through a Strategic Partnership Charter between the two countries that also included border security and energy. It currently remain in limbo under the new Trump administration.³⁵ High-level contacts between Armenian and Russian officials have also increased,³⁶ especially in the format of the Eurasian Economic Union and Commonwealth of Independent States. However, Armenia's membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) remains "frozen."

Russia looks set to remain an important player in Armenia, but the nature of this partnership is increasingly unpredictable. It should be remembered that Moscow maintains strong influence through Russian media consumed in the country. Not only do most Armenians speak Russian,³⁷ but they also consume its media, music, and social media,³⁸ making the country especially vulnerable to both benign and malicious information campaigns.³⁹ This is something that will likely increase as the next parliamentary elections scheduled for the middle of 2026 approach but it should be realized that there is already a well-established audience for such narratives in Armenia when the promise of beneficial relations with the EU have still not come to fruition and normalized relations with Azerbaijan and Turkiye remain elusive. That situation is perhaps Moscow's trump card. Without that normalization, Armenia cannot diversify its foreign policy to any notable degree, especially when the West is at

³⁵ Onnik James Krikorian, "New Armenia-U.S. Partnership on Pause, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 3, 2025, <https://jamestown.org/program/new-armenia-u-s-partnership-on-pause/>

³⁶ "Armenia rushes to reengage Russia, aiming to outflank Azerbaijan," *Eurasianet*, March 25, 2025, <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-rushes-to-reengage-russia-aiming-to-outflank-azerbaijan>

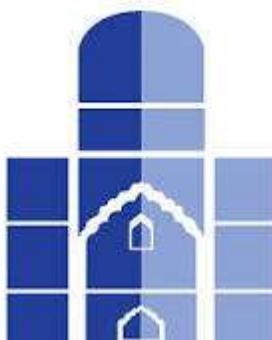
³⁷ Caucasus Barometer 2024 Armenia, Caucasus Resource Research Centre (CRRC), "Knowledge of Russian," July 27, 2024 to October 10, 2024, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024am/KNOWRUS/>

³⁸ "Telegram becomes most popular messaging app in Armenia," ARKA, January 4, 2022, https://arka.am/en/news/technology/telegram_becomes_most_popular_messaging_app_in_armenia/

³⁹ "Yerevan Threatens to Ban Another Russian TV Program," *Azatutyun*, January 15, 2025, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33276707.html>

loggerheads with the authorities in neighboring Georgia. For Moscow, perhaps the best way to manage the situation is through a weak and vulnerable leader, currently Nikol Pashinyan.⁴⁰ This appears to be a goal easily within reach. At time of writing, Pashinyan's electoral ratings stand at 11.5 percent.⁴¹ Recent local elections in the country's second largest city also saw a united opposition select a pro-Russian candidate as mayor.⁴²

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⁴⁰ Mark Dovich, "Russia wants Armenia vulnerable, Pashinyan-linked paper says," Civilnet, October 4, 2022, <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/677734/russia-wants-armenia-vulnerable-pashinyan-linked-paper-says/>

⁴¹ "Armenia: Polling results suggest public wariness over government's political course," Eurasianet, May

7, 2025, <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-polling-results-suggest-public-wariness-over-governments-political-course>

⁴² Onnik James Krikorian, "Armenian Local Elections a Barometer for Pashinyan's Political Future," Eurasia Daily Monitor, April 21, 2025, Armenian Local Elections a Barometer for Pashinyan's Political Future