

# Armenia Keeps Its Options Open, But What Can Europe Deliver?

In crucial parliamentary elections, almost half of the Armenians – 49.7% to be precise – voted to let the risky experiment of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan continue, [granting him](#) 64 mandates in the 105-seat parliament. The International Election Observation Mission [said](#) voters “were offered a genuine choice,” but lamented the “unprecedented and worrying” pressure and threats from Russian authorities.

Behind the headline-grabbing news (“Armenia’s pro-West government wins election despite Russian pressure,” as the BBC), a more complex reality lurks.

With turnout full 10 percentage points above the previous elections, many of the mobilized voters seem to have broken towards the opposition, which performed stronger than the polls predicted. The two opposition parties that will take up seats are not precisely led by pro-Western figures: tycoon Samvel Karapetyan, embedded in Russian networks,

leads Strong Armenia (23.31%, 29 seats), and Armenia Alliance (9.95%, 12 mandates) is led by former [Putin-friendly](#) president, Robert Kocharyan. Pashinyan will have to face highly hostile opposition without an absolute majority.

Could Pashinyan transform Armenia [as he promised](#)? Would he take note of the significant but not majoritarian support for his campaign and rein in his instinct to steamroll the opposition while he still can? Only the future will tell.

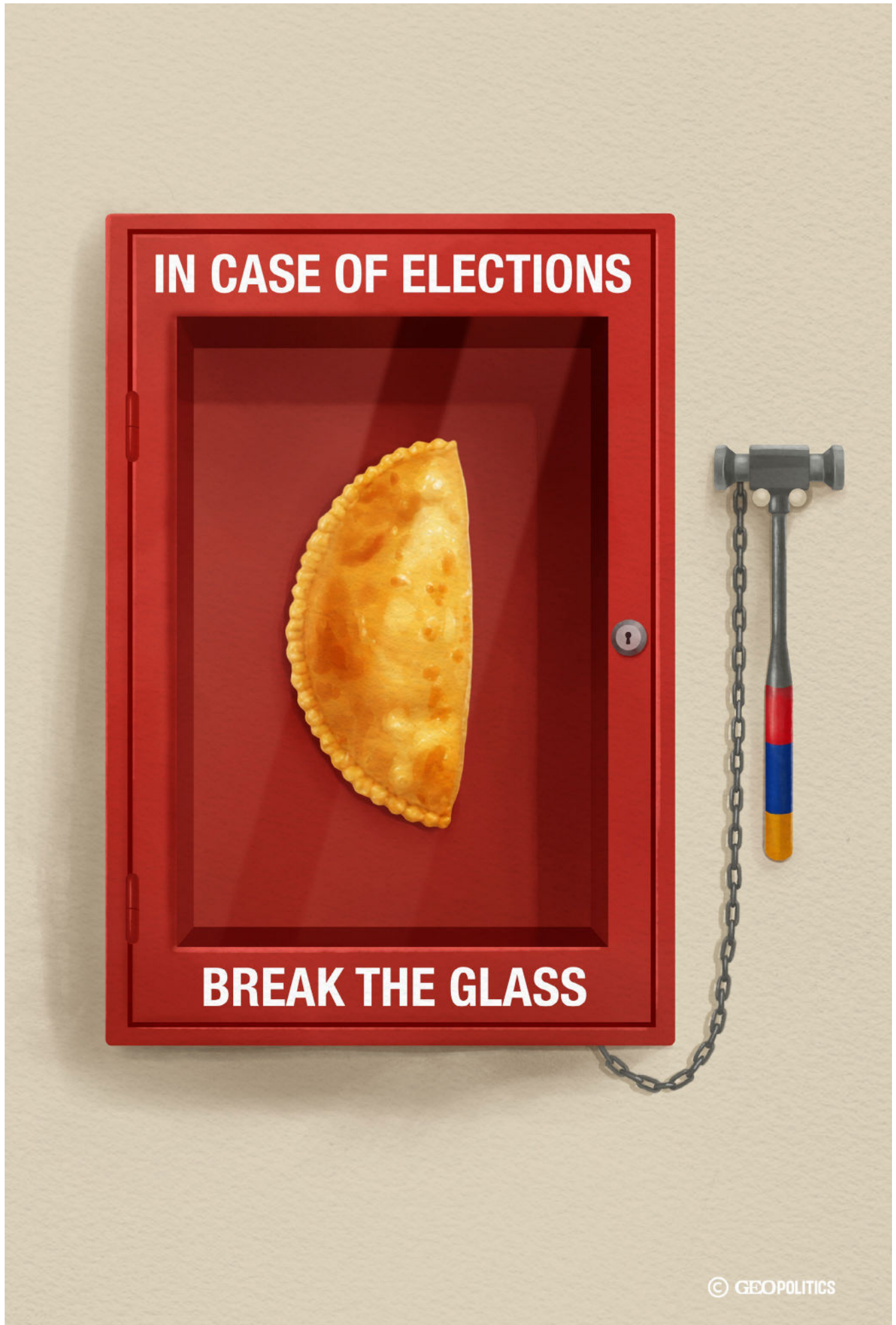
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What is clear is that the Armenians decided to keep the option of drifting away from the Kremlin’s toxic embrace, despite the pressure. The real question is whether and how Europe could channel that cautious optimism.



**JABA DEVDARIANI**  
Contributor

Jaba Devdariani, a seasoned analyst of Georgian and European affairs, has over two decades of experience as an international civil servant and advisor to both international organizations and national governments. His significant roles include leading the political office of OSCE in Belgrade from 2009 to 2011 and serving as the Director for International Organizations (UN, CoE, OSCE) at the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2011-2012. Currently, as a volunteer co-editor for Europe Herald, a Civil.ge project (FB/@EuropeHerald), Devdariani dedicates his expertise to elucidating European current affairs for a broader audience.



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## Slow and Curious

Despite its small size, Armenia offers Brussels an opportunity for a striking diplomatic victory: persuading one of Russia's most loyal strategic partners, historically aligned by regional conflict and shared adversity, to move closer to the EU.

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For sure, this extraordinary situation is of Russia's own making. Armenians are not going to forget that Moscow left their distress call to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) fall flat. But in this troubled region, small states are used to the fact that their fate depends on the vicissitudes of geopolitics, which affect the attention span of their larger allies (and enemies). More than betrayal, Russia's insistence on staying stuck in the Ukrainian quagmire is compelling Armenia to keep its options open.

Despite international headlines, Armenia is not likely to move quickly toward the West. After voting, Pashinyan [affirmed](#) his wish to bring Armenia to "European standards" while also emphasizing the need to boost "strategic partnership" with China and maintain relations with Russia. His main point was that the nation's established "strategic balancing" policy will persist. Analyst Richard Giragosian [noted](#) that Pashinyan's first trip as re-elected prime minister might be to Moscow, to persuade the Kremlin to relax restrictions on Armenian trade.

That may shock some opposition enthusiasts and CSO types in Georgia, who [rushed to](#) Yerevan on the election eve to retrieve (at least partially and emotionally) their pro-Western *paradise lost* in the home country. But the geopolitical level-headedness may come as a relief in Brussels and the European Capitals.

## Help, But Not a Rescue

If anything, Europe has delivered on symbolism ahead of the Armenia vote, giving a material "feel" to the Europe vs. Russia buzz. The [summit](#) of the European Political Community, where top politicians rubbed shoulders and paced the streets of Yerevan with Pashinyan, and the back-to-back EU-Armenia Summit could be seen as both a demonstration of support and a classic "show of flag" operation addressed to the patron in the Kremlin.

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That was undoubtedly noticed: Moscow has deployed the pressure instruments very familiar to Georgia: [restrictions](#) on agricultural produce, alcohol, and mineral waters, citing "phytosanitary" reasons. If continued, these may shave 2% off GDP, the Central Bank [warned](#). In a tit-for-tat, Brussels [rushed](#) EUR 50 million in financial aid to counteract the immediate effects and promised more.

This aid, as with the [deployment](#) of the EU Partnership Mission (EUPM) under the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), provides top-level support and advice to the authorities on foreign information manipulation, cyberattacks, and illicit financial flows, which are hallmarks of the EU's modality of assistance.

It is symbolically significant. It is focused on providing immediate relief. The CSDP format means Brussels keeps the strategic significance in mind. But at this stage, it is not rushing into big decisions either. One can argue that the arrangement may fit both sides. But it also reflects the realities.

## Ready When You Are

PM Pashinyan is right when he says the country needs reforms to catch up to the EU standards.

In 2013, under severe pressure from Russia, Yerevan refused to sign the Association Agreement with the EU – [a rapid U-turn](#), followed by a period of adaptation. The resulting Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) has been applied since 2018.

Even though it is perceived as the “Association Agreement Light,” CEPA retains its crucial structural element – approximation to the EU *acquis*. Also, the Commission prepares, and the EU Council adopts the Partnership Implementation [Report](#) for Armenia, a lighter, but structurally similar document to that adopted for the Associated and Candidate States. When taken together, these two elements can ensure deeper EU-compatible reforms and clearer monitoring of the degree of approximation.

But the reality is that the balancing act, combined with existential security threats, has distracted Armenia from pursuing EU-compatible structural reforms. Even though some steps have been taken to improve the rule of law and anti-corruption bodies, public administration reform, strategic planning, and public finance management – areas where the EU likes to see rapid progress before committing – are still [considerably behind](#) many benchmarks for EU enlargement candidates. Still, on the other indicators, Armenia is faring well, especially considering its security fragility.

Europe could provide financial and expert support to help the country move closer to European standards and adopt and implement more of the *acquis*. The problems this would likely encounter in Armenia include the considerable need to build civil service capacity and to attract educated youth. While the task is objectively complicated in a very small country, this obstacle is not insurmountable given the political will.

But the real challenge for the EU is not about technicalities; it is about the context of governance.

## How Fundamentally Sound?

As Moldova and Ukraine [opened](#) their membership negotiations last week, they, along with all other prospective candidates, will first face scrutiny of so-called “fundamentals” – democratic governance, the rule of law, transparency – all the elements that make a state compatible with the Copenhagen Criteria and the EU treaties.

While international election observation missions gave past elections a broad “thumbs up,” concerns about Pashinyan’s personalistic government style in European capitals are palpable. These were not allayed by the post-election news.

Pashinyan [reiterated](#) that the leaders of the main opposition forces, Robert Kocharyan (Armenia Alliance), Gagik Tsarukyan (Prosperous Armenia Party), and Samvel Karapetyan (Strong Armenia), should be imprisoned for alleged vote-buying and fraud.

Prosecutors [reportedly](#) brought charges against Russia-linked oligarch Tsarukyan, whose Prosperous Armenia fell short of the 4% threshold by a couple of dozen votes (its partisans say through electoral machinations). He was banned from leaving the country, and his property was also [reportedly](#) seized as part of the investigation. The prosecutors also reportedly [asked](#) the Central Election Commission to authorize a criminal investigation against Kocharyan. Karapetyan sat out the election campaign while being under house arrest. All three are framed as pro-Russian politicians, while the two clearly have considerable business interests and capital in that country.

These developments put the EU in an important dilemma: let things take their course through the courts and risk accusations of favoring Pashinyan and relaxing rule-of-law standards out of geopolitical interest, or call for restraint and risk strengthening Russia’s hand?

An example of Georgia next door does not offer straightforward answers but should be a source of plenty of anxiety in Brussels. European politicians have been criticized for letting the pro-European Mikheil Saakashvili's administration get away with personalist rule and restrictions on the opposition, let alone rule-of-law abuses. Yet, the rise of Bidzina Ivanishvili was once hailed as an example of an orderly democratic transition, but it has also shown the corrosive influence that Russia-linked oligarchs can have on the fragile political system. It has been an embarrassment that Georgia was hailed as one of the top pupils in the EU association right before it plunged into the abyss of anti-Western conspiracies and brutal repression of fundamental freedoms.

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Pashinyan's Civil Contract is not the only force in the new parliament, but it enjoys a comfortable majority, and even 3/5 of the votes necessary to pass constitutional laws. He can form the government and advance reforms without the opposition's support. Yet this approach is likely to further consolidate the personalistic management style. EU's success in Armenia – as perceived both inside the country, and wider in Europe – hinges on the support of a transformative, popular leader, not an autocrat.

## **Squaring the Circle: What Europe Wants**

Leadership shown by Europe – and led by Paris – in hosting the EPC summit in Yerevan is a good example of the proper approach to take. To succeed in Armenia without compromising its values or, indeed, Armenia's security, Europe should act as a team, uniting the EU institutions and capitals. Naming an experienced head of the EU delegation

in Yerevan and ensuring coordination with a lead country spearheading the Team Europe approach could offer a flexible, focused strategic setup.

On specifics, some lessons from Georgia are applicable.

The work to strengthen Armenia's *administrative capacities* is a decisive element in expanding compatibility with the European legal space. Political opposition is not the only counterweight to the strong executive: before matters reach the judicial system, there is the independent, professional civil service, committed to Constitutional principles and protected from political overreach. The EU should invest its political capital and expertise in implementing public administration reform in a way that is mindful of its implications for the distribution of power.

Both of these reforms should be seen as benefiting citizens directly. Armenia has advanced in *service delivery and digitalization*, and these reforms could move forward quickly, as the examples of Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate.

The EU should show that it could be tough on crime, strict on justice, and politically fair. A toxic influence of the Russia-linked tycoons on national politics needs to be countered, but within the framework of the rule of law. Backing judicial reform and encouraging and supporting the independence of the courts can and should coexist with the acknowledgment that these individuals – even as opposition politicians – could indeed act as conduits of Kremlin influence. Once again, PM Pashinyan should be nudged (but also given the means to) convince Armenian citizens that the eventual prosecutions are about law, applied fairly.

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The Georgian experience should teach the EU that some reforms are only feasible if security issues are addressed simultaneously and effectively. The EU can bring its considerable economic and political weight to bear on this equation, creating incentives for both Baku and Ankara to open the borders. Some of these incentives could include supporting cross-border economic projects, for example, through the Global Gateway scheme.

And finally, since the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the European capitals have traveled a considerable way towards understanding the crucial and continued relevance of hard security. The dissolution of Armenia's partnership with Russia has left a significant capacity gap in its military, security, and infrastructure capabilities. If not the EU, then individual European capitals could try to help Yerevan fill its gap and thus assuage the real security fears of the Armenian population.

## Hold the Door

Armenia's elections create an opening for European actors to strengthen their foothold in a strategically crucial region, where fundamental security interests intersect with trade and migration concerns and opportunities. The European Union has the appropriate tools at its disposal to take advantage of this opening in the interests of stability and to defuse one of the region's more intractable knots in conflict.

The geopolitical situation in and around Armenia is in a state of fundamental flux. Two of the regional powers – Russia and Iran – are weakened by wars economically and are in a precarious political position. The precise consequences of the U.S.-Iran accord and a potential peace deal with Russia are, at this stage, impossible to predict. It is therefore in Europe's fundamental political and economic interest to maintain a foothold in the South Caucasus, uphold stability, and keep trade links there open for business. It is good news for everyone in

the region that, at least on this point, the interests of the U.S. administration, with its TRIPP regional connectivity project, and Europe seem to coincide.

To turn challenges into opportunities, and opportunities into realities, Europe requires a flexible and adaptive presence in Armenia. The EU has not, traditionally, excelled at adaptability, but as crises multiply, Brussels is slowly learning to equip itself and master the financial and political tools.

In the medium term, over the next two to three years, it would be plausible for Armenia to benefit from various CSDP facilities and eventually secure a full-fledged Association Agreement with the EU. The key sticking point here is the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), which could benefit Armenia the most, especially if trade with Türkiye opens. Yet, concluding such an agreement would mean withdrawal from the Russia-led Customs Union and thus would need to make economic sense to compensate for losses. In contrast to Georgia, Armenia has not constructed a political project based on the historical narrative of its affiliation with Europe. EU candidacy or membership is therefore rather more controversial. Yet, the EU and Yerevan can still build a close neighborhood partnership.

In terms of security, crucial for Armenia, it is for the national capitals to take a substantial role. Paris has built the closest relations in this field and already consolidated them by [signing](#) a “strategic partnership” accord with Yerevan in May 2026. If it chooses to, France, as a major European military power, has the capacity to become the guarantor of Armenian sovereignty and to ensure that European interests are heard in strained talks with Ankara and Baku.

Putting these tools to good use could be a test for “geopolitical Europe” and serve as a powerful example of Europe's capacity to encourage positive change in Armenia's neighbors ■