

# Armenia Votes in Test of PM's Pivot Away From Russia

By [Mariam Harutyunyan for AFP](#) and [Irakli Metreveli for AFP](#)

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Armenians vote in the parliamentary election at a polling station in Yerevan. **Karen Minasyan / AFP**

Armenia voted Sunday in a parliamentary election set to test Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's tilt to the West, as the country faces threats and allegations of interference from former imperial ruler Russia.

Armenia and Russia are technically allies, but Moscow has compared the former Soviet republic's EU ambitions to the same path it claims triggered its 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

The election comes after years of upheaval since Pashinyan was propelled to power in a 2018 street revolution.

The small Caucasus country is still reeling from long-time foe Azerbaijan's military takeover of the Karabakh region.

The conflict came to an end in 2023, when the Azerbaijan army seized control of the enclave,

and most of the Armenian population fled.

Pashinyan has framed the vote as a choice between a lasting peace with Azerbaijan or a return to war.

The 51-year-old has also sought to loosen Armenia's dependence on Moscow after it failed to help during the Karabakh conflict.

He has frozen Armenia's participation in a Russia-led security bloc while deepening ties with the European Union and the United States, setting Armenia on a path toward possible EU membership.

While U.S. President Donald Trump offered his "TOTAL Endorsement for Re-Election" to "great friend and Leader" Pashinyan, Moscow has bristled at the possible loss of yet another ally in its backyard.

"We will accept any choice made by the people" in the election, Pashinyan told journalists at a polling station in Yerevan after casting his ballot.

He said Armenia would pursue a balanced foreign policy after the vote, insisting "there is no question of choosing" between Russia and the West.

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In a pointed remark, Russian President Vladimir Putin said in May: "We all see what is happening with Ukraine now...How did it all begin? With Ukraine's attempt to join the EU."

The Kremlin has been accused of seeking to sway the vote in Armenia.

Analysts have noted misinformation on the web, hacker activity and Kremlin-friendly narratives portraying Western cooperation as dangerous.

In the weeks before the vote, Russia banned the import of several products from Armenia, seen as a move to heap economic pressure on the country.

And Armenian officials have warned that "enemies of freedom" are funding propaganda efforts.

### **'Reckless rush'**

Pashinyan has insisted he does not want a rupture with Moscow. But the campaign is a battle over Armenia's geopolitical future.

Pashinyan and his chief opponents have all accused each other of risking a fresh conflict.

Pashinyan told voters Armenia could face a "catastrophic war" with Azerbaijan within months if his Civil Contract party — leading in opinion polls — fails to secure a strong majority.

His opponents say that rhetoric is fearmongering.

Samvel Karapetyan, a billionaire Russian-Armenian businessman whose Strong Armenia party is polling second, has rejected claims he would drag Armenia back into Russia's orbit, but warned against Pashinyan's "reckless rush" to the West.

"Russia has been and will remain our strategic partner and principal economic partner," he said.

Karapetyan has been under house arrest since last year on charges of plotting a coup — allegations he rejects as politically motivated.

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Europe has made little secret of who it wants to win.

In a high-profile visit in May, French President Emmanuel Macron threw his support behind Pashinyan, embracing the Armenian leader as a dear friend.

At an evening reception, Macron took to the microphone and Pashinyan to the drums for a rendition of "La Boheme," the 1965 classic by the late French-Armenian singer Charles Aznavour.

### **'Voted for peace'**

It remains unclear whether Pashinyan's party can secure the two-thirds parliamentary majority needed to pass constitutional amendments, which Azerbaijan has demanded as a condition for a final peace treaty.

Pashinyan's democratic record is also on the ballot paper.

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Eight years after he swept to power on a promise to dismantle Armenia's oligarchic system, he faces increasing accusations of democratic backsliding.

Still, for many Armenians, the opposition remains associated with Russian influence and oligarchs.

"I voted for peace. Only Pashinyan can bring peace," one voter, 63-year-old craftsman Hakob Hakobyan, told AFP.

Another voter, Khachatur Movsisyan, a 59-year-old mechanical engineer, said he had backed an opposition party "because the country, and all of us, need change in foreign policy, domestic policy and in negotiations with Azerbaijan."

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