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Pashinyan Under Pressure

Less Inconsistent, But Still Unpredictable

Onnik James Krikorian

On 11 June 2024, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien arrived in Yerevan to engage with Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan in two days of U.S.-Armenia Strategic Dialogue (USASD) to strengthen bilateral relations and assist with the country's economic, energy, and security diversification. The visit came as the U.S. seeks to exploit what it considers a window of opportunity to weaken and reduce Russia's influence in Armenia and open new trade routes through its territory free from Moscow's influence and control. O'Brien shocked many with his candor.

It shouldn't have come as a surprise. This was already suspected

and had been since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 spilled over geopolitically into the South Caucasus, increasingly disrupting ongoing negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In particular, it muddied the waters on implementing the ninth and final point of the 10 November 2020 ceasefire statement that ended the Second Karabakh War: restoration of regional economic and transport links between the countries, including from Azerbaijan to its exclave of Nakhchivan through Armenia. Disagreement over the involvement of Russian FSB Border Guards in overseeing the route, in addition to how customs checks would be carried out, or at least agreed in a resulting tripartite working group, had been unambiguously

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spelled out in the aforementioned document.

The U.S. clearly has other ideas, and O'Brien made it blatantly clear in Yerevan that Russia

as well as China do not factor into any of them. Though he did not mention it by name, that will likely one day also include Iran. The same message, though also referring to Central Asia, was delivered to Baku during his visit on 27 June 2024.

After the Russia-Ukraine war began in February 2022, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has shown a keen interest in reorienting himself away from Moscow towards newfound friends in Brussels and Washington eager to exploit Russia's distraction from the region for their own gain. This geopolitical shift also extended to the former de facto but now dissolved mainly ethnic-Armenian separatist region of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) even if it meant contradicting the then de facto leadership. Pashinyan crafted a tide of criticism against the Russian peacekeeping contingent effectively discrediting them amongst the Armenian populace in the process.

Despite the lack of trust between Yerevan and Baku, normalizing relations is now in Pashinyan's interests; and he can no longer afford to delay.

True, Armenia had been irked by the lack of military support from Moscow during the Second Karabakh War in 2020, though that was more its mistake

given that fighting occurred on internationally-recognized sovereign Azerbaijani territory, a situation that Russia was under no obligation to respond to. The September 2022 incursion, however, was different in that Azerbaijani forces reportedly entered Armenian territory, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) failed to react. Pashinyan saw another opportunity to shift the blame for yet another military disaster.

Some Armenian analysts even alleged that Pashinyan even saw an opportunity to renege on the 10 November 2020 agreement. By shifting all responsibility for Karabakh on to Russia, he could not only hold out against the terms of re-establishing a land link between Azerbaijan and its exclave of Nakhchivan, but also potentially rewrite them. If Baku saw reciprocity as a solution to how routes through Armenia and Azerbaijan could function, then it would be better to sacrifice Lachin in order to preserve full control over Syunik, they charge.

Crossroads of Peace

The sensitivity of what Azerbaijan refers to as the Zangezur Corridor and Armenia calls part of its Crossroads of Peace initiative is not new. Pashinyan even focused on it in a 23 May 2001 piece penned for his *Haykakan Zhamanak* newspaper. When then President Robert Kocharyan was believed to be negotiating a territorial swap to facilitate such a route in talks held in Key West, Florida, in March 2001, it was considered tantamount to treason. Pashinyan made it clear that control should remain with Yerevan and that Armenia should benefit from transit fees.

“If Turkey or Azerbaijan wants to communicate through Meghri, let them communicate. Let them use our territory, let them use our railway and pay for it, as is customary in the world,” he wrote in the aforementioned article. “Turkey has no railway connection with Nakhchivan and [...] the Turks will have to use our railway on the Gyumri-Yerevan-Yerask line and pay for it. Let the economists calculate how many millions of dollars that would be for our budget.”

Pashinyan has argued in the past that if the route was to fall out of

Yerevan’s control, then Armenia would turn into a “dead end,” no longer able to become the “heart of the region” or the “crossing point of West and the East.” This appears to be the position he maintains today. It is also one that O’Brien seemed to tacitly approve during his most recent trip to Yerevan. “USAID intends to support Armenia to develop a transport strategy to underpin Armenia’s vision of the ‘Crossroads of Peace,’ encouraging and strengthening regional trade and connectivity through a just and durable peace,” read an official statement from the U.S. Armenia Strategic Dialogue that he led on his visit.

The Crossroads of Peace initiative is an extension of Pashinyan’s earlier Armenian Crossroads initiative, put forward at the end of 2021, which is itself an expansion of the North-South Road Corridor project under construction in Armenia since the Sargsyan presidency. While an East-West component does include the mainland Azerbaijan-Nakhchivan route, its main focus is on a north-south road connection through Armenia from Iran to Georgia and rail transportation between Armenia and Türkiye. However, in his two-page Crossroads of Peace proposal, Pashinyan does not prioritize the route to and from Nakhchivan, even though it was a

central component of many peace proposals in the past, including the 10 November 2020 trilateral ceasefire statement. It also fails to include a specific road, instead preferring to use existing roads further north, something that Azerbaijan opposes.

In short, Crossroads of Peace appears to be primarily a geopolitical project, not a geoeconomic one. The absence of any sort of feasibility study suggests strongly that it hypes the political importance for

Western audiences of supporting the project without consideration of its economic viability or not. Even a cursory examination of the map of its proposed routes suggests strongly that the absence of a feasibility study is deliberate: the existing network of routes beyond Armenia’s borders, developed since the collapse of the Soviet Union at great cost, are unlikely to be abandoned to advance Pashinyan’s geopolitical ambitions. And this suggests, in turn, that Crossroads

of Peace is not economically viable. This, of course, does not mean that the sort of support articulated by

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the likes of O’Brien will not eventually materialize in concrete form, but it does decrease the likelihood that the billions of dollars surely needed to bring the Crossroads of Peace initiative to life is unlikely to produce an economic return. All this is especially disconcerting given Pashinyan’s unwillingness to prioritize the route to and from Nakhchivan—the most geoeconom-

ically (and geopolitically) reasonable piece of infrastructure that would pass through Armenian territory.

Armenia’s primary goal since regaining independence has been to establish an open border with Türkiye, enabling access to the European market and effectively delaying the resolution of its issues with Azerbaijan. It is no surprise that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Azerbaijani

counterpart, Ilham Aliyev, both believe that normalization between Ankara and Yerevan should only happen after progress in relations between Baku and Yerevan. In July 2024, some Azerbaijani analysts even suggested that it could at least be dependent on whether an initial document—be it a checklist of basic principles or a framework agreement—is initialed or signed until a comprehensive treaty is ratified within a certain time period. This reasoning was also behind the failure of the 2009 Zurich Protocols between Armenia and Türkiye.

But while it might seem that Pashinyan has managed to ride the storm of disappointment and defeat since the Second Karabakh War and subsequent developments—something the opposition considers to be nothing short of capitulation—this could not be further from the truth. When Pashinyan's Civil Contract party came to power in 2018, it garnered 70 percent of the vote. Following the war, snap elections held in June 2021 saw that fall to 53.95 percent. In September 2023, in municipal elections held in the capital, it was

just 32.6 percent. By December 2023, in a survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI), only 20 percent of respondents said they would vote for Civil Contract if elections were held that weekend. And in May 2024, in a poll by MPG, that had dropped further to just 12.8 percent.

That rebounded a little in a later survey by the same pollster in July 2024, but only slightly (14 percent). Only 25.8 percent believed the country was moving in the right direction. Moreover, since Aliyev strongly reiterated his position in June 2024 that no agreement could be signed until Armenia removed a controversial preamble to the country's constitution effectively laying claim to Karabakh, 80.3 percent of respondents said they were against changing it at all. That figure was 34.2 percent in January 2024.

Such numbers are arguably existential in nature, but they also conceal the reality that the opposition hardly fares any better, only drawing equal when the ratings of individual parties are combined.

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The vast majority of the electorate still remains either against all political forces or is simply non-engaged and apathetic. Even the April 2024 agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan to demarcate 12.7 kilometers of their mutual border, with Yerevan also handing over four non-enclave villages in the Gazakh region it had controlled since the early 1990s, failed to ignite popular anger.

But that does not mean the situation will remain like this. Even if the opposition remains marginalized and unpopular in 2025, the situation could change ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled for 2026. What the Armenian opposition really needs is a populist to take on a populist—a professional orator to take on another.

Church & Opposition

Step in Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, Primate of the Tavush Diocese and former head of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Canada. That the government and the Church would go head to head had anyway been clear since Armenian Public Television refused to air the annual New Year's Eve message by the Catholicos of All Armenians, Karekin II, on 31 December 2023. The snub was

taken harshly by the Church and interpreted by observers as the most serious escalation between the Catholicos and the Prime Minister since early 2020. The Church anyway opposed normalization with Azerbaijan—"For the Church, the approach of the authorities to resolving the conflict, which boils down to recognizing Artsakh [Karabakh] as part of Azerbaijan, is unacceptable," Galstanyan said in June 2024—and Karekin II had been calling for Pashinyan's resignation since Armenia's defeat in the Second Karabakh War.

Initially starting with small protests and acts of civil disobedience near the location of the border delimitation and demarcation process, Galstanyan embarked on a roughly 170-kilometer march to Yerevan. However, given that he covered 98 kilometers on the first day in less than 7 hours, it is safe to say that not all of it was on foot. Upon arriving in the Armenian capital on 9 May 2024, he organized a protest demonstration in the central Republic Square that attracted about 31,700 people. This was the largest rally since Pashinyan's own in 2018 and was enough to surprise the government—or at least until the next two rallies held in the following days, which were attended by only 11,000 and 9,000 persons, respectively.

Part of the reason for the huge drop in numbers could have been that, rather than talk about the situation on the border, Galstanyan instead called for Pashinyan's resignation. The Armenian prime minister was even given an hour to quit, further extended by another 15 minutes when the demand was ignored. Predictably, Pashinyan did not respond. Galstanyan nonetheless announced that the parliamentary opposition consisting of Kocharyan and Sargsyan's *Hayastan* (Armenia) and *Pativ Unem* (I Have Honor) factions would launch impeachment proceedings against Pashinyan, even though they lacked the necessary number of deputies to do so. Lacking one deputy to do so in a National Assembly dominated by the ruling Civil Contract party, they might hardly have bothered.

Nonetheless, if removed, an interim government headed by a temporary caretaker prime minister would then prepare for early elections to be held a year later. Even though Galstanyan was constitutionally ineligible to run for such a position on account of his dual Armenia-Canada citizenship, he did not rule it out, feigning reluctance until "divine intervention" instead. Claiming that he was acting individually and not as a proxy for the Church itself, some Armenians saw Galstanyan as an outsider

untainted by the disillusionment associated with traditional political parties and the current government. Even Western media picked up on the cleric's personage, incorrectly presenting him as a lone crusader for justice who had reluctantly entered politics to speak up for the residents of Tavush. That too could not have been further from the truth.

Galstanyan had been visible in the Dashnaktsutyun-led protests in 2022 and later that year described himself as a revanchist eager to take revenge against Azerbaijan to regain land lost in the Second Karabakh War. That same year, former Armenian Foreign Minister Raffi Hovannisian had also proposed the establishment of an interim government in case of success in ousting the Pashinyan Administration. Galstanyan was again included as an integral part of that structure. All of this was long before the issue of border delimitation and demarcation came up.

Besides, at his first small gathering held in the Tavush village of Voskepar on 13 April 2024, Dashnaktsutyun members were present—including from its radical youth wing, the Armenian Youth Federation (AYF). By his side at all times was Dashnaktsutyun MP Garnik Danielyan, raising doubts

about his claims of having no direct political linkages with the main party in Kocharyan's parliamentary faction. Galstanyan, by his own admission, also said that he was engaged in politics with the blessing of Karekin II, just as it was in 2022.

Indeed, the Armenian Government was quick to make such claims from the outset. "A cleric cannot say a political text without the permission or instructions of the Catholicos of All Armenians [the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church], Karekin II," stated Pashinyan in a live televised address before Galstanyan's first rally. "It is obvious that the leader of the [demonstrations] is the Catholicos of All Armenians, and the beneficiary is [former president] Robert Kocharyan."

Among his supporters were also individuals such as Hampig Sassounian, sentenced to life imprisonment for assassinating the Turkish Consul General in Los Angeles in 1982 until his controversial release on parole in 2021. Others included ultranationalist groups such as the National Democratic Pole and militias such as Combat Brotherhood. A fourth rally on 26 May 2024 did see numbers increase from the two previous protests but still only attracted 23,000 people, which is average for Armenia even

during the Kocharyan period. As expected, and ignoring his constitutional ineligibility, Galstanyan declared himself to be the opposition's nomination for the post of Armenian prime minister

But Galstanyan did score some victories. Traveling by car to the Sardarapat memorial complex, his supporters camped overnight on the eve of the annual official commemoration of the First Armenian Republic that takes place on 28 May. Likely believing that Galstanyan hoped to provoke a clash with police, Pashinyan postponed the event to later that afternoon after the protestors had left. Nonetheless, an unprecedented incident did occur when Karekin II arrived and was temporarily blocked by police.

The Church became even more outspoken in its criticism of Pashinyan, resorting to stereotypical and nationalist slurs against him. "I have said several times that these authorities are not Armenian. [...] Everything can be expected from the anti-national authorities," Archbishop Mikael Ajapahyan, Primate of the Diocese of Shirak said of him. "It is quite logical that [...] the interests of 'old men,' such as ex-presidents Sargsyan and Kocharyan, and the Armenian Church found each other [and]

decided to use the image in the cassock as a new tool for active confrontation with Pashinyan,” concluded one Russian analyst.

But when Galstanyan led his supporters to parliament itself on 10 June 2024, camping outside on Yerevan’s central Baghramyan Avenue, it became clear that clashes were inevitable. Back in April 2004, the opposition had attempted the same, but was violently dispersed in the early hours of the morning by police under then-President Robert Kocharyan. Galstanyan’s aim was to pressure parliament to initiate an extraordinary session called by the opposition to discuss the resignation of the entire government, given that they lacked enough deputies to table a motion to impeach Pashinyan.

On 12 June 2024, around 3,600 gathered outside the National Assembly amid significantly bolstered security measures. Pashinyan’s officials had already warned the demonstrators publicly that significant precautions had been readied both inside and out in case they planned to storm the

building while Pashinyan spoke inside. Clashes broke out and police fired stun grenades at those among the crowd who had attempted to break through. Around 100 people required medical treatment, with on-the-ground footage showing Galstanyan and Dashnaktsutyun leader Ishkhan Saghatelyan attacking the police line and using force.

Tensions were also high in parliament, with government and opposition lawmakers confronting and jeering at each other. Pashinyan had launched a ferocious tirade against Dashnaktsutyun MPs, accusing them of being responsible for the exodus of 100,000 ethnic-Armenians from Karabakh

following Baku’s military operation to disarm Armenian security forces in September 2023. He also accused the nationalist party of paying 5,000 Armenian Drams (around \$13) to individual Karabakh Armenian refugees to attend the protests.

In the days that followed, several Dashnaktsutyun activists were detained by police. Some Western commentators—especially

Widespread disappointment and disillusionment with the results of the Velvet Revolution and the Pashinyan government has set in—even if the opposition has yet to fully capitalize on it.

those that had anyway been critical of Pashinyan and his apparent willingness to deal with Azerbaijan—were quick to condemn the former revolutionary leader for the use of police to suppress the crowd. This was their mistake too. The 2018 Pashinyan-led Velvet Revolution was more about replacing a deeply unpopular leader in the form of Serzh Sargsyan than bringing about a truly democratic society and all that it entailed. Pashinyan’s methods have always been populist and manipulative. Ironically, Galstanyan was just copying them.

Even if Pashinyan today speaks about transforming the country from a revanchist “Historical Armenia” to a more conciliatory “New Armenia” or “Real Armenia,” the language and symbolism he used in the past had been blatantly antagonistic and nationalistic—and not least when Pashinyan infamously declared “Artsakh is Armenia” on 5 August 2019, not only making claim to the former NKAO but also to the seven surrounding then-occupied regions. The following year,

he also attempted to hold a constitutional referendum using booklets designed to look like passports with

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a map combining Armenia, the former NKAO, and those same regions emblazoned on the cover. Even following military defeat later that same year, he included remedial secession as a policy objective in snap-elections held in June 2021. Though Pashinyan can be lauded for progress in nor-

malizing relations with Azerbaijan than anyone else before him, it should not be forgotten that he now has little choice, as he continues to burn bridges with Moscow and succumb to pressure from the U.S. and the EU to oust Russia from the country.

But six years on, widespread disappointment and disillusionment with the results of the Velvet Revolution and the Pashinyan government has set in—even if the opposition has yet to fully capitalize on it. Given the sensitivity of changes afoot in the country, and especially in terms of normalizing relations with Azerbaijan, the Armenian prime minister’s situation remains

incredibly tenuous in case a new figure—one who is able to instill confidence and hope among the population—emerges. Galstanyan's movement demonstrated that, even if it failed.

Election Headaches

This raises concerns about parliamentary elections scheduled for no later than 2026, but which may end up taking place earlier. Even if he were still to garner a higher number of votes than his rivals, it is also quite possible that Pashinyan will not be able to achieve a sufficient majority in these parliamentary elections—whenever they end up taking place. That could create unfortunate obstacles in the normalization process post-2026. There is also a lot riding on Pashinyan being able to go to the polls having signed a peace deal in order to justify what are perceived as unpopular unilateral concessions.

Others, such as former ally Hayk Marutyan, also intend to contest the vote. The former mayor also participated in last year's Yerevan City Council elections. Pashinyan's Civil Contract lost 33 of its previous seats in that vote, leaving it with only 24 out of a total of 65. Marutyan and National Progress came second

with 14. Another opposition force, Mother Armenia, represented by former Kocharyan-ally Andranik Tevanyan, came third with 12 seats. Dashnaktsutyun did not participate, but it is clear that it is active behind the scenes.

Towards the end of May 2024, Galstanyan was present at an international conference held by Dashnaktsutyun in Yerevan devoted to *Hai Tahd* (Armenian Cause). With him was a special representative sent from Etchmiadzin and Kocharyan's former foreign minister, Vartan Oskanyan. The event was unreported in the local media, but was covered by the pro-Dashnak press in the diaspora.

And on 15 June 2024, Galstanyan was present at another meeting this time convened by the Ararat Alliance, a body established by the head of the Union of Russian Armenians, businessman Ara Abrahamyan, who is widely described not only as pro-Putin but also as a Kremlin insider. With them was Seyran Ohanyan, the head of Kocharyan's mainly Dashnaktsutyun *Hayastan* parliamentary faction. Several pro-Galstanyan Telegram channels voiced their displeasure at this apparent endorsement of a Russian platform given earlier assurances that there were no such links.

This apparent connection to Abrahamyan could also prove a major problem for Pashinyan going forwards. Though O'Brien had been in Yerevan to encourage the government to diversify away from Moscow, few believe that this can become a reality economically in the foreseeable future. Armenia's main market remains Russia, and it seems unlikely that it can expand into other markets so easily unless the new trade routes O'Brien had emphasized are in place. That, however—by O'Brien's own admission—requires normalization and open borders with both Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

The Russian Connection

Since the conflict over Ukraine entered into its present stage in February 2022, with the West responding inter alia by imposing a sanctions regime on Russia, Armenia has certainly benefited from the re-export of Western goods to Russia through its territory. In 2023, that amounted to \$3.4 billion—an incredible 39 percent increase over the previous year. Armenian exports to Russia had already tripled in 2022, when compared to 2021 figures. Russia is also the destination of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers supporting their families back home.

Moreover, Russia maintains a monopoly on rail transportation in the country until at least 2037, though it is in the area of energy where Armenia is most dependent of all. In short, it is unclear how Yerevan can break free from its dependency on Moscow in the foreseeable future.

As a result of a number of deals made under previous governments, Armenia appears locked into receiving its gas from Gazprom through Georgia via fully Russian-owned pipelines until 2043. Only 12.5 percent comes from Iran in a barter deal with Armenia for electricity in exchange. Under the terms of these contracts, Armenia cannot purchase gas from any country other than Russia. Though one analyst suggests Pashinyan could nationalize the Armenian section of the Iranian pipeline to increase volume there, it could also involve years of international arbitration for violating the agreement. It could also provoke a more immediate response from the Kremlin, and it is not clear if Armenia's new Western friends could respond in time to save the day, or even at all.

Some have also suggested purchasing gas from Azerbaijan in the context of a post-peace deal situation, but unless new pipelines are built, this gas would still have

to pass through the Russia-owned pipeline network—unless, of course, an arrangement between Baku and Moscow was to materialize. Azerbaijan would also have to match prices offered by Moscow, heavily subsidized in a form of soft power, though Aliyev has said this could be possible in case of normalization. Baku already sells gas to Tbilisi at below-market rates, as part of its own soft power projection, but that too is because a number of pipelines originating in Azerbaijan pass through Georgian territory. It also, for example, is obliged to provide free gas to houses of worship in that neighboring country, including Armenian churches.

Confounding the situation is the Soviet-era Metsamor nuclear reactor plant, which has had its termination date extended several times over the years. Armenia also receives its nuclear fuel from Russia. Armenia is in negotiations with Russia, the U.S., and what it describes as a “third country” regarding the replacement of its aging nuclear reactor. This also includes modular reactors from the U.S., a geopolitical tool that Washington views as a way to wean many countries away from Moscow, especially in the former Soviet space. The trouble is, the U.S. has yet to construct one—something it puts down to commercial companies being

unable to compete with state-run enterprises from Russia and China, which have commercially available variants.

But this still doesn’t address the issue of nuclear fuel, which would still have to be transferred by land or air via Russia, though one Armenian political scientist suggests Kazakhstan could be an alternative. For that to happen, however, Kazakh fuel would still have to be transported via Russia and Georgia, Iran, or Azerbaijan. The first would still be controlled by Moscow, the second is unlikely to be acceptable to the United States, and the third is hardly feasible until normalization—and even then, it might not be welcomed by Baku.

Even despite the UN’s main nuclear energy specialist in Armenia warning that the country should continue its long history of tried and tested cooperation with Russia on a replacement nuclear reactor, Pashinyan has said he has found the prospect of working with the U.S. instead to be “politically appealing.” In July 2024, Armenia’s Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan stated that talks in Washington on this issue were in a “substantive phase,” also calling for the legislative basis in the U.S. for cementing a deal to be expedited.

Visiting Yerevan that same month, USAID Administrator Samantha Power also underlined how nuclear was the main focus of its attempts to help diversify away from Moscow.

Certainly, with the global shift towards renewable energy, Armenia should consider green energy options as part of its transition away from fossil fuels. The most viable option in this regard is for Armenia to join the two-part regional mega project to supply wind, solar, and hydro energy to Türkiye, the Western Balkans, and part of the European Union from sources including Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Its centerpiece involves the installation and funding of two separate undersea cables. However, achieving this will require regional cooperation, including opening borders, restoring transportation links, and normalizing relations with Azerbaijan to ensure full diversification in order to meet energy needs. While Pashinyan views the West as a potential savior, powers closer to home are likely more important. In short, numerous obstacles and lingering Russian influence could keep Armenia partially within Moscow’s orbit.

Additionally, the outcome of the Ukraine war will significantly

impact the region. If Russia emerges victorious, Moscow may return to the South Caucasus with renewed assertiveness. Here the most likely focus is Armenia—not Azerbaijan or Georgia. Although Armenia is unlikely to leave the Eurasian Economic Union soon, its increasing criticism of Russia and its diminishing involvement in the CSTO are actions Russian President Vladimir Putin is unlikely to overlook.

Pashinyan’s Fortune

This year, Pashinyan has been fortunate. In 2025, much less 2026, he might not be. Currently, there is a rare opportunity for Armenia and Azerbaijan to strike a deal. Despite the lack of trust between Yerevan and Baku, normalizing relations is now in Pashinyan’s interests; and he can no longer afford to delay. However, Pashinyan’s unpredictability and, to a lesser extent, his inconsistency, remain concerns. His actions are guided by self-interest and self-preservation rather than national or, much less, regional interests. His words and deeds might seem tactically skillful at times, but his attempts at strategy have often led to failure and military defeat. What might be good for him at a particular time might not be for the country he leads.

As an example, speaking in the Armenian National Assembly in mid-June 2024, Pashinyan stated that if he had the opportunity, he would have returned to Azerbaijan the seven formerly occupied regions around the former NKAO and acknowledged that Karabakh is part of Azerbaijan. However, his words do not explain why he prolonged the war despite multiple attempts to negotiate a ceasefire earlier.

In the Spring 2023 edition of *Baku Dialogues*, I described Pashinyan as “predictably unpredictable, consistently inconsistent,” a characterization that still holds true. The danger lies in his tendency to shift with the political wind. For instance, at the beginning of June 2024, Aliyev repeated his contention that a peace agreement with Armenia could not be signed unless its constitution was changed, though he had said this before. Yet, by the middle of the same month, media reports indicated that Pashinyan had instructed that a new draft of a new constitution be completed by the end of 2026, meaning a referendum

could not be held until 2027 at the earliest.

This statement came despite the fact that a draft of the country’s new constitution had been started in 2022 and submitted for review in January 2024. Since then, Pashinyan had signaled his intent to change those parts of it that represented—or could be construed as making—territorial claims on neighboring Azerbaijan and Türkiye. This includes potentially removing a controversial preambular paragraph referencing the 1990 Declaration of Independence, which in turn

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refers to a 1989 joint statement on the “Reunification of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Mountainous Region of Karabakh.”

At the beginning of June 2024, Aliyev reiterated concerns that future Armenian governments might question or nullify any agreement to normalize relations unless Armenia commits to amending the preamble. He emphasized that this commitment should be made before any document is signed. Yerevan

responded by stating that constitutional amendments are an internal matter, while Baku contends that the issue directly pertains to its territorial integrity. Since then, some analysts have suggested that the intent to do this could be written into any framework agreement on the understanding that the constitution would be changed within a certain time limit. Retired British ambassador James Sharp has noted that this was the case with the Good Friday Agreement between the United Kingdom and Ireland. Most recently, Aliyev has floated the idea of initialing a set of agreed basic principles by or even at COP 29 in Baku in November 2024. This would leave a comprehensive treaty until after the constitution is changed.

If a compromise could have allowed Armenia a year to put constitutional amendments to a nationwide referendum, the announcement of a new deadline to draft amendments or a new constitution by the end of 2026 at first seemed more like a tactic to delay the process in the hope that Baku would drop its demands. This deadline falls six months after the latest possible date for holding parliamentary elections in Armenia, where Pashinyan’s political future is uncertain. Moreover, even if a referendum

were held, its outcome would be far from guaranteed.

For the amendments to pass, more than 50 percent of the electorate must naturally vote in favor, and their total should also exceed a quarter of all registered voters. Analysts opposed to a peace deal quickly point out that in last year’s city council elections, voter apathy was so significant that only 28 percent participated, meaning even fewer voted for Pashinyan’s candidate, Tigran Avinyan. For Pashinyan, it is also crucial to implement structural changes in the constitution to ensure the political system benefits him, just as it did for his predecessor. This could be another reason for delaying any referendum.

To win the 2026 election, Pashinyan will likely need to demonstrate that his “peace agenda” has borne fruit, that it has preserved and even enhanced Armenia’s economy and security, and that the country’s future prosperity is inextricably linked to that of its neighbors. Before O’Brien arrived in Yerevan, this seemed imminent. However, there is now a degree of uncertainty, particularly following yet more new arms deals with India and especially France. Ever since Russia and Ukraine went to war in February 2022, and

Western attempts to expand its presence in the South Caucasus took on speed, geopolitical confrontation in the region has reached levels hitherto unseen.

Meanwhile, with so much riding on his peace agenda, it seems unthinkable that Pashinyan

could fare well if it were seen to have failed—just as it did for his humiliated predecessor, Serzh Sargsyan, in the context of the 2009 Armenia-Türkiye protocols that were formally withdrawn unratified just a month before he was unseated by Pashinyan in 2018.

Baku asserts that normalization is not as urgent for Azerbaijan as it once was. However, for Pashinyan, retaining power might at least make it a critical priority. But all this rests rather too uncomfortably on the Armenian prime minister's luck continuing. He remains reliant only on platitudes and, so far mainly

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goodwill gestures from the United States and the European Union, which appear to view Yerevan as an alternative to Tbilisi in case the current Georgian government remains in power after elections later this year. It is sobering to think that this is the same bet they made on former Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili now languishing in a prison cell just outside the capital.

As Armenia gears up for its pre-election year in 2025, the coming months will show whether Pashinyan's populism still has any traction left in a country slowly starting to question his every move. Ironically, it could be this populism, bolstered by some support from the West, as well as a peace deal with Azerbaijan, that proves to be his salvation. Increasingly, the opposition claims the same. **BD**

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