

Armenia's Election Was Rigged In Plain Sight | Mikael Darbinian

Mikael Darbinian, a former U.S. diplomat and ethnic Armenian now living in Armenia, joins to talk about the June 7 election, claims of rigging, arrests of opposition figures, and the growing power of Prime Minister Pashinyan. The discussion also covers foreign pressure from the EU, U.S., Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Iran, plus fears that Armenia is losing sovereignty. Links: Security Observer Análisis (Spanish language channel) - <https://www.youtube.com/@securityobserveranalysis> Security Observer Global Voices (my Think Tank channel in English) - <https://www.youtube.com/@securityobserverglobalvoices> Security Observer website: <https://security-observer.com> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic>) Merch: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Guest intro and background 00:01:12 What happened in the election 00:03:25 Election rigging claims 00:06:22 Recount and parliament threshold 00:10:05 Public frustration in Armenia 00:13:08 Why Pashinyan still has support 00:17:42 Foreign influence and corridor politics 00:22:04 TRIP corridor and U.S. interests 00:35:08 Iran, sovereignty, and Armenia's future

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. Today, again, with an episode on Armenia. I am joined today by Mikhail Darbinian. Mikhail, welcome. Thanks for having me, Pascal. Thank you for coming online. And Mikhail, you have a special profile because you actually were a U.S. American diplomat. Can you give us a little bit of your background?

#Mikael Darbinian

Yeah, I was a vice consul for the U.S. State Department in Argentina and subsequently in Moscow between 2020 and 2024. By the end of 2024, I was in the consular service, so foreign service. I was able to do a lot and gain a lot of experience from it.

#Pascal

And now you're in Armenia, and your ethnic background is Armenian as well.

#Mikael Darbinian

Yeah, exactly. Ethnically, I'm Armenian as well. I've lived in the States, I've lived in Armenia, I've lived in several other countries. And we've relocated here as a family to be in a smaller, less

cosmopolitan, metropolitan place compared to Los Angeles, Moscow, or Buenos Aires. So it's a lot smaller here.

#Pascal

So what actually happened last weekend in these elections? We've heard before that there were large-scale problems in the run-up to the elections, large-scale arrests of opposition figures, important opposition figures. And then during the elections, there were irregularities too. Can you tell us what you perceived, seeing it from inside Yerevan?

#Mikael Darbinian

Yeah, absolutely. So, elections were on the 7th of June. They were parliamentary elections with the ruling party that's been in power since 2018. They were seeking to extend the prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, seeking to extend his eight years of power. And throughout the years, as his public approval rating has gone down, authoritarian practices by him have increased after the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh, after numerous other losses and, you know, different failures. For example, the poverty rate in Armenia is still at 20%.

In some areas, it's over 40%. This is, you know, compared to Georgia, which was able to halve its poverty rate throughout these last years in general. So, parliamentary elections with lots of arrests of opposition leaders leading up to the elections on the 7th of June and on the very day of the elections as well. Dozens of people were arrested the day of the elections and prior to that. Basically, all were critics or members of parliament or candidates for MP. So, yeah, lots of persecution of the opposition.

#Pascal

The conversation that I just had with two filmmakers and journalists from Armenia, they also told me that during election night, there were these irregularities — that actually Mr. Pashinyan, at 2 a. m., well before all of the polling stations were counted, just announced that he won, and that there was a lot of election rigging going on, like pretty, pretty obvious, open kinds of election rigging. What did you see?

#Mikael Darbinian

So these were probably the most rigged elections I've seen, I've monitored, or I've covered — at least through my own work — elections in different countries as well as Armenia. These were the most rigged elections I've seen so far, precisely in Armenia. So besides actual arrests, on the very election day, members of the ruling party would accompany voters inside polling stations. They would wait outside polling stations. They would literally walk up to people in the polling booth, guide them, showing them with a finger what to do, who to vote for. You had lots of individuals that had

— well, here there are 18 parties participating and one ballot for each party — so 18 different papers that you need to put in one of them. You have to take the one that you're voting for, put it in an envelope, and then put it in the box, the ballot box.

Well, people would come in with an already pre-sealed envelope of the ruling party, which is number 16. People walk in with that already. They go behind the polling booths and just take it out of their pocket and then go and drop that in. Mainly elderly, for example, or people that aren't really well-versed in voting. Turnout was about 58%, which is okay. It's not the highest and it's not the lowest in Armenian history. But there were also conscripts, recruits, basically military recruits, 18-year-old lads that were in several different polling stations that were let in to vote. In one area, they were let in to vote, probably a group of maybe 40 of them, 30, 40, 50 of them. They were let in to vote two minutes before the polls closed.

And in another area, they were let in at around 10 o'clock at night when the polls had already closed. So they should have been sleeping actually at that time. That's the actual time that they need to be sleeping, recruits. Well, they're taken out, they're taken to the polling booths, the polling stations while it was closed, and made to vote. And I mean, who else are they going to vote for? The ruling party, because it's all organized by them. Just to confirm, the Prime Minister currently controls the judicial, the legislative, and the executive branches of government. So basically all police, all judges, everything — he controls every one of them. So the electoral committee as well is assigned by him. So any investigations, any recounts, they're going to be tainted by individuals who are loyal to him. Hey, just a very quick note.

#Pascal

The best way to support this channel is by signing up for my free Substack. You can also help with a paid subscription there, or you can get some of our new merch on neutralitystudies.com. Links below. See you there. And as we are speaking today, on June 13th, we are still waiting — according to my information, we are still waiting for the result that should come out tomorrow on whether or not one of the minor opposition parties actually gets to pass the 4% minimum threshold, or whether they're going to be excluded, which then would actually redistribute their votes and give Mr. Pashinyan a supermajority in parliament. Is that right?

#Mikael Darbinian

Exactly, exactly. You're very well following everything. So there are three opposition parties: Strong Armenia, Armenia Alliance, and Prosperous Armenia. Prosperous Armenia is the smallest opposition party. It's been around for about 15, maybe 20 years. It's always kind of gone about separately — 6%, 7%, 4%. It's always kind of made parliament, but just with barely a small majority. So this time, the problem is that, according to the recount — the initial counting on the 7th of June, 8th of June, sorry, because it prolonged into the 8th of June — this small opposition party had 3.994-something percent of the votes. You need 4% to get into parliament.

So them getting into parliament would reshuffle the seats in parliament and actually restrict the ruling party with some votes. The ruling party currently has a majority, just a barely small majority, but they have a majority, enabling them to pass regular laws, form a government, declare a state of emergency, but they cannot make constitutional amendments, for example, assign the constitutional court and things like that. They need a constitutional majority for that. So exactly as you're saying, the small opposition party right now keeps pushing for them to recount these votes. There's been a recount at around 500, 600 polling stations out of 2005. So they've done around 600 polling stations.

#Mikael Darbinian

It seems like the small opposition party has gained up to 4%, but there's nothing concrete right now. Results should have been ready. The recount should have been ready by 1400 hours local time yesterday, but there's still no actual results of a recount. What's more, the electoral committee has annulled the results at several polling stations — three, I believe — and those three polling stations had votes from this small opposition party. So them annulling the results of those polling stations restricts this small opposition party from having enough votes to get into parliament. And so that's one of the major issues — basically, the government controlling the results, the recount, they're trying to restrict it so they get a bigger majority.

#Pascal

Where does this leave us within Armenia? I mean, what I've heard from my previous discussion is that the exit polls would suggest that the government party would have realistically gained around 30% of seats, something around there, let's say a third, which would make it still the largest party, but far away from the 49 or so percent that they're proclaiming at the moment. And of course, far away from the supermajority that they would want. And plus, it would give other parties the possibility to form a coalition government and actually have a change of government. Now, where does this leave us with the general population in Armenia? Is this just going down? Armenia has about two and a half million people, right? Or three? Approximately, just less than three. Just less than three. Where does this leave the general population? Isn't there large-scale frustration in the country at the moment?

#Mikael Darbinian

There is. There is. I mean, leading up to the elections, if you look at different polls, numerous polls were taken, surveys were carried out by, you know, different countries, NGOs, and the majority of them showed that many of the voters, many Armenians in general, they're not really interested in voting. They don't want to participate. This kind of changed because we saw an increased number of participants in this election compared to the 2021 elections. But in any case, people do feel frustrated because they want change. A lot of people want this change. And the 30% that you're mentioning, it does seem realistic.

The ruling party does seem like it could gain 30% of the votes. But obviously, with all the tactics they used—busing people in, having people vote twice, taking people's names off the list, for example, when you go to vote, you have to tick off your name—they are taking people's names off those lists, or people's names are already signed, as if they'd already voted. They went to the polling station, they saw, "Hey, who's this signing my name right here? I didn't sign it." And those types of tactics basically try to bring down the possibility for the opposition to vote.

And people are frustrated. And overall, I mean, society is not—it's not—what a lot of media, especially outside of Armenia, are portraying as a choice between Russia and the West, and that Armenian society only wants to go towards the European Union and Russia is annihilating them. It's not really like that. Armenians, they're open to everything. They're open to good relations with Russia and with the EU, as it always has been; it's been balanced out. But now it seems like the government's trying to, you know, forcibly take the country into this geopolitical confrontation, which people don't want.

#Pascal

What I have difficulties understanding is, how is it that the government and the president, who actually lost Nagorno-Karabakh, Artsakh, to Azerbaijan—how is it that we are supposed to believe that still more than half of Armenians support that government? But if we then also say that about a third is realistic, why is it that he still has that kind of popularity, even after what happened to Nagorno-Karabakh and the 100,000 refugees that created, being driven out of their homes and into mainland Armenia? Plus, of course, we've seen that he actually spoke very poorly of these people who were driven out of their homes, who are Armenian citizens, right? So can you make sense of that?

#Mikael Darbinian

Yeah, you know what? You have a good point here. This actually merits a very deep sociological study because if you imagine, for example, if the U.K. lost Northern Ireland all of a sudden, what would people say? If Japan lost Hokkaido, for example, I don't think average Japanese citizens would be very happy, or the U.S. losing Puerto Rico. So it merits a very deep sociological study, but part of his support comes from a lot of, for lack of a better word, media manipulation, or using the media for his own means to kind of shape narratives and blame others.

For example, Russia was blamed for the loss of NK. Some people blame the EU as well for the loss of NK. He shifted the blame in a lot of areas, especially towards Russia, and specifically after the 2020 war, Russia was kind of being targeted there as, hey, they didn't help us, they didn't stop the Azeri advance. And after 2023, especially, I think relations have already kind of gone a bit more sour there. So the support that he has also comes from, and I truly believe this, after the 1994 victory or control of Armenian victory over Nagorno-Karabakh. After that, a lot of NGOs slowly, slowly started flooding Armenia. George Soros, for example—they do some good things as well, but there's also the

counterpart of that. They came in in 1998. Other NGOs came in in the early 2000s, trying to, with the end goal of educating journalists how to do good journalism, etc.

And that kind of formed the whole opposition. It formed like a concept. It basically told people how to be opposition to the government. And a lot of these NGOs then got into different discourses—a discourse for peace with the neighbors—while in Azerbaijan, it was a complete war discourse. There's anti-Armenian, from top to bottom, institutionalized anti-Armenian discourse, while in Armenia, these NGOs were preaching basically, you know, let's just let it go. We don't need Nagorno-Karabakh. It's not Armenian, this and that. I think that affected a part of society, a sector of society that came to believe that, you know, maybe it's not really Armenian, even though there are, you know, churches there for like the past 1,700 years or 1,000 years.

And so I think NGOs played a big role in this, and they continue to play a big role in his support and his shifting of the blame to generals, for example. He blamed Russia for the loss of NK. He blamed Armenian generals for the loss of NK. He even blamed the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians there—Armenian citizens. He blamed them also for the loss, saying, you guys didn't fight, you guys just left and fled and everything. And this is after Armenia stopped all of its aid, breaking with the constitution, because Armenia's constitution states that Armenia is the guarantor for the physical security of Armenians from NK. He basically broke that constitutional norm and no longer provided security for those Armenians, and it eventually led to that. So, there are several things, several factors there.

#Pascal

How big is the factor of foreign influence now over this result? And one of the shocking things to me, of course, not just since this election, also before, is this very, very hypocritical support for Mr. Pashinyan by the European Union, but also the United States—especially the European Union, though. We've seen how, on the day after Mr. Pashinyan actually imprisoned one of the largest opposition figures and also a church leader, Karekin II, another week later, Kaja Kallas went to Yerevan and stood next to him and said, like, he's a great beacon of democracy and so on. I mean, it's so in-your-face kind of hypocrisy that it's really hard to miss. But how are you interpreting it?

#Mikael Darbinian

Yeah, foreign influence is major here. Foreign influence is major. And as I mentioned, as the prime minister's public support has decreased over the years, he's increased his authoritarian tactics. And also he sought the support of foreign actors to stay in power. So he kind of—as a former consular officer, I did a lot—I'm using the word visa shopping, but this is support shopping. Visa shopping is basically when they deny you a visa in one consulate, you go to that same consulate in a different country. For example, you go to a different consulate to test to see if they'll give you a visa. Well, the prime minister, Armenia's prime minister, kind of did the same for support.

He tried being pro-Russia, he tried being pro-Iran, giving Iran a consulate general in the southern part of Armenia to create kind of a zone of influence. He tried being pro-China at one moment, and then he eventually ended up being pro-Turkish, shifting his whole orientation towards being pro-Turkey, Azerbaijan, and the EU. The EU coincides with his goals of maintaining himself in power, and the EU also finds in him an individual to use as leverage against Russia. So foreign influence is major here. You have Azerbaijan that's pushing for concessions. Azerbaijan has already pushed for territorial concessions against Armenia, which Armenia's prime minister has happily given. Some villages were ceded. Parts of the villages were ceded. Why these villages?

#Pascal

These villages are deep inside Armenia. Why are the Azerbaijanis pushing for these concessions? And why would he give those up? I mean, they're deep inside Armenian territory.

#Mikael Darbinian

Yeah, it's kind of part of a de facto border that hasn't really been, it hasn't been demarcated exactly. There's a de facto border between Armenia and Azerbaijan marked by military positions on two sides, and you have a no man's land in the middle. Some of these areas, they weren't necessarily no man's land. There were areas where Armenian villagers would literally go and, you know, use as grazing grounds. Yeah. He's been ceding that basically to continue to gain the support of Azerbaijan and Turkey in international forums. And because he's also seeking to change the Armenian constitution to remove all references to the Declaration of Independence, which mentions that Armenia is a guarantor for the Armenians of NK, and also Mount Ararat, which is a symbol of Armenian history and cultural identity.

Mount Ararat, he took that off the passport stamps, for example. Up until now, it's always been part of the passport stamps. You see it everywhere. It's like the Eiffel Tower, probably, for France, or Big Ben for the UK. It's a symbol of the country. Those have been taken out. He's been persecuting the church. He started his campaign against the church just after Azeri authorities mentioned that the Armenian church was a big danger for the Caucasus, a major threat. The biggest threat to the South Caucasus is a revanchist type of church. A week later, last year, he started his persecution of the church to basically try to arrest the head of the Armenian church. So all these kind of coincide.

Um, yeah, foreign influence is big. The EU also wants to use Armenia. That's why they're kind of pushing Armenia into confrontation with Russia. I believe, and I don't have any exact proof, but it seems like they're pushing Armenia into confrontation with Russia for Russia to take a step, a measure, and then the EU says, look, you know what, Russia is not supporting you, come with us. You see something like that. For example, the Eurasian Union, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, for example. Armenia has really kind of stopped participating in many of these at a high level. It's kind of rolling back its participation in these. I think it's kind of at the request of the EU for him to change his policies and get support.

#Pascal

And how about the factor of Iran? I mean, one of the most, to me, insane pet projects of the United States is to do this 50-kilometer-long strip corridor, or Zangezur corridor, to connect Azerbaijan to Azerbaijan's enclave in Armenia, and then further on to Turkey. But that corridor would be right at the border with Iran and would, under the ideas at the moment, be operated for 99 years like a colonial lease agreement, basically by the US military. I mean, this seems like the height of stupidity, especially for a small country in between big powers that must make sure that none of the big powers is too much pissed off with it. Can you speak to that and maybe a bit about how realistic you think that is now with this election result?

#Mikael Darbinian

Yeah, so basically in August 2025, the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia signed an initial peace agreement, or peace memorandum — yeah, a memorandum of understanding.

#Pascal

I mean, it has no leading force to a large extent under international law. It would still need to go through their parliament, so it's not a done deal, not at all. But that thing is there now, yeah.

#Mikael Darbinian

So after that, they developed further documents from this, and they actually had an agreement which they signed. Marco Rubio, on the 26th of May of this year, flew into Yerevan from India. He flew in for an hour, two hours max, signed this document, the agreement — the Trip Agreement, the Corridor Agreement — and left Armenia. I think they were fearing that the ruling party may lose their majority, and so they wanted to get this thing signed before the elections. It was about two weeks before the elections. And so what this is, it's called TRIP, officially, the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity or something. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

It's a corridor that links Azerbaijan, mainland Azerbaijan, with its exclave on the other side of Armenia, the exclave of Nakhichevan, which was separated during Soviet times. And it's part of the Middle Corridor. So what you have through the Caucasus is a series of infrastructures that were built after the fall of the Soviet Union that connect the Caspian with the Black Sea. It's called the Middle Corridor. You have different pipelines. You have the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan, for example, an oil pipeline. So it's a series of roads, railroads, gas and oil pipelines that run from the Caspian to the Black Sea. And what Armenia's is, is a third route through there. Because right now, the Middle Corridor on the Black Sea side has two ports in Georgia. The country of Georgia has Batumi and it has Poti.

They're two major ports that Georgia uses for export and import through this corridor. So from Central Asia and China, through Kazakhstan, goods flow through the Caspian Sea by boat, and then they go through the Middle Corridor towards the EU and vice versa. Well, these two ports, Poti and Batumi, have been very saturated. They're very overwhelmed. The past several years, they've been increasing — there are increasing volumes of goods, trade, and ships are having longer wait times. It's costing a lot more to ship through this. They just don't have the infrastructure because of the high amount, the increasing amount of goods. Well, in 2020, there was another port installation that was going to be built in Georgia, just north of Poti.

It's called the town of Anaklia. Between 2016 and 2020, there was a consortium that was looking to build. They invested. They initially drew out the whole plan for this port to alleviate the two ports for more traffic. Well, in January 2020, the Georgian government annulled that—not a treaty, but they annulled that project. Yeah, they annulled that project. So basically, they stopped any project through that corridor. Some people say it might have been because they wanted to invest more in a north-south corridor with Russia, Iran, Armenia. Others say financial issues, financial disagreements—whatever it is, that third port through Georgia was no longer possible. Well, what other country is there? For the Middle Corridor, they weren't going to use Russia.

They weren't going to use Iran. Armenia was the only country there. In that same year, in 2020, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict took place—the 2020 44-day war, as it's called—in that small territory that also borders Iran and Armenia. Well, it just so happens that Azerbaijan's main military gains were just along the Iranian border towards the Armenian border. So they basically gained and took over all this territory inside the de facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh up to the Armenian border, therefore securing the possibility for the future corridor. And so that was 2020. And then you jump, you fast forward to 2025, 2026. The agreement's already basically in place. The U.S. is now using Armenia as a transit zone.

It's basically what it is for the supply chain. If you read the text of these memorandums of understanding and these documents that they signed, it puts a lot of emphasis on Armenia supporting the supply chain. Not so much that Armenia is going to be the receptor of huge amounts of investment, etc. But it just needs that 40-kilometer corridor that's already linking, to link Azerbaijan to the Middle Corridor. Infrastructure is already there. During Soviet times, there was a railroad running there. It's not in use at all. People have already kind of used it as scrap metal, so the terrain there permits it. In no other part of Armenia do you have an east-west running route. So that's the only place, because Armenia is very mountainous. And basically...

#Pascal

What is Armenia going to get out of this, especially if it's going to be a 99-year lease to the United States? I mean, that means you're going to get all the traffic without the trade. It's like it will just pass through Armenia.

#Mikael Darbinian

Yeah, what it is, if you look at transit fees, locally, domestically, it's being sold as a project that's going to bring Armenia out of poverty. It's going to bring Armenia into the 21st century. But if you really look at it, you know, it's going to get transit fees out of there. That's really what it's going to get. If you look at transit fees for railroads and roads, for example, in Kazakhstan and neighboring countries, the total transit income for Kazakhstan makes up about 2% of the budget. For Azerbaijan, it makes about 1.5% of the budget. These are 2024–25 figures, approximately, of government budget. I mean, we're not talking about... total income, sorry. Total income. GDP. Okay, fine.

Yeah, approximately that much. So in Georgia, it makes about less than one percent transit fees. In Turkey, it's a lot less, it's 0.6, a bit less than that. In Serbia, which is one of the highest I found, it goes almost to three percent. So transit fees in themselves, they're not necessarily bringing you huge amounts of income, especially if you have, you know, a 40-kilometer straight road that is going to take 15 minutes to pass. It's not really going to bring you much. It's not like Georgia that has a longer route all the way to the port cities that can take you a full day, six hours, seven hours. So not really much. It's just anchoring Armenia within this whole framework of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia now, and securing it as part of a U.S. project as well for Central Asia. It's securing Armenia within this route. So we can't all of a sudden change and say, you know, I want to go out of this route, etc., etc.

#Pascal

What you just described is a very clear geoeconomic reason for this kind of, also, political interference. But is there a geopolitical, a geostrategic reason as well to try to use Armenia against Russia, you know, very blatantly? We've seen how—we are seeing right now how—Ukraine is being used as a way to bleed Russia. We've seen attempts at using Georgia. The Caucasus region itself is extremely important. What do you think are some of the, maybe not the designs, but some of the attempts of Western governments concerning Armenia?

#Mikael Darbinian

Yeah, well, just to put a footnote to this, the Middle Corridor for the U.S. is very important because Kazakhstan produces about 38 to 40 percent of the world's uranium. The U.S. stopped importing uranium from Russia, or it's almost at zero percent. I think they banned uranium in 2024. So the U.S. needs uranium. It has imported about 80 to 90 percent of its uranium for the past 30 years. It used to come from Russia, a big load of it. But because of the confrontation with Russia throughout the years, it's slowly, slowly gone down. While starting in 2010, Kazakhstan has increased its uranium production. And now Kazakhstan is about, I believe, 15 to 20 percent, I want to say, of U.S. uranium imports.

Last year, President Trump also mentioned that he wants to diversify uranium imports. He wants to modernize the whole nuclear energy sector in the U.S. So that's one of the things right there. And as well, I think this is fundamental. Last year, last April, I believe it was, an independent geological organization found rare earth minerals in Kazakhstan, to the extent of converting Kazakhstan into being the third rare earth mineral country in the world after China and the U.S. So if this survey is true, which I believe it is, because I think I see, you know, the U.S. fast-tracking this corridor, I think the U.S. and President Trump, who's really, really after these rare earths, I think he sees that already in Kazakhstan.

And he wants to, it's one of his aims, to get a secure rare earth supply from Kazakhstan. So Kazakhstan also has a lot of critical minerals as well that the U.S. is also seeking. And it's a country that, you know, still can develop a lot. So that's the U.S. interest right there. And obviously it creates, you know, the East-West corridor for the U.S. For the EU, obviously, as you mentioned, there is a huge confrontation. The EU is still, by inertia, the EU elite is still, you know, supporting the war efforts in Ukraine, right? Despite no changes on the battlefield besides Russia's slow gains. Russia's still slowly, slowly making gains. And just to kind of add this part, the reason why I think it's slow is because Russia wants to make this military operation sustainable.

If you go all of a sudden with everything, you know, incurring high losses, public opinion, etc. But, you know, it's a sustainable military operation. And so I think that's why it's going slow. But in any case, Ukraine, the EU is unable to really change anything on the front lines there. And they see in Armenia an opportunity to get back at Russia. Basically, by increasing their efforts in Armenia against Russia, they force Russia to deviate diplomatic, intelligence, or other resources towards Armenia to counter EU influence there. So I think they're trying to... and it's part of this whole confrontation with Russia, using Armenia as leverage against Russia.

#Pascal

How do you think this is going down in Iran? Because that's the other big elephant in the room. And the United States is currently just losing a huge war against Iran. I mean, we are still waiting to see whether or not they're going to sign this weekend a 14-point plan that, if true, is really a surrender by the United States. And Iran is there. And Iran is actually in the Gulf. The Gulf region has now significantly increased its weight. And I cannot imagine that the Caucasus region is not something they're worried about either. I mean, the entire area in the north around Tbilisi, it's all Azeri territory, ethnically, and there are Armenian minorities as well. I mean, Armenia must be on the mind of the Iranians too. What do you know about that elephant?

#Mikael Darbinian

Well, first of all, I think it's worth mentioning that Iran is here to stay. A lot of people thought, and some in the West or other countries also supported, you know, separatist movements or what

appeared to be cultural separatist movements in Iran. But that all showed, you know, these latest confrontations all showed that Iran is solid. Iran doesn't seem like it's going to break apart. You didn't see massive separatist protests or anything like that in Iran. So I think that was a bad calculation or miscalculation by some, by some that are in the confrontation with Iran. If you would have asked me this, for example, 10, 15 years ago, I would have said, you know, Iran, well, it's kind of lost its influence in the South Caucasus, which it kind of was back then.

But now, the confrontation as a result of Israeli-U.S. attacks on Iran this February through April 8th, I believe Iran did come out in a stronger position from this conflict than it was before this conflict. That's not to say it didn't lose a lot, a huge amount of material damage. It did lose people. It lost valuable political leadership. But I think it's in a stronger position precisely because it's able to deter U.S. and Israeli attacks. That was unthinkable 15 years ago. And so with the possibility of U.S. presence, this corridor that we mentioned in southern Armenia, part of the Middle Corridor, the trade corridor, actually 74% of that is going to be part of the U.S. The U.S. is going to own 74% of that, going to operate it, has specific rights, exclusive rights to operate that, and that's right on Iran's border.

How is this going to be interpreted by Iran? Obviously, not positively. I can't really say. I don't know what type of measures Iran will take because the Iranian and Armenian people in general are on very good terms. You have literally no issues with them. They respect one another. And the Iranian government as well has always been on good terms with Armenia. So it's hard to say. I can't really say what Iran's going to do, but that's going to possibly affect bilateral relations, specifically because of one other thing. In 2024, media reported that Armenia had bought approximately 500 million in arms from Iran.

This was 2024. At the time, Armenia and Iran denied these, but on the 28th of May, there was a military parade here in Armenia, and we saw what appeared to be at least four different types of Iranian weapon systems. Radar—two radars. They're not very sophisticated ones, but ones that you can still use. Anti-air missiles on a pickup, for example, radars. Now, let's say if in 2024 Armenia did buy weapons from Iran. In 2025, Armenia signed basically the corridor agreement bringing the U.S. on the border with Iran. I don't think that's good for Armenia-Iran relations. I don't think Iran's going to trust the current ruling party and the current government, given what they did. So that's going to be a major issue.

#Pascal

I mean, the expectation in my corner of the Internet is that the United States and the European Union will try to use Armenia as a tool in order to, we can all fight with Russia and we can all fight Iran, and in the process, sell out basically Armenia, maybe in all but name, maybe even completely work on the dismantlement of Armenia as a sovereign nation. How much credence do you put into such depictions?

#Mikael Darbinian

Well, Armenia's situation right now is similar to that of Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. I mean, I'm sorry to say that's how it is. Basically, these countries were all dragged into a confrontation between East and West. A lot of Western NGOs are implicated in this as well. A lot of new narratives are being formed. And so... that's possible. That's possible. How it's going to be, I don't know, because, again, Armenian society is not necessarily overtly pro-EU or overtly pro-Russia. Armenian society accepts Russia perfectly well, and European nations—not the European elite, but France, Germany, Italy, Greece. You have Armenians living in Greece. You have Armenians living in France. So I think because of the Armenian nation's kind of cosmopolitan nature, they're accepting all of these.

So framing this, you know, framing from the outside that what's happening in Armenia is the people's self-determination against Russia, etc., it's not true. It's just not true. It's basically foreign influence in the Caucasus. This has happened for centuries. This has happened for centuries. Different foreign actors have all come to the Caucasus. You had the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, you had the Iranian Empire, you know, using different ethnic groups inside the Caucasus for each one of their campaigns, you know. And then during the Soviet time, that didn't happen because all of the South Caucasus was under one political framework, one political institution. Yeah. So there was none of this. There was no outside influence during the 70 years of Soviet rule. There was no real conflict.

I mean, there were some ethnic tensions between Armenians and Azeris, but major conflicts there weren't because there was no outside influence. After the fall of the Soviet Union, we see outside influence coming back to the Caucasus, and that's just a continuation of how it is. So, yeah, it's very possible that the EU does use Armenia. As of right now, for example—one thing I'll say—the Eurasian Union, for example, I mean, it's also in a Eurasian Union with Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, several countries. It's a customs union where, you know, these countries export to one another without having to pay tariffs.

Well, Russia, in one case, Russia stopped fish imports, trout imports from Armenia. And, you know, Armenian society, some parts of Armenian society were, you know, raising their hands, hey, look what Russia's doing, etc. But do you know why they stopped all those fish imports? Well, basically because Armenia was importing fish from Norway, putting certificates as if they were local Armenian fish, and re-exporting to the Russian market. What happened was, it's ssb.no, the Norwegian Official Statistics Bureau. You go there, 2023, six tons of trout exported from Norway to Armenia. 2024, 2,224 tons of trout exported from Norway to Armenia.

Why the sudden increase? This is 2024. And Russian inspectors, they went to different fisheries inside Armenia to inspect because they saw that the fish they were receiving from Armenia with these false certificates were bigger than the average Armenian trout. Colors were a bit different. Physiognomically, they were a bit different. And they went to these fisheries, and 50% of these fisheries declined to allow these inspectors to go see them, to allow them to inspect their fish to see

if there was a difference. So, I mean, that's just one of the cases. I'm not sure if it's the same case as in other fruits or other agricultural goods.

And why, as of right now? Well, I think, for example, for the fish, Russian customs on fish, it takes a while until you actually see this, until it gets all the way up to the top. And, hey, if Armenia is basically pursuing a different customs union, it's breaking its compromise with another customs union, and it's actually putting into question the whole framework of that customs union. So, look, these things happen. These things happen the same way the EU pays millions to the government to use for anti-Russian hybrid warfare just before the elections, which seems kind of strange.

#Pascal

Do we know anything about that? Is this just clear election interference from the outside, from the European Union part? Or do we know what the money was actually used for?

#Mikael Darbinian

It's not very transparent. Look, I'll be honest with you. I haven't seen big Russian NGOs, Russian interference. I haven't seen that. There is a Russian NGO that's a humanitarian NGO here, but it's not the biggest thing. Many people don't even know about it. It goes out to villages, hands out some goods, but it's not. And there are maybe a couple of small NGOs for, like, World War II veterans or Soviet veterans. So honestly, I think Russian influence or Russian presence in Armenia in that sense, it's null. It's almost nothing. I haven't seen any. And I follow the media. I follow all types of social media channels. I'm out there with the people as well.

I think, yeah, the money, I can't say what it was used for because it wasn't very transparent. Between March and April, a group of up to 14 of the hybrid response team, as the EU called it, was sent from the EU to Armenia. And that cost, I think, a couple million for the EU taxpayer to bring them here. What they did, I think they were marketing experts, people doing surveys and people that can provide the government independent marketing and consulting. I think that's my opinion. I don't know because it's not really transparent. But supposedly it was to create conditions for free and fair elections. But no one really knows where those 30, 40 million went.

#Pascal

Yeah, I mean, and looking at what kind of free and fair elections it was, one then wonders whether there's not a better allocation, or if it hasn't been actually explicitly counterproductive. But what do you think this leaves us with now for the immediate future? In the other talk I had, after the talk, one of the two interviewees actually said to me, "Look, we might well be looking at the beginning of the Palestinianization of Armenia, like splitting it up and making smaller territories, with Azerbaijan

occupying the high grounds and Turkey starting to occupy and eat itself into the territory." I mean, there's a fear that we might be looking at the beginning of the end of Armenia as a nation-state project. Is this overblown, over the top, or is this something that you're worried about too?

#Mikael Darbinian

That's actually something that many people are worried about, public sentiment here in Armenia, precisely because this whole geopolitical confrontation is resulting, or will eventually result, in Armenia being inserted into the whole Turkic world, which in itself, I mean, you know, the Turkic world, their own world, they have their own culture, ways of life, and everything. But between Turkey and Azerbaijan, who continue to have hostile policies towards Armenians themselves, particularly Azerbaijan, and Turkey's long-term strategic goals of obviously dominating the Caucasus and getting to Central Asia, which are still very much in place.

The EU is pushing for normalization between Armenia and these two countries, opening borders between these two countries, which, opening the borders, it's always good to have open borders and to have trade. But opening the borders is going to mean a huge amount of Turkish capital and companies flooding Armenian markets, buying out Armenian real estate, running small stores and small businesses into the ground because they're not going to be competitive against larger, more experienced Turkish ones. Azeris as well—I mean, they're not as developed as Turkey—but it's basically integrating Armenia into the Turkish world. I also foresee that once the borders are opened, Russia's two military bases, which it has had for 200 years—the 102nd Motorized Infantry Base and the Erebuni Air Base in Armenia—they're going to have to leave because the current government's going to say, you know, "Russia, we've made peace with Turkey."

Retrieve, you know, withdraw your border guards, because Russian border guards are on the Turkish side as well, or on the border with Turkey. Remove your military bases and your border guards, we don't need you anymore. And after that, it's just going to be complete dominance of Ankara there. And as for the cultural disintegration as well, that's what the current government is doing—you know, removing all cultural elements, reducing cultural importance, persecuting the church. So, yeah, I mean, it's going to become, and many people believe that, it's going to become just Palestinianized or Ukrainianized. I mean, they're kind of different concepts, but a country with no sovereignty, which currently doesn't really have much sovereignty. It's in its weakest position it's ever been. So that's exactly it.

#Pascal

How did it happen to you? I mean, and again, Armenia has gone through several rounds of elections and so on, but it seems to me that Mr. Pashinyan really managed to push Armenia considerably in a direction that has little to do anymore with national sovereignty. I mean, again, signing away a piece of state territory which has been claimed for the longest time, that's a huge thing. I mean, the Japanese and the Chinese, they wobble around tiny little islands, but you would never give up the

claim. That's the point. You never give up the claim because it's obviously, for the future, beneficial for your negotiation strategy. And now having an Armenian government that actually does that and keeps giving in to more and more claims from the outside and more and more land grabs. And the trick, in that sense, is also just a land grab from outside powers. How come that flies in the Armenian political process?

#Mikael Darbinian

Well, it's the prime minister supported by Turkey and Azerbaijan to maintain, to keep his power. That's what he wants. And he's willing to give anything to keep his power there. By doing that, he's securing himself with the U.S. for the corridor. He's securing himself with the Azeris. He's securing himself with the EU by going against Russia, and he's securing himself with Turkey by the cultural—by taking out, for example, Mount Ararat and slowly, slowly undoing Armenian cultural identity. This wouldn't have happened in any other country, honestly. That's why I say it merits a sociological study, because it's very strange.

But he has, back in 2008, there was civil unrest everywhere, partly due to the prime minister and protests in 2008. And that time was when he actually showed himself. He screamed to the people. He was screaming, "We need to clean the capital, Yerevan, from this Karabakh Armenian scum." So way back then, he was already anti-Armenian, anti-Artsakh. I mean, in Nagorno-Karabakh, there are Armenians that live there. They have their own dialect. But just like any other part of Armenia, they all have dialects. Well, for some reason, this guy was very against those types of people. And he came to power through NGOs, really.

That's what it was, because it was 2018. A series of Western-backed NGOs, they were the ones that mobilized a lot of the people. And just as a kind of proof of this, post-Soviet states don't really mobilize, especially the smaller ones—Armenia, Georgia, or Kyrgyzstan. They don't mobilize until you have an outside actor pushing them or organizing from the outside. Otherwise, these people are still... in general, they're still developing that political culture. Same with Armenia. They don't really tend to mobilize until they have outside pushes like that. And so this guy came to power in 2018 to stay in power. And he's willing to cede anything to really get what he wants.

#Pascal

It's hugely problematic for you as a former U.S. diplomat. How do you assess the U.S. role in this? Because in a sense, Armenia—why does the U.S. need to be there? I mean, okay, the rare earths and the uranium, sure, the economic aspects, certainly. But militarily, because as far as I understand, it would be the U.S. military, or at least military contractors, that would actually secure it and get basing rights there. Is this just blatant interference in foreign affairs?

#Mikael Darbinian

Well, you know, the U.S. is pursuing its own interests, geostrategic interests. I think every country has to do the same. The U.S. is doing that, but, you know, Armenia doesn't necessarily have to give everything in. They can say, you know, U.S., instead of you taking 74%, give me 100%, but, you know, we'll trade, we'll be on good terms. But, you know, I think the U.S. is doing what it's going to do, like what many other countries would do. Every country has to follow their own national interests. They can't really be worrying about others. Armenia is not doing that. Armenia's current government, the ruling party and the prime minister, is not doing that because he's doing what he needs to do to maintain himself in power. That's all. So that's the issue right there. U.S. military—I don't think, as of right now, at least, the U.S. military would be there.

But contractors, security contractors, that's very possible. And another issue here is it's on the Iranian border. So besides the U.S., who else would be interested? Israeli companies would be interested there. I mean, hey, if I was Israel, I would like to put a military contracting company right on Armenia's border right there. Why not? You can finally have that. But that's the issue right there. That's creating lots of tension in an area where there doesn't need to be tension. Every country has to follow or pursue its own national interests. The U.S. is doing that. It's something it's done for a long time. Weaker countries, unfortunately, don't have much to say, but they can still have deterrence by not breaking ties with other countries. Armenia, if it didn't break, it's not seeking to break ties with Russia, with Iran, with China. You can step up diplomatic efforts for that and, you know, be kind of a counterweight.

#Pascal

Even under the current government of Pashinyan, do you think Armenia will maintain its relationships, trade and otherwise, with Russia and Iran? Or do you think they will sacrifice those as well in the name of, you know, being good students of the Western alliance?

#Mikael Darbinian

I think an extreme case is Ukraine, where they sacrificed everything. Yeah. And not rewarding their children. Yeah, yeah, it's a very, very sad example. But yeah, that right there, that's an extreme example. Another one may be Georgia, but Georgia shifted.

#Pascal

It did, and it's significantly now trying not to be a pawn, right, and trying to actually keep tabs on the NGO sector and maneuver in a neutral way between the powers. But Armenia seems to be going the other way around.

#Mikael Darbinian

Yeah, Armenia's problem here is that unlike Georgia and Ukraine before the 2022 escalation, and Moldova, Armenia's prime minister literally controls everything in this country. I mean, it just falls short of being a dictatorship in that sense. There's still media that can criticize him, although people get arrested for that. A blogger got arrested just yesterday. Okay. Yeah, he got arrested just yesterday. But the thing is, in Ukraine, in Georgia, and in Moldova, I'm not convinced that the leaders of those countries—or actually, Zelensky now does, yeah, obviously he controls everything. But Pashinyan, for example, controls everything. Everything—courts, constitutional, everything.

So anyone that wants to go against this, they're either arrested or jailed. There have been over 300 people who have been jailed or arrested, detained since last year. And this is still continuing. You just can't speak out against this. And I think that's what the West, that's what the interested parties in this, that's what they want. They want a guy that's basically a dictator controlling every aspect of Armenian society to make sure nothing changes. Kind of like Zelensky, you know, supported by the EU as well, despite many, many concerns there about his rule. I think Armenia may be heading towards that. It could get worse. I think it may get worse if they continue in power. But, yeah.

#Pascal

Yeah, and let's not forget, like, if you do that, if you are a dictator on the right side of history for the West, then you get invited to Washington, even if you used to be on a terrorist list in Syria, right? So I think that the incentives that are thrown out and the examples that have been set are just pretty strong for Armenia's PM, for Mr. Pashinyan, to go and plow on.

#Mikael Darbinian

Yeah, yeah. I think Trump, honestly, he doesn't really care about Armenia itself. He just wants the corridor for his own geopolitical ends, you know. Armenia—where is that? Who's the leader? He didn't even remember the prime minister's name earlier this year, or I think it was last year. So, I mean, just to show that it's really insignificant—Armenia in itself—just the territory is needed, and strongmen in the territory to control, that's all. But yeah, it basically goes as that. And if the opposition, for some reason, is detained, which is a possibility, the opposition could just continue to be detained permanently after the elections.

That's going to erase all of the opposition inside the country. And you have basically the opposition detained, and if they can't get someone, they go to the family members. They pressure them, they fire the family members, for example. I know numerous people who have been fired from their jobs in the military and, you know, in different offices because their relative was part of the opposition. You know, that's what's happening right now. And it's a green light. If he stays in power, this is a green light for literally that type of activity, detaining everyone and being...

#Pascal

It's a very dangerous position for the country, however, we can't change it. So we're just going to continue analyzing it. And this was a very good and helpful exposé, especially also looking at Iran and Kazakhstan, what we get from there. Mikhail, thank you so much for this. People who want to follow you or read more from you, where should they go?

#Mikael Darbinian

Well, I'm the founder of Security Observer, security-observer.com. It's Security Observer Global Voices as well on YouTube, where I basically give a voice to the Global South—experts from the Global South. So they can find me on YouTube, SecurityObserver.com.

#Pascal

I will put a link to your work and to your YouTube channel as well in the description box below so people can find you there. And we will certainly see you again in the near future. Please let us know if something is moving. Mikhail Darbinian, thank you so much for your time today. Absolutely, thank you.