

Armenia's Break From Russia

When I first [visited](#) the South Caucasus in 2021, the geopolitics of the region looked entirely different. In the short time since my visit, many winds have changed, and many tides have turned.

Back then, Georgia was a pro-Western frontrunner with a track record of reforms. The Georgian Dream government was still pursuing a strategy of apparent determination to move the country towards Western alliances, pulling its institutions out of the swamp of corrupt Russian influences.

Armenia, on the other hand, seemed firmly gripped in Russia's fist and frozen in a conflict with its neighbors. Russian troops were supposedly maintaining the fragile peace, but were in effect enforcing Armenia's subjugation and preventing any change of orbit. Armenia appeared hopelessly dependent on Russian energy sources and investment, and it seemed as if that would remain the case for a very long time.

Nevertheless, I [used](#) my visit to Armenia to underline the strategic benefit of reaching out to Europe. As Lithuania's Minister of Foreign Affairs, my overall

strategy was to support democratic forces wherever and whenever they needed a friend. Lithuania would be that friend. As a smaller state with few military options, I navigated a values-based, pro-democracy path, consistently defending the principle of the rule of law, whatever it took. I also chose to recommend this strategy to other small states in similar predicaments with large, aggressive neighbors.

And so I made the case in Yerevan: Europe can provide more stability and prosperity. During a tête-à-tête meeting with the Prime Minister, I suggested reaching out to Brussels to request a European border mission to help patrol parts of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border.

And with that mission, a gradual realignment process began. Five years after my visit to offer assistance in a "hopeless" situation – Armenia's pivot to the West is no longer talked about in whispers. The work is progressing and gathering pace. I am convinced that this process can only strengthen Armenia and will certainly allow Armenians more freedom to flourish than Russia will ever provide to those who choose "partnership" with Moscow.



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I am also certain that Armenia's break with Russia is succeeding because, fundamentally, alignment with democratic values provides any country with more sustainable security and stability than other, more autocratic systems can offer. The illusion of safety that an imperialistic oppressor attempts to sell to its smaller neighbors is not only a lie but also very fragile.

Escaping the Spider's Web

Many might have thought that the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan was choosing a risky path in trying to settle the decades-long conflict with Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Indeed, the risks were considerable, but in such conflicts, all paths are risky. When faced with unavoidable risk, he chose the path with the most reliable long-term mitigation strategy, even when easier short-term avoidance tactics were available.

Many would have expected a lengthy military conflagration after war broke out once again in 2020, but instead, Pashinyan chose to de-escalate, signing the ceasefire that ended the war. Far from a show of weakness, this decision to hold a steady course must have taken great strength. It is difficult decisions like these that build the foundations for future progress.

When Azerbaijan moved against Nagorno-Karabakh again in 2023, and Armenians were forced to leave their homes in droves, many experts were again expecting an escalation. Pashinyan chose to de-escalate on that occasion, too. Again, he avoided the paths that would lead back to square one, regardless of how convenient they might have appeared.

The fragile lie of Russian "protection" was cracked and exposed when Russia decided not to intervene.

It did not matter that Armenia and Russia were in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). It did not matter that Russia had pledged security guarantees. Any "agreements" made with an autocrat can be ignored or torn up at any time by the autocrat — this is the feature of autocracy that autocrats find the most attractive. That is the main reason for a smaller state to choose the risky path of democracy: its risks are still smaller than the almost certain dangers of being a fly in a spider's web.

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Russia, the spider, was perhaps too busy trying to catch another fly in Ukraine to notice Armenia beginning to wriggle free. The decision to keep wriggling came at a high political cost, but it now appears to be paying dividends. As Russia increasingly defaulted on its promises, Armenia gained room to cultivate ties with more reliable partners. The supposedly safe options proved unsafe, while the supposedly easy options grew harder with each passing year. And when a smaller state demonstrates persistence and a willingness to take risks for freedom, others take notice.

After a long and strained relationship, Türkiye is now extending a stabilizing hand to Armenia. Earlier this year, Turkish Airlines [launched](#) direct Istanbul-Yerevan flights, followed by high-level government [meetings](#) and [renewed efforts](#) to restore railway links between the two countries. These steps are gradually rebuilding bilateral ties, strengthening Türkiye's role in the region while providing Armenia with greater geopolitical options.

For years, Russia exploited Armenia's diplomatic and economic isolation, presenting itself as an inevitable partner, a destiny, and the only rope keeping Armenia afloat. But when the moment came, that rope

snapped. Moscow failed to deliver on its promises, exposing the fragility of the dependence it had spent decades cultivating. Once the rope broke, everyone could see that it had never been as strong as it appeared.

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Indeed, Russia thrives only in a geopolitically unstable environment, where neighboring countries are forced to seek its assistance. That means Russia has a vested interest in prolonging instability to remain relevant. This is why reducing diplomatic tensions in the region is already diminishing Russia's influence there. Or, to put it simply, the farther away the Russians are, the calmer the region becomes. And that is very much in the interest of both Türkiye and Armenia.

When Europe Gets It Right

Despite many observers, myself included, expressing frustration with European passivity and ineffectiveness, there are also important success stories. Europe's powerful potential is sometimes put to good use. The European mission on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border provided stability and reliability at a moment when both were badly needed. Yet that mission is only a small example of a much larger reality.

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When Europe commits itself to a country's transformation, the results can be remarkable. The experience of the Baltic States demonstrates this

clearly. In little more than two decades, countries that emerged from Soviet occupation and economic hardship have become prosperous, stable, and secure members of the European family. Democratic institutions were strengthened, economies modernized, and living standards transformed. Europe has the instruments to achieve and sustain rapid progress for millions of people when it finds the political will.

That success carries lessons far beyond the Baltic region. Armenia's gradual realignment towards Europe is taking place because the European project still offers something Russia cannot: a pathway to greater sovereignty, prosperity, and stability. The attraction of Europe does not rest on coercion. It rests on results.

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It is often said, and I would broadly agree, that Vladimir Putin felt far more threatened by this explosion of European democratic prosperity than by NATO's enlargement. He found himself confronted not by a military threat but by an ideological embarrassment. The supposedly "decadent" West was dramatically outperforming his attempts to revive the geopolitical influence and imagined prestige of the Soviet past. The success of countries that escaped Moscow's orbit posed an uncomfortable question for those still trapped within it.

This helps explain why the Kremlin has invested so much effort in preventing others from following the same path. If democratic transformation could succeed in the Baltics, why not in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, or Armenia? If countries on Russia's periphery could become more prosperous, more secure, and more democratic without Moscow's

guidance, the entire foundation of Russia's regional influence would begin to erode.

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Yet despite being labeled a “Great Power,” Russia has enjoyed only mixed success in its attempts to stop that process. Some countries have remained trapped. Others have broken free. It turns out that even great powers struggle to force determined nations to bend the knee permanently. Even threatening the world with nuclear weapons has not always produced the capitulation Moscow expected.

Armenia's ongoing transformation is a reminder of that reality. The country is still navigating immense challenges, but its trajectory demonstrates that geography is not destiny. Countries are not condemned to remain forever within somebody else's sphere of influence. Sometimes the web tears and the rope breaks.

The Power of Example

Yet Russia has not failed everywhere. Russia had more success recently in Georgia. The Georgian government has been deliberately drifting towards Russia. A former candidate to join the European Union and NATO, the Georgian government [refused](#) to pursue the European integration path, converted its country into a major hub for Russian sanction avoidance, and a refuge for Russians fleeing the war. I had the privilege of [participating](#) in one of the pro-European rallies in 2024. Addressing the crowd, I said that the European Union is not a threat to any government. We have been and remain ready to help Georgia on the path to Europe. Unfortunately, the Georgian government kept choosing the other path. The Kremlin hasn't won over the free people of Georgia, but its influence has successfully turned the government back towards the East.

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The region has changed dramatically, and the examples of Georgia and Armenia illustrate the two very different paths a smaller state can take. Despite ongoing and remarkable protests in Tbilisi, Georgia is no longer on an EU and NATO integration track. The government might try to deceive itself that there is some third way possible, while the reality is very binary – if you are not on a track to Europe, you are on a track to Russia.

The more you hold steady on the path westward, the further you will move away from Moscow. Armenia has democratically chosen the right path, and that has already made the country more independent and, therefore, more secure. Prosperity always flows from there eventually.

Yet Armenia's progress should not lead us to romanticize Europe or overlook its shortcomings.

As I mentioned above, it is unfortunately true that Europe is far from operating at its full capacity to assist, defend, and nurture democracies and those striving to become new allies aligned with the West. To cynics, it can easily seem that the European Dream is no less a mirage than the Russian one, and that betting on alliances with democratic countries can appear naïve or even a surrender of sovereignty.

Even well-established EU members express concerns about the centralization of power in Brussels; one member even left the Union entirely. Populist politicians in all countries have won votes and seats by whipping up suspicions of “unelected bureaucrats” and many, much darker conspiracies. Of course, such politicians have their popularity boosted by enthusiastic support from Kremlin propagandists,

and sometimes by the same direct collaboration and corruption that recaptured Georgia and almost fully subjugated Hungary.

Yet despite these imperfections, there are reasons why countries on Europe's eastern frontier continue to place their faith in the European project.

I can understand those who are cautious about the long-term prospects of aligning with the West and integrating into imperfect European institutions. However, as a representative of a Baltic State, I point to our own history in this struggle. We stood up for our own democratic freedom, against the same mammoth enemy, even when we were told not to, even when we were assured it was hopeless. Since regaining that freedom, we have been tireless advocates for all those who also seek it, and I would argue that great progress has been made.

That experience shapes how we view the choices now facing countries such as Armenia. Contrary to the desk research by Western analysts, we on the Eastern Flank have lived experience and understand the nature of existential threats; we are familiar with those who threaten us. We are best positioned to understand the current predicament of those in the South Caucasus. We also share the same interests — more democratic countries mean more democratic allies to protect all our democracies.

The Baltic States are ideally placed to advocate for a closer relationship and more assistance to Armenia. Our history, struggle for freedom, and shared geopolitical heritage provide us with ample understanding. The Baltics are the best example of a successful

transition from Soviet occupation to a modern European society. Nowhere else is it as clear what the Western strategic direction, democratic reforms, and embrace of a market economy can do to a region.

European countries feel overwhelmed by the return of risky geopolitics. Not so long ago, the European continent seemed at peace — with Russia placated, the U.S. offering security, it seemed as if history had truly ended. The Baltic States, on the other hand, have consistently warned of the looming geopolitical dangers. Today, the Baltics could (and should) best explain what leaving aspiring European Union members outside the Union would mean for their security.

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That is precisely why Armenia's current trajectory matters far beyond Armenia itself.

Armenia is a shining example to the region, showing that a country can choose sovereignty even when threatened. When Armenians make that choice, Georgians are given an additional reason to believe that the pull towards Moscow is not inevitable. The world is watching, and each country is calculating and recalculating its own shifts. Leading by example is the strongest and most inspiring form of leadership, and Armenia will certainly benefit from its decision to take this long, risky, and difficult path rather than the shortcut to disaster ■