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Foreword

The South East Europe, Caucasus, and Black Sea region stands at a critical inflection point in November 2025, as authoritarian consolidation, grassroots resistance, and fragile peace processes converge to reshape the democratic landscape in the region. The four analyses in this volume capture the multifaceted nature of these challenges, from systematic democratic dismantling and historic protest movements to precarious civic space and incomplete peace frameworks that defer justice for geopolitical expediency.

Megi Benia examines how Georgia's acute authoritarian crisis exemplifies the deliberate weaponisation of state institutions against civil society. The Georgian Dream's imprisonment of 145 political prisoners (exceeding Russia's per capita rate), the November 2024 EU accession postponement, and adoption of Russian-style "foreign agents" legislation mirror patterns of civic space contraction visible across the region. The dismantling of NATO and EU integration departments reveals how authoritarian consolidation operates through both overt repression and bureaucratic hollowing-out of democratic institutions.

Dušica Djukić analyses Serbia's student-led protest movement and its implications for the country's future. The tragic collapse of the Novi Sad railway station in November 2024 sparked a powerful and ongoing youth-led movement which resulted in the largest demonstration in Serbia's modern history. This bottom-up, leaderless movement has maintained strict non-violence despite President Vučić's escalating response: media smears, excessive police force, alleged sonic weapons, and framing peaceful students as foreign-backed "terrorists." The movement demonstrates how youth activism can mobilise across social divides even under repression, offering both hope and a test case for democratic resilience.

Tigran Melikian explores how Armenia faces its own democratic crossroads. While avoiding wholesale collapse, its civic space reveals a troubling paradox: formal openness coexisting with mounting threats. Journalists face harassment, protesters encounter disproportionate force and biometric surveillance, and trust in NGOs has plummeted. The June 2026 parliamentary elections will determine whether Armenia consolidates democratic gains or slides toward authoritarianism. Prime Minister Pashinyan's promise to establish a "Fourth Republic" through constitutional reform—linked to Azerbaijani territorial demands—illustrates how domestic futures are entangled with external pressures.

Manoug Antaby examines how the August 2025 Armenia-Azerbaijan peace framework embodies "negative peace"— the mere absence of war without justice or reconciliation. Elite-driven negotiations excluded affected populations, deferred critical issues, and prioritized US geopolitical interests over local needs. Armenian and Azerbaijani citizens express willingness to reconcile, yet historical grievances continue to hamper this process. Without mechanisms for prisoner release, war crimes investigations, or curriculum reform, this "peace" remains extremely fragile.

These developments reveal a region where democratic transitions remain incomplete, authoritarian methods are becoming normalised, and external actors exploit conflicts for influence rather than resolution. Georgia's descent warns of unchecked illiberal drift. Serbia's movement proves civic resistance remains possible with societal solidarity and international support. Armenia's 2026 elections will test whether fragile openings can be institutionalised. The Armenia-Azerbaijan framework underscores that durable

peace requires survivor-centered processes addressing historical grievances, not expedient agreements serving external agendas.

The path toward sustainable peace and democratic consolidation requires confronting not only immediate challenges but deeper questions of justice, accountability, civic agency, and reconciliation. Choices made in the coming months will have long-term and significant consequences for the region and beyond.

Armenia's Civic Space at a Crossroads: Democratic Openings, Populist Pressures, and the Upcoming 2026 Election

Tigran Melikian

Key Takeaways

- Armenia's civic space, which showed signs of opening after the 2018 Velvet Revolution, has narrowed in recent years as journalists face harassment, protests are met with disproportionate force, and populist rhetoric, especially from opposition actors, frames civil society and independent media as threats to national identity or "unpatriotic," creating a more fragile and contested environment for civic actors.

- The June 2026 parliamentary elections will determine whether Armenia consolidates democratic gains or slides toward authoritarianism, with Prime Minister Pashinyan promising constitutional reforms to establish a "Fourth Republic" if his party wins.

- Armenia stands at a crossroads between two paths: towards increased authoritarianism, or towards greater democratic resilience. In the absence of comprehensive anti-discrimination laws, weak institutional safeguards, and a fragmented opposition to the current government, the outcome of the country's future is by no means certain.

Introduction & Stakes: Armenia's Civic Paradox and the Road to 2026

In April 2018, a popular movement led by journalist, former political prisoner, and MP Nikol Pashinyan peacefully overthrew the semi-authoritarian regime of President Serzh Sargsyan (the so-called "Velvet Revolution"), demonstrating that a nonviolent transition to democracy was indeed possible.[1] Since then, Armenia has exemplified a paradox in democratic evolution: it boasts one of the most open civic and media environments in the post-Soviet space, yet simultaneously faces mounting threats to civil liberties, political pluralism, and civic resilience. The Velvet Revolution ignited unprecedented civic energy, toppling entrenched elites and ushering in democratic hopes.[2] But the ensuing years have tested the fragility of these gains.

Nikol Pashinyan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia capture during the Session "Shaping the Future of Democracy" at the Annual Meeting 2019 of the World Economic Forum in Davos, January 23, 2019. Congress Centre - Aspen1. Copyright by World Economic Forum / Sikarin Fon Thanachaiary.

The trajectory of Armenian civil society mirrors both progress and precarity. Key reforms included removing NGO reporting burdens, launching transparent grant systems,[3] and legally recognizing volunteering.[4] At the same time, civic actors have faced smear campaigns, legal harassment, surveillance laws, and a rising wave of populist and nationalist rhetoric.[56] This contradictory reality defines Armenia's civic space as "narrowed"[7], yet not closed, repressed, or obstructed like neighbouring Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkey, and Georgia.

Civil society in Armenia emerged over decades, shaped by post-Soviet transformations, donor influxes, and protest legacies.[89] The roots of civic engagement can be traced to grassroots movements and informal activism during the late Soviet period. These evolved into more formalized structures in the 1990s and 2000s, although they remained constrained by authoritarian governance. The 2018 revolution catalysed this latent capacity, as NGOs and civic movements were able to quickly mobilize and channel popular demands into reform agendas. Yet the independence of civil society organisations (CSOs) remains uneven. Some CSOs, particularly in Yerevan, maintain watchdog roles; others have become aligned with political movements.[10] This urban-rural divide is stark: in Yerevan, well-established CSOs influence policy, but in rural regions many activists struggle against funding shortfalls and local skepticism.

Looking ahead, the upcoming June 2026 parliamentary elections represent a critical juncture. They will serve as a referendum not just on governance, but on the integrity of Armenia's democratic space. Will the country reaffirm its commitment to pluralism, accountability, and civic participation, or succumb to global and regional trends of shrinking space? The stakes are high for Armenia's young democracy on the road to 2026.

Populism and Ruling Party Dynamics

The post 2018 era in Armenia marked a moment of optimism: the Civil Contract Party under Nikol Pashinyan rode the wave of the Velvet Revolution into power, promising openness, transparency, and a break with Armenia's postSoviet patrimonial legacy. Yet as the initial reform momentum slowed, the party increasingly displayed traits characteristic of populist incumbents seeking to consolidate power: adversarial media relations, boundaryshifting rhetoric, and the invocation of nationalsovereign tropes to defend majoritarian rule.[11]

One frequently used government strategy has been to target the media and opposition voices. Investigative journalists who exposed defence procurement controversies, or flagged nepotism and opaque public contracts, have been accused of undermining national solidarity, branded "unpatriotic" and treated as part of a politicised "fifth column". In the second quarter of 2024 alone, 15 cases of physical violence against journalists (most of which were the result of disproportionate actions of the law enforcement bodies), 24 injured, 71 other pressures[12], 122 violations of the right to receive/disseminate information were reported.[13]

Female journalists face a double burden of harassment and misogynistic abuse, specifically in online media, with cases of victim blaming, gender stereotyping, and framing by opposition that female politician's legislative proposals are part of the agenda of Soros.[14] By personalising and gendering criticism, the ruling and opposition elite shifts the focus from institutional reform to individual reputational warfare. This aligns with the designation of gendered attacks as a parallel axis of civic shrinkage.

At the rhetorical level, nationalism has been weaponised. Aggressive activities and campaigns by (opposition) nationalistic organizations against civil society, specifically those working in the fields of human rights and protection of minorities, have further impacted the already shrinking civic space in the country.[15] This has been paired with a lack of adequate response from governmental bodies, such as the prime minister and judicial institutions.

These patterns echo global populist tendencies: the blurring of opposition/civil society boundaries; the personalisation of political attacks; the nationalist framing of critique; and the strategic use of media hostility. In Armenia's case, the challenge is compounded by its geostrategic location, recent conflict trauma, and the stillfragile institutional architecture of its democracy. The cumulative effect: those identified as dissident actors by the state are not only delegitimised in public, but are also increasingly constrained in practice, which has resulted in the further shrinking of civic space whilst maintaining a thin veneer of democratic pluralism.

Protest, Policing & Legal Constraints

In the years following 2020, the protest landscape in Armenia has grown more contested, followed by a more aggressive approach by the state. Whereas the 2018 revolution emphasised nonviolent mass mobilisation, subsequent protests, triggered by border demarcation issues with Azerbaijan, socialeconomic grievances, or environmental concerns, have often been met with a disproportionate response by the national security apparatus.[16]

Protest Demonstration, Yerevan, 28 April 2018, by Pandukht, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

According to the Aram Manoukian Institute's 2025 whitepaper, protest policing since 2023 has undergone a qualitative shift which has resulted in the routine deployment of elite tactical units, use of stun grenades and teargas in otherwise peaceful settings, and absence of adequate advance warnings or medical safeguards.[17] Amnesty International likewise reports Armenian police used "unlawful force" during the AprilMay 2024 protests, requiring the Prime Minister to resign. Furthermore, in June 2024 clashes broke out during protests against the border demarcation deal with neighbouring Azerbaijan leaving over 100 injured and more than 90 detained.[18] Moreover, several opposition politicians and civic activists were detained during protests linked to the ongoing border-demarcation negotiations with Azerbaijan. Among those arrested were prominent critics of Prime Minister Pashinyan, who had appeared on independent media platforms. CSO Meter noted that a June 12 2024 assembly resulted in injuries to more than 100 participants and media workers after stun grenades were deployed.[19]

Recent events illustrate how policing and legal repression are becoming centralised instruments of political control. In October 2025, riot police violently arrested Gyumri's mayor, a member of the opposition party, Vartan Ghukasian, and more than forty of his supporters amid clashes at the municipal building. The Anti-Corruption Committee's charges were widely perceived as politically motivated, particularly after Prime Minister Pashinyan's earlier pledge to oust the mayor. Multiple municipal employees were later detained, including relatives of Civil Contract party members, underscoring the blurred line between

legal enforcement and political retribution. [20]

Similarly, in Vagharshapat, the fourth largest city in the country and the centre of the Armenian Apostolic Church, observers documented electoral misconduct during the November 2024 municipal elections. The Corruption Prevention Commission's failure to publish mandatory financial disclosures, alleged vote-buying by Civil Contract candidates, and the misuse of administrative resources demonstrates misuse of power by an allegedly independent body.[21]

Recent legal measures serve to further exemplify the increasingly authoritarian direction in which the government is moving. In 2024 draft defamation/disinformation bills proposed criminal penalties for harsh speech against public officials. Parallel to this, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) are emerging, with minimal oversight of their abuse, dominantly filed by entities and individuals with large political and economic resources against media, individual journalists and human rights defenders (70% of the total lawsuits).[22] In addition, recent amendments to Armenia's Law on Police empower the Ministry of Internal Affairs with real-time biometric surveillance and facial recognition across public spaces, measures that CSOs warn may be used to monitor, intimidate, or suppress protestors and civic actors.[23]

In spite of this, the authorities claim that enhanced video surveillance and biometric monitoring are needed to "strengthen the security of public spaces" and combat crime or terrorism[24] . Similarly, hardline protest policing is framed as preventing instability or foreign-provoked unrest in a volatile post-war context. Government representatives also reject the term "SLAPP," insisting that lawsuits against media or activists are legitimate efforts to protect officials' reputations and counter disinformation.

That said, it would be hard to deny that civic space in Armenia is not shrinking, and an increasing body of evidence supports this: civil society actors report frequent censorship, difficulty mobilising outside urban hubs, and reluctance to lead largescale visible protests given the risks of surveillance or police escalation. Government officials defend their actions as necessary for the preservation of law and order, but to many, the Armenian government's aggressive policing and surveillance appears plainly antidemocratic.

Minority Rights and Institutional Safeguards

Despite formal commitments to human rights and equality, Armenia continues to lag in protecting and integrating its most vulnerable populations. A key gap is the absence of a comprehensive antidiscrimination law that is inclusive (provisions for sexual orientation and gender identity).[25] Hate speech remains prevalent, particularly online but also within political discourse. As the constitutionally recognized national church, the Apostolic Church wields considerable moral authority. Its leadership has historically espoused conservative stances, for instance, unequivocally rejecting LGBTQ+ relationships, thereby reinforcing traditional attitudes in society.[26] While the Church does not directly dictate policy, its pronouncements contribute to a climate in which progressive reforms on gender or minority rights are cast as attacks on Armenian identity.

Institutional safeguards for rights exist, but they are under strain. The national human rights institution, the Human Rights Defender's Office of Armenia (HRDO), is formally independent, yet has seen its credibility wax and wane. While the HRDO continues to represent a key institutional safeguard within Armenia's human rights architecture, public confidence in the institution has fluctuated sharply over time[27]. Public confidence spiked to an all-time high of 81% in 2021 amid the post-war crisis, reflecting citizens' urgent hopes for accountability. But by 2024, trust in the HRDO plummeted to 33%, with 42% expressing distrust. This dramatic reversal suggests a crisis of confidence in whether the ombuds institution remains truly neutral. The sharp swings in trust could also point to the politicization of the office in the public eye.

Protest to demand the resignation of Armenia Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, in Yerevan. 27 May 2024. Credit: Reuters
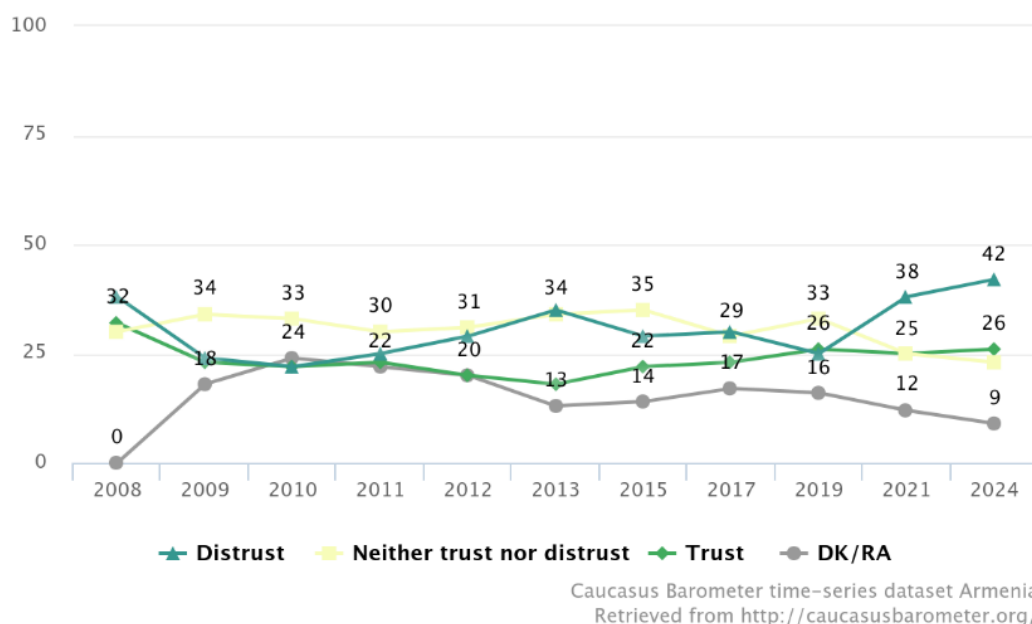
Civil Society Infrastructure & Funding

An oft-overlooked dimension of Armenia's civic space is the infrastructure that sustains civil society, funding, public trust, and organizational capacity. Many Armenian CSOs operate in a perpetual scramble for resources. According to the USAID CSO sustainability index, financial liability has long been the weakest dimension, with uneven distribution of public funding in favour of CSOs providing services in Armenia, at the cost of those with watchdog functions, human rights advocacy, or environmental focus.[28] With fewer long-term grants and a shift toward short-term, crisis-response projects, many organizations operate hand-to-mouth. Additionally, the closing down of USAID operations in January 2025 dealt a major blow to Armenia's civic and media ecosystem: the freezing of U.S. assistance has forced many grassroots organizations to shut down, compelled larger CSOs to scale back, and cut off funding for independent outlets, significantly weakening pluralistic oversight and public accountability.[29] Combined with regional instability and domestic political polarisation, these factors are shrinking the operational space for CSOs across Armenia.[30]

One potential counterweight is the Armenian diaspora, which is one of the largest per capita in the world. The diaspora has historically played a philanthropic role in Armenia, funding humanitarian projects, schools, and churches. Increasingly, diaspora donors and organizations are stepping in to assist civil society as well. For example, diaspora-led charities and foundations have supported independent media outlets, human rights initiatives, and disaster relief efforts. Analysts point to the diaspora's tradition of charitable giving as a resource that could partially fill the gap left by departing international donors.[31] However, while the diaspora is a vital source of goodwill and funds, it cannot single-handedly replace institutional donors.
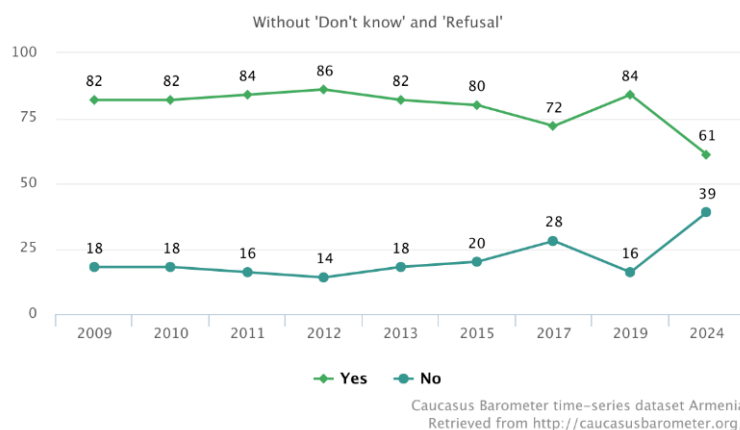
Public trust is the other critical pillar of civil society infrastructure, and here Armenia faces a troubling trend. Trust in NGOs and media has been declining, undermining the legitimacy of the civic sector. According to the Caucasus Barometer, conducted by CRRC-Armenia since 2008, public trust in NGOs has had an average of 23.6%.[32] Alarmingly, distrust toward NGOs rose to an all-time high of 42% in 2024. The media fares no better: while distrust averaged 31.7% between 2008 and 2019, it surged to 69% in 2021, and although it declined slightly by 2024, distrust remains high at 49%.[33] These trends suggest not only increasing scepticism toward key democratic actors, but a broader crisis of civic legitimacy.

TRUNGOS: Trust towards NGOs (%)

Distrust: 32 (2008), 18 (2009), ~22 (2010), 24 (2011), 20 (2012), 34 (2013), 22 (2015), 29 (2017), 26 (2019), 38 (2021), 42 (2024)
Neither trust nor distrust: ~30 (2008), 34 (2009), 33 (2010), ~22 (2011), 31 (2012), 35 (2015), 33 (2019), 25 (2021), 26 (2024)
Trust: 32 (2008), 18 (2009), 24 (2010), 22 (2011), 20 (2012), 13 (2013), 14 (2015), 17 (2017), 25 (2019), 12 (2021), 26 (2024)
DK/RA: 0 (2008), 17 (2009), 22 (2010), 16 (2019), 9 (2024)

Legend: Distrust — Neither trust nor distrust — Trust — DK/RA

Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset Armenia
Retrieved from http://caucasusbarometer.org/

Economic hardship further dampens civic engagement. Since independence from the Soviet Union, Armenia's population has faced inflation, unemployment, and the aftershocks of war, leaving many people focused on day-to-day survival rather than activism. When households are worried about jobs and prices, volunteering or attending public hearings is a luxury few can afford. This economic strain, combined with cynicism about institutions, yields low participation rates in elections, with voter turnout in recent elections around 49%.[34] Local elections in Yerevan in 2023 recorded the lowest turnout in history: only 28%[35] of the eligible population voted, further weakening democratic resilience. The erosion of trust may also contribute to political disengagement, reflected in low motivation to participate in upcoming elections[36] or civic initiatives.

VOTPRCP: Would you participate if national elections were next Sunday? (%)

Without 'Don't know' and 'Refusal'

Yes: 82 (2009), 82 (2010), 84 (2011), 86 (2012), 82 (2013), 80 (2015), 72 (2017), 84 (2019), 61 (2024)
No: 18 (2009), 18 (2010), 16 (2011), 14 (2012), 18 (2013), 20 (2015), 28 (2017), 16 (2019), 39 (2024)

Legend: Yes — No

Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset Armenia
Retrieved from http://caucasusbarometer.org/

Comparative Lens: Georgia, Serbia, and Moldova

Armenia's trajectory becomes clearer when viewed against regional peers experiencing similar democratic pressures. Georgia, once a democratic success story, enacted a "foreign agents" law in 2024 that undermines NGOs and stokes public hostility.[37] This marked a decisive turn away from EU-aligned reforms and toward an authoritarian model of civic control. The Georgian case illustrates how quickly a reformist government can backslide: using legal tools and propaganda, even a relatively open society can be pushed toward

authoritarian practices in a short time. For Armenia, which shares a society-wide pro-de-mocracy sentiment but also nationalist currents, Georgia is a cautionary tale of how democratic gains can be eroded if populist narratives go unchecked.

Serbia's authoritarian slide has been marked by media repression, anti-protester violence, and smear campaigns against CSOs.[38] What distinguishes Serbia is the state's use of hybrid tactics, formal legality cloaking informal coercion. Protesters face police brutality, while NGOs endure reputational attacks and intrusive audits. Serbia's drift has occurred despite EU accession talks, showing that international engagement alone does not safeguard democracy.

In contrast, Moldova shows how political will and EU integration incentives can expand civic space through reforms and structured dialogue.[39] Since 2019, Moldovan civil society has benefited from state-CSO partnerships, tax incentives, and public consultation mechanisms. The recent elections in September 2025 resulted in a majority of the seats for the ruling pro-European party. Although progress remains fragile, and oligarchic interests and Russian influence still remain, Moldova underscores the potential for democratic resilience. For Armenia, Moldova is a reminder that political will and external incentives (like EU integration prospects) can significantly expand civic space.

These comparisons reveal that external engagement (such as EU incentives) and internal political will must operate in tandem to protect civic freedoms. Georgia's regression underlines the vulnerability of even reformist states to authoritarian backlash when civic actors are framed as adversaries. Serbia warns of what happens when populist rhetoric goes unchecked by institutions. Moldova offers a model for embedding civic engagement into governance structures and reaping the benefits of cooperative pluralism.

Armenia's divergence from Georgia and Serbia is instructive: it has avoided formal repressive laws but echoes similar nationalist rhetoric. Its alignment with Moldova, both rated highest on the 2024 CSO Meter, suggests a fragile potential for democratic consolidation, if reforms deepen and populist pressures are contained. Armenia therefore stands at a crossroads in the lead up to parliamentary elections in 2026 – it can opt to slide further into authoritarianism, as Georgia and Serbia have done, or it can choose to follow the Moldovan example and strengthen its democratic institutions and civil society.

"Yes to Europe, No to Russian Law" [SLR] 28/04/2024 - Massive pro-EU demonstration in Tbilisi from First Republic Square to Parliament. Source: Jelger Groeneveld, flickr.com/photos/34523388@N06/53693458681.

2026 Election Risks and Scenarios

The parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2026 will be a pivotal stress test for Armenia's civic space. Politically, the landscape heading into these elections is marked by weak and fragmented opposition and a disillusioned electorate. Pashinyan's Civil Contract party dominates the scene, not because of overwhelming popularity (the Prime Minister's ratings have dipped amid difficult peace negotiations), but because alternative contenders are scarce. The main opposition factions in parliament are led by figures from the old regime, ex-presidents and their allies, who many voters distrust. Newer political parties exist, but none have built a broad base or unified into a credible coalition. As one analyst observed, *"opposition forces are either anti-democratic, fragmented, or unpopular"*.[40]

Security incidents with Azerbaijan could justify emergency laws or suppress criticism. These patterns mirror 2020 and 2022 crackdowns. If public trust in electoral institutions erodes, post-election unrest is possible. Armenia's prior experiences with disputed elections and mass mobilisations suggest the volatility of such periods. Yet resilience also remains possible. Civil-society coalitions have indeed emerged in Armenia, for example the AntiCorruption Coalition of Civil Society Organizations of Armenia, which coordinates public monitoring of anti-corruption reforms.[41] The 2024 Caucasus Barometer survey by the CRRC-Armenia found that despite widespread alienation from formal political parties, 74% of respondents believe Armenians have the right to freely express opinions and a similar share consider Armenia a democracy, albeit with "serious challenges".[42][43] Meanwhile, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2024 review indicated that over 66 % of public servants in Armenia report their organisations "collaborate effectively with stakeholders outside the public sector (e.g., academia, civil society organisations, media)".[44]

Various scenarios could unfold. In one outcome, the elections are free, competitive, and peaceful. Civil society's role in monitoring and civic education is respected, setting a precedent for institutional strengthening. In a medium-risk scenario, the elections occur without major fraud but are marred by inflammatory rhetoric and minor procedural irregularities. The government tolerates criticism but continues populist attacks on media and NGOs. In a worst-case scenario, civic freedoms are restricted under emergency decrees, opposition protests are violently dispersed, and independent observers are denied access. Such an outcome would likely trigger international condemnation and stall any progress toward deeper European integration.

Yet the 2026 elections carry strategic significance far beyond routine politics. They will likely determine the course of Armenia's most critical national issues, notably the prospective peace agreement with Azerbaijan and potential constitutional changes. In fact, at a party congress in September 2025, Pashinyan declared that if Civil Contract wins in 2026, they intend to "establish the Fourth Republic of Armenia" by adopting a new constitution via referendum.[45] This proposal is not merely domestic posturing; it aligns with a key Azerbaijani demand that Armenia amend its constitution to renounce any territorial. In short, the 2026 elections are not just about who wins power in Yerevan, they are about whether Armenia's experiment in democracy survives.

Conclusion: Between Fragility and Resilience

From the hopeful surge of Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution to the ongoing challenges of war, polarization, and institutional strain, the civic space journey has been anything but linear. Yet, even under duress, Armenia has managed to preserve a degree of pluralism and civil engagement that distinguishes it in the region. The 2026 elections could either consolidate this fragile openness or reverse it dramatically. The evidence suggests a hybrid contraction: in many respects the space has narrowed; critical journalists face attacks, protesters face intimidation, NGOs are beleaguered, but it is not *fully* closed or systemat-

ically crushed as in outright autocracies. Instead, Armenia teeters between fragility and resilience. It remains a democracy on paper and in the hearts of many citizens, but the quality of that democracy hangs in the balance.

Armenia's civic space stands at a crossroads. The forces of populism, nationalism, and securitization threaten to narrow participation and silence dissent. If these forces prevail unchecked, Armenia could gradually slide toward the kind of managed democracy or soft authoritarianism seen in some of its neighbors. Yet, equally present in Armenia are countervailing forces of democratic resilience. A vibrant core of civil society activists, human rights defenders, independent journalists, and engaged citizens continues to push back against illiberal currents. Public demand for fairness and accountable government, while muted by disappointment, still exists, seen in opinion surveys where a majority insist that Armenia should remain a democracy, albeit one with "serious challenges." International support and attention also remain factors; Western democracies and organizations have not abandoned Armenia, and continued engagement provides both resources and moral support for keeping civic space open.

The next months are pivotal. Reforms introduced now could shape the rules of engagement for a generation. Reforms and proactive measures, such as safeguarding media independence, ensuring an even playing field in the elections, and protecting minority rights, could solidify the rules of the game and institutionalize democratic norms for a generation. Failure to act could see Armenia slide toward the kinds of systemic repression seen in Georgia and Serbia. The task before policymakers, media, activists, donors, diaspora, and citizens is clear: to turn fragility into resilience, and democratic aspiration into institutional reality. If Armenia can preserve and strengthen that space under duress, it will send a powerful message in a world where democracy is under siege.

Policy Recommendations

Strengthening Armenia's democratic resilience requires a coordinated policy agenda that protects fundamental freedoms, reinforces institutional accountability, and restores public trust. The following measures should be taken to ensure that Armenia's hard-won fundamental freedoms are protected:

- **Safeguarding journalists**. Armenia needs to protect its media freedoms through the protection of its journalists, particularly female journalists - who increasingly face targeted harassment. Legislation explicitly penalizing gender-based abuse in public discourse, combined with a rapid-response mechanism offering legal aid and emergency support for threatened journalists, would help counter this trend. An independent media ombudsperson should also be established to uphold press freedom standards and provide a neutral channel for complaints.

- **Expanding anti-discrimination protections**. Armenia needs comprehensive, inclusive legislation offering clear remedies for victims of hate crimes or bias, while strengthening the HRDO to investigate civic space violations. Creating an independent equality body with broad investigative and enforcement powers, supported by public education campaigns promoting inclusive narratives, would further reinforce societal protections.

- **Ensuring that the national security forces respect international human rights standards.** Protest policing must be aligned with international human rights standards. Clear limits on police use of force, a ban on biometric data collection at demonstrations, mandatory rights-based training, and guaranteed judicial review of detentions within 24 hours would reduce the risk of abuse.

- **Securing a conducive environment for civil society.** Implementation of anti-SLAPP measures, streamlined NGO operations, institutionalized CSO-government consulta-

tions, and tax reforms that enable local philanthropy and sustainable funding. boosting CSO financial resilience, through expanded tax designation schemes, capacity-building grants for rural and youth initiatives, co-financing of international grants, and digital platforms encouraging diaspora giving, would enhance long-term sustainability. Combined with fact-checking support, nationwide media literacy, and cooperation with tech companies to curb hate-speech amplification.

- **Safeguarding electoral integrity**. Armenia should ensure unhindered access for independent monitors, enforce transparent campaign financing rules, prohibit hate-based campaigning, and establish a nonpartisan electoral ombuds office. Strengthened protocols to counter election-related misinformation are also crucial.

Fully implemented, these measures together provide a realistic roadmap for protecting civic space and rebuilding trust in Armenia's democratic institutions.

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Storm on the Shore: Georgia's Democratic Crisis and Its Implications for Wider Black Sea Security

Megi Benia

Key Takeaways

- Georgia has shifted from democratic beacon to authoritarian crisis. Georgia has transformed from a model of democratic transition to an acute authoritarian state under the Georgian Dream party, which has systematically dismantled democratic institutions since 2012 under oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili's informal control.

- Russia's Ukraine invasion accelerated Pro-Russian alignment. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine marked a turning point, with Georgian Dream abandoning pragmatism for overt pro-Russian positioning, culminating in the November 2024 EU accession postponement and dismantling of institutions responsible for Western integration.

- Systematic repression has created a human rights emergency. Georgia holds approximately 145 political prisoners (higher per capita than Russia), with opposition leaders jailed, independent media under assault, and Russian-style "foreign agents" legislation effectively criminalizing civil society.

- Democratic erosion threatens regional black sea security. Georgia's authoritarian turn weakens regional security by undermining resilience against Russian hybrid threats, eroding NATO/EU trust, and potentially emboldening democratic backsliding in neighboring states like Moldova and Armenia.

- The international community must shift to robust pressure. The article calls for decisive action including comprehensive sanctions on Georgian Dream leadership, withdrawal of EU candidate status, diplomatic isolation, and direct support for democratic forces, rejecting further engagement with the regime.

Introduction

For nearly two decades, Georgia was a beacon of democratic transition. Its reforms, pro-Western stance, and vibrant civil society made it a crucial partner for the EU and NATO in the strategically vital Black Sea region. However, this narrative has dramatically changed. Georgia is not merely experiencing democratic regression, it is undergoing an acute and rapidly consolidating authoritarian crisis, particularly evident from November 2024 onwards. Mass protests, widespread election fraud allegations, legislative attacks on civil society and independent media, the jailing of opposition leaders, and the effective sabotage of its EU candidacy demand an urgent and unequivocal framing of this dire situation. The Georgian Dream (GD) has chosen a path of illiberal reinforcement by systematically dismantling democratic institutions and repressing all dissent.

This crisis extends far beyond Georgia's borders, resonating across the geopolitically contested Black Sea region. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its continued occupation of Georgian territories, and hybrid activities underscore the importance of internal democratic resilience for collective security. The GD's deliberate undermining of Georgia's democratic

foundations directly compromises this resilience.

This article examines how Georgia's internal authoritarian crisis, driven by a repressive ruling elite, undermines regional security and weakens cooperative frameworks in the Black Sea. It argues that democratic erosion in Georgia risks emboldening external authoritarian powers, corroding trust among allies, and diminishing the role of the country as a credible European and Euro-Atlantic partner. By linking domestic democratic trends to regional security dynamics, this study demonstrates that Georgia's democratic resilience is a regional security imperative, now critically dependent on decisive international action.

Demonstrators open a banner which reads: "Sanction Georgian Dream" in front of the national security forces in Tbilisi. 8 November 2025. Source: Levan Zazadze.

Evolution of the Georgian Dream Party: From Pragmatism to Authoritarianism

The Georgian Dream (GD) party, which assumed power in 2012 on a platform of democratic reform and European integration, has undergone a remarkable and troubling transformation. Initially characterised by a broad coalition and ostensibly reformist agenda, GD increasingly centralised power around its founder, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. Ivanishvili's informal yet pervasive influence illustrates oligarchic governance: formal institutions are subordinated to his personal discretion, undermining constitutional mechanisms and weakening democratic accountability. State institutions, rather than functioning as independent arbiters, operate as instruments of the consolidation strategy of the ruling party.

This evolution from pragmatic governance to authoritarian reinforcement has been facilitated by the persistent use of historical and geopolitical narratives. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War has been instrumentalised to justify a cautious, Russia-leaning foreign policy and suppress domestic dissent[1]. By framing opposition to GD as destabilising and potentially provocative toward Russia[2], the party blends national interest with partisan preservation, thereby consolidating authority under the guise of protecting stability. Economic dependencies[3], including trade, remittances, and tourism, further reinforce pro-Russian policy tendencies, ensuring that pragmatic concerns of economic continuity are consistently prioritised over democratic norms.

Authoritarian tendencies are also deeply intertwined with elite self-preservation. Over a

decade in power has allowed GD to establish strong networks of patronage and corruption. The judiciary has been systematically captured through politically motivated appointments and institutional manipulation, ensuring that legal scrutiny remains selective and under the thumb of party interests[4]. Courts, prosecutors, and law enforcement act as shields against accountability rather than impartial guardians of justice. In this sense, democratic erosion is not merely an incidental feature of GD, it is a deliberate strategy to protect the ruling elite from investigation, prosecution, and political challenge.

Geopolitically, Georgia's traditional hedging strategy between European and Euro-Atlantic integration and Russian pressures has shifted towards a much greater accommodation of Russian interests. Russia leverages Georgia's occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, energy dependence, and economic influence to shape Georgian policy. GD's foreign policy, initially presented as balanced pragmatism, has thus increasingly facilitated Russian strategic aims while undermining Western integration, illustrating how authoritarian consolidation can be reinforced by external geopolitical pressures.

Protesters march demanding that the international community sanctions Georgian Dream. 19 October 2025. Source: Megi Benia.

Post-2022 Dynamics: War in Ukraine as a Catalyst for Open Pro-Russian Alignment

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a pivotal moment in Georgia's democratic trajectory. GD's initially cautious pro-Russian tendencies escalated into open alignment, reflecting both domestic elite calculus and external pressures. This shift was crystallised in high-profile public interventions by Bidzina Ivanishvili. His April 29, 2024, speech[5] exemplified an overt replication of Russian narratives, portraying Russia as a rational actor defending its interests while framing Western support for Ukraine as destabilising. By embracing these narratives, GD positioned itself publicly in line with Russian strategic messaging, abandoning the subtle pragmatism that previously characterised its foreign policy.

The consequences of this rhetorical alignment were compounded by concrete policy decisions. The November 28, 2024, announcement to postpone Georgia's EU accession process[6], initially projected as administrative, prompted nationwide protests. Civil society, opposition parties, and independent media framed the postponement as a decisive break in Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic trajectory. Demonstrations, which began in late 2024, have continued into 2025, evidencing both the depth of societal resistance and the intensity of the authoritarian response by the official authorities. These protests highlight the intersection of domestic repression and geopolitical shift as GD's alignment with Russian narratives is reinforced by systematic attacks on institutions capable of resisting authoritarian advance.

This post-2022 period also underscores the instrumentalization of the state apparatus for ideological and geopolitical purposes. Security and diplomatic institutions, previously engaged in NATO and EU integration, have been hollowed out, with key departments dismantled or merged under ideologically loyal but professionally unqualified personnel[7]. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence have witnessed targeted purges, with divisions responsible for European and Euro-Atlantic integration, security policy and strategic planning dismantled[8]. Such actions are not merely administrative, they are calculated efforts to reorient state policy in alignment with Russian preferences while eradicating institutional memory and resistance.

These developments illustrate a broader pattern: GD leverages domestic authoritarian tools to reinforce a foreign policy that directly benefits Russia. The alignment is not limited to discourse but manifests in structural, legal, and bureaucratic changes designed to marginalise European and Euro-Atlantic influence and establish Russian strategic interests in Georgia, thereby amplifying instability across the wider Black Sea region.

Dr. Rusudan Kobakhidze, researcher at the Soviet Past Research Laboratory, blocks traffic in Tbilisi in protest against the introduction of administrative penalties which allow the authorities to imprison protesters for up to 15 days without charge. 4 November 2025. Source: Megi Benia.

Current Situation: Democratic Collapse and Strategic Vulnerability

Georgia's democratic crisis has accelerated into an acute authoritarian reality, with profound implications for national security, regional stability, and civil liberties. The country currently holds approximately 145 political prisoners (a per capita rate higher than in Russia) demonstrating the systematic criminalisation of dissent. Opposition leaders, activists, and journalists are routinely prosecuted under spurious charges designed to neutralise political competition[9]. New cases continue to emerge, threatening the survival of opposition parties and signalling the unrelenting campaign of the ruling party to monopolise political authority.

Civil society and independent media face severe suppression. The "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" (commonly referred to as the "Russian Law") stigmatizes NGOs receiving foreign funding, effectively replicating Russia's coercive legal framework[10]. Reporting obligations, invasive audits, and administrative burdens make independent civic action nearly impossible, curtailing oversight of government behaviour. Independent media outlets encounter legal harassment, financial constraints, and targeted attacks, while state-sponsored disinformation campaigns delegitimise alternative voices and reinforce pro-government narratives[11]. These measures systematically eradicate platforms for democratic engagement, producing an environment of fear, self-censorship, and coercion.

Institutional erosion extends to strategic policy areas. Diplomatic and defence structures have been deliberately weakened. Units tasked with NATO integration, EU affairs and multi-lateral security coordination have been dissolved, and experienced personnel dismissed[12]. Purges are ideologically motivated, targeting civil servants committed to constitutional principles and Euro-Atlantic integration. As a result, Georgia's strategic institutions are incapable of formulating coherent security policies, leaving the state vulnerable to external coercion and influence operations.

Protests remain widespread but are met with aggressive state repression. Demonstrations following November 28, 2024, EU accession postponement, as well as subsequent anti-government mobilisations, have been suppressed through excessive force, administrative detentions, and legal harassment. Reports document police brutality, targeted intimidation of civil society leaders, and politically motivated prosecutions[13]. This approach transforms dissent into a criminalised activity, undermining the fundamental beliefs of democracy.

In sum, Georgia faces a multi-dimensional crisis: a consolidated authoritarian regime, politicised institutions, a weakened civil society, a besieged media landscape, and an overtly pro-Russian foreign policy orientation. This convergence of internal authoritarianism and external alignment with Russia not only threatens Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations but also compromises security across the wider Black Sea region. The country is caught in a trajectory of systematic democratic erosion, geopolitical isolation, and heightened vulnerability to malign influence, a scenario with implications that extend far beyond its borders.

Democratic Decline and Regional Security Implications

Eroding Resilience against Disinformation and Hybrid Threats

The systematic weakening of democratic institutions directly impairs Georgia's resilience to external influence operations. Disinformation campaigns, particularly those orchestrated by Russian state and proxy actors, thrive in environments of political polarisation and declining trust in public institutions.

As Georgia's domestic politics become increasingly fragmented and overtly repressive, pro-Russian narratives portraying the EU and NATO as "agents of moral decay" or "threats to sovereignty" gain dangerous traction[14,15]. These narratives resonate with segments of the population frustrated by economic stagnation and disillusioned with a political elite perceived as corrupt. The anti-Western rhetoric aggressively spread and promoted by government institutions and officials, often aimed at deflecting domestic criticism, further amplifies this vulnerability.

Hybrid threats, including information manipulation, and the incitement of social unrest, are most effective when states lack societal cohesion and democratic legitimacy. The diminished transparency, the confrontational stance toward NGOs, and the government's own complicity in spreading disinformation severely reduce the effectiveness of whole-of-society responses, leaving the country dangerously exposed to malign external interference.

Undermining NATO–EU Engagement in the Black Sea

Georgia's acute authoritarian crisis fundamentally undermines its strategic credibility as European and Euro-Atlantic partner. Both NATO and the EU have repeatedly emphasised that democratic governance and rule of law are absolute prerequisites for deeper integration. The 2023 enlargement report[16] by the European Commission explicitly linked Georgia's candidate status to verifiable progress in judicial reform, media freedom, and depolarisation - conditions that Georgia has aggressively moved away from.

A large demonstration in support of Europe Day in Tbilisi. 9 May 2025. Source: Radio Free Europe.

In practical terms, democratic backsliding severely limits the scope of security cooperation. While Georgia remains one of NATO's most active partners through various integration mechanisms, internal instability, anti-Western rhetoric, and human rights abuses fundamentally weaken political trust. Member states, already hesitant about enlargement, now cite Georgia's profound democratic deficiencies as undeniable evidence of unreliable commitment and a divergence from shared values.

At a regional level, this credibility gap severely hinders multilateral coordination within the wider Black Sea security architecture. Initiatives under the EU's Black Sea Synergy[17] framework rely on a basic level of political convergence around shared democratic values and a commitment to a rules-based order. Georgia's aggressive deviation from this path risks isolating it diplomatically, diminishing its strategic value as a reliable ally, and creating a dangerous vacuum that hostile actors can exploit.

Spill-over Risks and Authoritarian Entrenchment

The deterioration of Georgia's democratic governance carries profound and dangerous spill-over effects across the wider Black Sea region. Authoritarian actors, primarily Russia but also others with revisionist ambitions, directly benefit from democratic fragility among their neighbours. They exploit domestic divisions to project influence, offer alternative governance models, and aggressively delegitimise Western-backed democratic norms.

Georgia's situation may embolden similar trends in other states facing democratic pressure, such as Moldova and even nascent democracies in the Western Balkans. The perception that democratic backsliding can occur without significant international consequences risks encouraging illiberal tendencies elsewhere in the region, creating a domino effect of democratic erosion.

If Georgia definitively falls to authoritarianism, it will send a chilling message to Moldova and Ukraine, potentially undermining their European and Euro-Atlantic paths and complicating their struggles against Russian aggression. It could also influence Armenia's geopolitical calculations, potentially pushing it closer to Russia out of perceived necessity. Such a development would undoubtedly have an emboldening effect on authoritarian regimes like Belarus, further solidifying the illiberal bloc in Eastern Europe.

Additionally, weakened democratic governance fundamentally undermines societal resilience against hybrid threats. Civil societies under pressure are less capable of mobilising against external aggression, countering propaganda, or sustaining a pro-Western consensus. As powerfully demonstrated by the Ukrainian experience, robust, resilient democratic institutions and a vibrant civil society are not luxuries, they are crucial for enduring external threats and maintaining national sovereignty.

Conclusion

Georgia stands at a dangerous crossroads. Once a beacon of democratic transformation, it now faces an acute authoritarian crisis, a critical test of whether it can preserve the achievements of its post-Rose Revolution trajectory or slide further into illiberalism and entrenched autocracy. The implications of this choice extend well beyond Georgia's domestic political sphere. The systematic erosion of democratic institutions, the violent suppression of dissent, the jailing of opposition leaders, the criminalisation of civil society and independent media, and the consolidation of power by an oligarchic elite fundamentally weaken the foundations of regional stability, amplify vulnerabilities to hybrid threats, and irreversibly undermine collective efforts to secure the Black Sea region.

For NATO and the EU, Georgia's trajectory serves as a stark reminder that democracy and security are inseparable. A stable, democratic Georgia acts as an essential bulwark against authoritarian influence and a vital partner in maintaining the rules-based order in the region. Equally, a Georgia that surrenders to authoritarian drift risks becoming a dangerous gateway for destabilisation, a weak link in regional security, and a symbol of democratic failure in a critical geopolitical space. The Georgian Dream government has clearly demonstrated its unwillingness to be a partner for democratic reform, opting instead for a path of authoritarian consolidation driven by self-preservation and fear of accountability.

The recommendations outlined below underscore that reversing this democratic backsliding requires urgent, decisive, and coordinated international action. Democratic resilience must be treated not as an aspirational value but as an absolute strategic necessity and an indispensable element of collective security in the Black Sea region. The international community must shift its approach from cautious engagement to robust condemnation, targeted pressure, and unwavering, direct support for Georgia's suppressed democratic forces. This means isolating the authoritarian regime, sanctioning those responsible for abuses, and providing lifelines to those bravely fighting for Georgia's democratic future. The future of Georgia, and indeed the wider Black Sea region, depends on this decisive shift.

Recommendations:

Georgia's acute authoritarian crisis has escalated to a point where all genuine opposition, independent media, and civil society organisations are under unprecedented and comprehensive assault. The Georgian Dream (GD) has unequivocally demonstrated zero willingness to conduct reforms or take any meaningful steps towards democratic renewal. This inflexibility is not merely a preference, it is a calculated strategy rooted in:

- *Absolute Power Consolidation and Impunity*. The ruling elite, led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, has moved beyond simple power retention to complete control. Genuine democratic processes, an independent judiciary, or a free press would immediately expose their deep-seated corruption, illicit enrichment, and systemic abuses of power. The jailing of opposition leaders, the silencing of media, and the criminalisation of NGOs are not side effects, they are deliberate, core tactics to eliminate any possibility of accountability or challenge to their absolute authority.

- *Systematic Elimination of Dissent*. The crackdown is designed to be total. Opposition leaders are not merely "under pressure", they are imprisoned, often on fabricated charges, effectively executing political resistance. Independent media outlets and NGOs are facing a legislative and enforcement onslaught, exemplified by the "foreign agents" law (which bears a misleading resemblance in name only to the US FARA, and is instead a direct replica of Russia's repressive legislation). This law, along with other legislative amendments and administrative harassment, makes it virtually impossible for these vital democratic actors to receive funding, operate freely, or even exist legally within Georgia.
- *Weaponisation of National Security and "Sovereignty"*. The government aggressively frames any dissent, international criticism, or support for democratic norms as a foreign-orchestrated plot to destabilise Georgia. This narrative is used to justify the brutal repression, portraying opposition and civil society as "traitors" or "foreign agents," thus legitimising their imprisonment and suppression in the eyes of state-controlled media and a segment of the public.
- *Emboldened Autocracy*. The GD has observed other authoritarian regimes, particularly Russia, successfully crush dissent without facing decisive international consequences. This has introduced a belief that they can continue their rapid authoritarian consolidation and brutal repression with minimal meaningful repercussions.

The International Community Must Take Decisive Action against Entrenched Autocracy

Given the gravity of the current situation in Georgia, where internal avenues for reform are actively being closed off through state violence and legal weaponisation, the role of the international community must fundamentally shift.

The international community must operate under the understanding that the Georgian Dream is not a willing partner for democratic reform. Instead, it is an increasingly hostile actor that has chosen to dismantle democratic institutions and suppress its own people. The strategy must therefore be one of robust condemnation, targeted pressure, and unwavering support for those bravely fighting for Georgia's democratic future, both within and outside its borders.

The international community must:

- **Isolate the Regime and Apply Maximised Economic and Political Pressure**

  - Comprehensive Sanctions. Immediately implement robust, targeted sanctions (visa bans, asset freezes) on all key individuals within the Georgian Dream, the ruling party leadership, members of the judiciary enabling political persecutions, and oligarchic figures, most notably Bidzina Ivanishvili, who are responsible for democratic backsliding, human rights abuses, and corruption. Extend these sanctions to their immediate families and associated entities to maximise impact.

  - Withdraw EU Candidate Status and Condition Aid. Formally and unequivocally withdraw Georgia's EU candidate status, making it clear that the current authoritarian trajectory is incompatible with European values and integration. All financial and political assistance that directly benefits the state apparatus must be immediately frozen or redirected. Aid should only flow to genuinely independent, vetted civil society and humanitarian efforts.

  - Diplomatic Downgrade and Exclusion. Initiate a severe diplomatic downgrade, recalling ambassadors, suspending high-level official exchanges, and exclude Georgian government representatives from key international forums where their presence would lend legitimacy to the regime.

- Review Financial Flows. Scrutinize all financial flows into and out of Georgia, particularly those linked to sanctioned individuals or entities, to identify and close loopholes for illicit enrichment and circumvention of sanctions.

- **Provide Unconditional, Direct Lifeline Support to Suppressed Democratic Forces**

  - Direct Funding for Exiled/Underground Groups. Significantly increase direct financial and logistical support to independent media outlets, human rights organisations, and pro-democracy civil society groups that are forced to operate in exile or underground. Facilitate secure communication channels and training for those risking their lives within Georgia.

  - Legal Aid and Protection. Establish robust mechanisms to provide immediate legal aid, humanitarian assistance, and safe passage for persecuted opposition leaders, journalists, activists, and their families. Pressure the Georgian authorities for their release and ensure international legal observation in politically motivated trials.

  - International Platforms. Provide prominent international platforms for Georgian opposition, independent journalists, and civil society leaders to share their perspectives, counter state propaganda, and maintain international attention on the crisis.

- **Reaffirm and Enforce Security Integration through Democratic Compliance**

  - No Compromise on Values. Reiterate that NATO and EU integration are value-based processes. An autocratic Georgia cannot and will not be integrated into European and Euro-Atlantic security structures. Any notion of "security cooperation" with an authoritarian Georgian state must be critically re-evaluated as it risks legitimising the regime.

  - Regional Coordination. Intensify security cooperation with genuinely democratic Black Sea partners, making it clear that Georgia's authoritarian turn weakens regional security and is not a basis for collective defence. Explore alternative regional security frameworks that exclude authoritarian actors.

  - Monitoring and Documentation. Continue to thoroughly monitor and document human rights abuses, electoral fraud, and the erosion of democratic institutions. This evidence will be crucial for future accountability and serves as a historical record of the regime's actions.

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Peace Signed, Not Settled: Examining the US-Brokered Negative Peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan

Manoug Antaby

Key Takeaways

- The peace deal represents "negative peace" rather than reconciliation. The August 2025 US-brokered framework ended active hostilities but left critical issues unresolved, creating a fragile ceasefire focused on halting violence rather than building sustainable stability, justice, or genuine reconciliation between populations.

- A top-down approach excluded affected populations. Elite-driven negotiations excluded affected communities, victims' rights, and public participation, undermining internal legitimacy and creating a deal serving geopolitical interests (particularly US influence in the South Caucasus) rather than local needs for justice and healing.

- The public are willing but fearful of reconciliation. Both Armenian and Azerbaijani populations express willingness to engage in reconciliation, particularly younger generations, but deep-rooted distrust, fear of renewed conflict, and absence of transitional justice mechanisms impede meaningful progress toward positive peace.

- A sustainable peace requires survivor-centered approach. Long-term stability depends on addressing shortcomings through community-level reconciliation, releasing Armenian prisoners of war, establishing transitional justice mechanisms, reforming educational curricula, and building trust through grassroots dialogue and cultural exchanges.

Introduction

Following Azerbaijan's 2023 conclusive military victory over the formally Armenian enclave of Nagorno- Karabakh, which resulted in the forcible displacement of the entire ethnic Armenian population[1], the relationship between the two nations remains fragile. As regional instability grows, the need for a sustainable solution remains urgent. In early August 2025, Azerbaijan and Armenia signed a preliminary peace framework. While a potentially positive step, the skeletal agreement addresses immediate ceasefire mechanics while deferring critical questions of justice, reconciliation, and normalisation to undefined future negotiations.[2]

Within the context of these recent political developments, this article aims to examine if – and how - public willingness towards reconciliation between the two countries impacts upon the effectiveness and sustainability of the US-brokered peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Adopting the lens of public willingness to reconcile, this article argues that Armenian and Azerbaijan remain in a state of negative peace, particularly given the absence of community-level reconciliation and the persistence of mutual distrust.

This analysis draws on open-source literature and semi-structured interviews conducted by the author with one Armenian citizen, one Lebanese-Armenian representing Armenians in the diaspora, and one Azerbaijani citizen in October 2025. Participants were recruited through personal networks and informed of the anonymity of their responses given the sensitivity of the topic. Interviews were conducted in Armenian, English, and Turkish, and focused on perceptions of the peace deal, prospects for reconciliation, and trust in political leadership

Understanding the Nature of Peace

Broadly understood, peace can be categorised as either positive or negative. Positive peace refers to efforts aimed at eliminating structural violence, promoting expectations of non-violence, and building interpersonal trust, while placing certain goals like cooperation, conflict transformation, self-determination, human rights, and dialogue at the heart of peace.[3] In contrast, negative peace is defined as the absence of war and described as adversarial or conditional peace, and it primarily aims to terminate or moderate existing hostile relationships between conflicting parties.[4]

Peace does not exist in isolation; it requires governments to take concrete steps to sustain it, such as ensuring public participation in shaping peace processes, a factor notably absent in the preliminary agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Governments agreed to end the war without including affected populations in the peace processes, ignoring the prospects for reconciliation, transitional justice, and cooperative relations. This renders the recent agreement a form of ceasefire compliance—an attempt to enforce negative rather than positive peace through coexistence and mutual recognition—thereby undermining the long-term sustainability of peace efforts. In fact, focusing on short-term political gains while excluding affected populations' perspectives, demands, and agency makes negative peace inevitable. This is particularly critical given that Armenia had limited choice and engaged in negotiations fearing serious security threats, framing peace processes as imposed, incomplete, and coerced.

Ilham Aliyev delivered speech at Khankendi Stadium by Press Service of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan is licensed under CC BY 4.0.

The Effectiveness of Existing Peace and Its Implications

The recent deal has been widely praised, particularly by the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments, whose countries have suffered devastating economic, social, political, and diplomatic consequences due to the conflict. Both countries have affirmed each other's sovereignty and made a commitment to peaceful engagement.[5]

However, the skeletal nature of the August framework, while allowing both sides to claim diplomatic victory, creates dangerous ambiguities. Critical issues were not resolved but merely deferred, postponing multiple pressure points for future escalation and weakening lasting peace prospects. Each omitted issue represents a potential crisis that could unravel the fragile framework, with several issues raising concern about the sustainability and

credibility of the deal. As one Armenian citizen remarked, "I fear that we will have to plan only for the very short term"[6].

Domestically, the political leadership in Armenia and Azerbaijan are poorly positioned to negotiate and sign treaties without broad public support. On one hand, doubts about the leadership of the Armenian President Nikol Pashinyan[7] and the government's inability to communicate transparently or effectively on security matters[8] highlight the challenges of political legitimacy and representation in global diplomacy. On the other hand, Azerbaijan's repressive response to democratic movements in support of the besieged Armenian civilians in Karabakh in 2023,[9] coupled with the crackdown on civil society and freedom of expression,[10] have deepened public mistrust and created a top-down, authoritarian relationship between state and society.

Geopolitical factors also undermine the peace deal's effectiveness. While the agreement largely served Trump's political image, it diminished the agency of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. An Armenian citizen highlighted the centrality of foreign interests in the deal, saying "it is more of a surrender document than a peace treaty, while Trump only thinks about his image, the Nobel Prize."[11] Moreover, through this deal, the US establishes a permanent presence in the South Caucasus, securing significant influence in the region.[12] This, alongside the fears of Russian and Iranian potential attempts to discredit the peace process,[13] reveals the politicisation of the deal. Such factors have deprived the deal of internal legitimacy, weakening societal acceptance in both countries.

People cheering in Republic Square after PM elections by Armineaghayan is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

This top-down approach in making peace, reflected in the elite-driven negotiations, exclusion of affected communities, and absence of victims' rights and needs[14], lays a fragile ground for stability. Another Armenian citizen criticised Pashinyan for "making decisions for everyone,"[15] underscoring the exclusion of the public from determining their own political fate in favour of serving geopolitical agendas. This approach carries serious implications for future coexistence between the two countries, hindering transitional justice and reconciliation, two fundamental pillars of lasting peace and effective conflict transformation. The absence of social reconciliation risks further alienating the civilian population on both sides and leaving historical suffering unaddressed,[16] which increases the likelihood of renewed conflicts.

Reconciliation amid Hope and Fear: Viewing Peace through Public Acceptance and Willingness

The Armenian and Azerbaijani sides are willing to engage in reconciliation, but the fear of renewed conflict and the hope for greater stability are the factors impeding the efforts. Yet, it is important to acknowledge the asymmetries between both countries while discussing the communities of each nation to cooperate directly with the other side in an attempt to establish lasting peace. Azerbaijan, with significant support from regional powers, achieved military victory and performs better economically, whereas Armenia lost territory and population, with its vulnerable economy has weakened efforts to restore stability.

An Azerbaijani citizen illustrates, "it is not right to be a friend or a brother with the Armenian people after being enemies for 30 years. For us, they are neutral people."[17] Despite reflecting negative peace, this statement offers a realistic—rather than idealistic—view of the current relationship between the two nations. Similarly, an Armenian citizen notes, "the peace deal can be seen as a cautiously positive yet deeply flawed framework. The incomplete treaty risks deepening mistrust rather than healing it,"[18] which represents the reciprocal scepticism and negative sentiment between both communities.

Refugees from Karabakh flood Armenian cities after leaving their homes. 29 September 2023. Source: Sipa USA

In a 2024 survey conducted with 1,672 people in Armenia, 56% of participants viewed Azerbaijan as the main enemy, even though 88.5% of participants were in favour of reaching a settlement with Baku.[19] While there is desire to make peace, reconciliation is challenged on many levels. As one Armenian citizen stated, "decades of war, displacement, and dehumanising narratives have left deep scars on collective memory, but they have not extinguished the human capacity for understanding and empathy."[20] In other words, the peace deal is not neither a guarantee nor a sufficient condition for reconciliation. An Azerbaijani individual echoed this, saying "despite the deal, there is a sense of caution. People want to see real guarantees, and they do not want it to be just a promise."[21]

Shifting away from a purely negative conception of peace, an Azerbaijani citizen emphasised the importance of progress, arguing that "for young generations like us, peace is not just a noble goal. We can move forward with the support of both peoples in education and regional cooperation."[22] A similar point was made by an Armenian citizen, "the younger Armenian generation is open to dialogue rooted in dignity, equality, and truth. Reconciliation is not about forgetting history but about transforming it into a lesson for coexistence."[23] This explicates how the younger generation's fear of repeating past mistakes is pushing

them to engage in reconciliation, acknowledging mutual rights and liabilities.

This said, fear and distrust still dominate relations between the two populations. A citizen from Azerbaijan stated, "for 30 years, both sides have lived with pain and insecurity. That is why it is not easy to move forward. But our generation wants something different. We want to live in a region without fear, without hostility."[24] An Armenian citizen similarly observed, "if Azerbaijan respects all the agreements, it's very important for us. But I'm not sure it will keep its promises and respect the points of the agreement."[25] These views demonstrate the fragility and fear-oriented nature of the deal. The absence of solid mechanisms for transitional justice is a key factor behind the persistent hatred and distrust between the two populations, especially given its role in providing recognition to victims, enhancing the trust in state institutions, and fostering reconciliation while preventing future crimes.[26]

An Armenian flag flies close to the border with Azerbaijan and Iran, Syunik Province, Armenia. 12 June 2025. Source: Reuters

Conclusion

The August framework ended active hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but it left fundamental issues unresolved. It resulted in a negative peace by focusing on halting hostilities without providing any guarantees for sustainable stability or a shared vision towards cooperation. Thus, despite its significance, the partial peace agreement excludes the agency of local populations, severely undermining its effectiveness. The absence of affected populations' interests, demands, and perceptions excluded critical factors such as the shortcomings of local governments, collapse of internal legitimacy, geopolitical interests of global powers, and the elite-oriented peace-making approaches have undermined the agreement from the outset.

Public perception is therefore key to understanding the current peace and its limitations. Although both sides express a willingness to engage in reconciliation, the incentives are mainly rooted in negative peace—fear of renewed conflicts and hope for stability. Yet, positive peace remains an ultimate goal, as both populations increasingly recognise the need for multilevel cooperation, dialogue, trust-building initiatives, and acknowledgment of mutual suffering. This calls for a fundamental shift towards a people-centred peace that respects local agency and represents the concerns and aspirations of affected populations, ensuring inclusion of the voices of under-represented and vulnerable groups.

Recommendations

- **Address the shortcomings of the preliminary peace agreement as a priority.** Joint and decisive efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan are needed to strengthen the framework for long-term peace and stability between the two countries. To address the shortcomings of the incomplete peace treaty and maximise its impact, new strategies must adopt a different approach, which avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. These include the integration of cross-border approaches between the communities of both nations within the completed peace agreement, which are essential to reshaping public willingness to engage in reconciliation and laying the foundation for a lasting, positive peace. Such efforts must define a clear timeline for addressing issues excluded from the August framework.

- **Prioritise release of Armenian prisoners of war and broader victims' rights.** As an Azerbaijani citizen noted, "real peace means understanding and listening to each other. It does not mean dividing the future."[27] Building on this, one Armenian citizen urged the need for "a process that goes beyond political agreements, addressing the human, moral, and historical dimensions and losses of the conflict."[28] This includes critical and decisive steps, focusing on "efforts led by accountability and restitution, including the immediate release of Armenian prisoners of war and the establishment of impartial investigations into alleged war crimes and human rights violations."[29] To achieve sustainable peace, placing victims' rights on both sides must be prioritised[30] to ensure that justice is not selective, restores dignity, and builds trust in peace.

- **Develop national reconciliation strategies in coordination with the diaspora, national civil society and victims' groups.** Reconciliation must take place on all levels, using various strategies. For instance, an Azerbaijani citizen argues that "education, collaborative work projects, or flights between both countries in the future would make the deal not just a promise but a guarantee that Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict is 100% finished and there will be no conflict after any time."[31] This requires multi-level engagement, including government initiatives, grassroots dialogue programmes, NGO or civil society-led initiatives, and cultural exchanges, particularly involving diaspora communities who play a key role in shaping reconciliation from abroad. Such strategies can promote trust between the people of two nations, normalise interaction, and increase prospects for positive peace based on acceptance.

- **Reform national curricula to focus on peace and reconciliation**. Encouraging dialogue is a crucial start towards this end, extending beyond discussing problems and expressing expectations. As one Armenian citizen stated, "true reconciliation begins with justice, acknowledgment, and a shared commitment to prevent the repetition of past violence."[32] This cannot be achieved without transparent and fair dialogue between the two nations. There should also be an emphasis on revising national curricula to encourage peace and reconciliation. An Azerbaijani citizen explained that "rather than teaching students at schools and universities that Armenians are our enemies, they must be taught that while we have been enemies in the past, as we have peace deal, we are building friendship and stability between two nations."[33] This approach can address hatred, distrust, and fear, both institutionally and systematically, preparing the ground for lasting, positive peace for future generations.

- **Secure support from the international community.** National reconciliation and transitional justice efforts should be complemented by the presence of strong third-party actors. External involvement must work towards achieving sustainable peace rather than mere cessation of hostilities. As an Armenian citizen mentioned, "lasting peace demands international oversight and sustained diplomacy,"[34] which reveals the importance of state-level engagement, yet it must be accompanied by, and responsive to, local voices.

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Serbia's Historic Student-led Protest Movement (2024-2025)

Dušica Djukić

Key Takeaways

- Tragedy sparked historic student-led uprising. The November 2024 railway station collapse in Novi Sad, which killed 16 people, triggered unprecedented student-led protests that grew into Serbia's largest demonstration in modern history, with up to 325,000 participants in March 2025.

- A bottom-up movement demanding accountability. Unlike previous opposition-led protests, this decentralised, leaderless student movement demands accountability for corruption, transparency, and snap elections while maintaining strict non-violence and political independence.

- Government responses have escalated to violent repression. President Vučić's government has responded with denial, media smear campaigns, excessive police force, arbitrary arrests, alleged sonic weapon use, and intimidation tactics including labelling students as "terrorists."

- The international response has shifted from silence to criticism. After initial inaction, the UN has condemned human rights violations, and the European Parliament passed an important resolution in October 2025.

- The movement continues to test Serbia's democratic future. The protests challenge whether Serbia will continue towards authoritarianism or shift to genuine reform, with implications extending beyond Serbia as a potential model for youth activism across the Balkans and South Caucasus.

A Catalyst for Crisis

On the first of November 2024, the collapse of a newly renovated concrete canopy at the railway station in the city of Novi Sad in Serbia claimed the lives of fifteen, later sixteen people.[1] The tragedy triggered a series of unprecedented nation-wide student-led mass protests, which developed into a broader social uprising. The participants of the protests demand criminal and political accountability for the collapse of the railway station canopy denouncing the systemic corruption and neglect they blame for the tragedy.

The student-led protests continue a trend of publicly displayed citizen dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in Serbia and should be observed against the backdrop of mass protests, which have gripped Serbia in the more recent past.[2] While these past protests were initiated by political figures from the opposition to which the citizens responded, the current mass protests in contrast were launched bottom-up by Serbia's students, which to this day shape a different kind of discourse and represent a new political force in the country. Starting with the blockades of faculties, the formulation of students demands and the organization of road blockades, mass protests, and general strikes they have continued exposing systemic corruption and criminal activity that have marked the everyday life of Serbia's citizens in the past years.

At the time of writing (November 2025), the student-led protests are not subsiding, but rather gaining momentum. The most recent major protest took place on the first of November in Novi Sad to commemorate one year since the tragedy happened.[3] Since their initiation the student-led protests have witnessed a steady increase in supporters, sug-

gesting a high degree of public solidarity across the Serbian society. The student movement has revived a sense of agency and collective responsibility and has woken citizens up from decades of political apathy.

This article provides an analysis of the ongoing student-led protest movement in Serbia, tracing its origins, evolution, and expanding scope. It examines the key actors involved, the central demands driving the mobilisation as well as the government and international responses to the growing protests. Analysing the impact of the movement on national and regional politics, it concludes by offering recommendations for relevant stakeholders to address underlying causes and mitigate further escalation.

The Evolution and Spread of Protests

In response to an incident on the 22 November 2024, when students and professors at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDU) in Belgrade, who were publicly mourning the victims of the tragedy, were attacked by individuals allegedly linked to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), FDU students blocked their faculty, demanding the prosecution of the perpetrators. Their action caused a chain reaction: within weeks, students across Serbia voted to block their faculties in solidarity. By then end of December 2024, more than two-thirds of faculties had joined, which practically halted higher education in the whole country, as all academic activity in these institutions was suspended.

Anti-government protest in Belgrade following the Novi Sad railway station disaster. 22 December 2024. Source: Reuters

The protests, led by the "Students in Blockade" movement, soon expanded beyond faculty premises, with daily 15 minute – later 16 minute – road blockades and silent vigils in memory of the victims of the Novi Sad tragedy, ad-hoc protests in front of institutions, and large-scale rallies drawing tens of thousands of participants. The central symbol of the protests became a red, blood-stained hand and the slogan "corruption kills", reflecting the protesters' conviction that the tragedy was a direct result of systemic corruption.

Anti-government protest in Belgrade following the Novi Sad railway station disaster. 22 December 2024. Source: Reuters

By July 2025, protests were held in more than 500 cities and towns across Serbia.[4] Demonstrations in Novi Sad, Kragujevac, Niš and Novi Pazar attracted massive crowds. Students symbolically walked, ran, or cycled hundreds of kilometres across the country to reach protest sites. The students' actions captured the public's attention, and they were welcomed by citizens who offered them food and accommodation. Attendance peaked on the 15 March 2025 during the protest "15th for 15" in Belgrade, with a local citizens' association "Arhiv Javnih Skupova" reporting between 275,000 and 325,000 participants, making it the largest mass protest in Serbia's modern history.[5]

After months of government inaction and silence from European institutions, the students expanded their efforts internationally. They ran and cycled across Europe to address EU institutions in person and raise awareness about the situation in Serbia.[6] The students were supported throughout their journey by the Serbian diaspora, which had already been active in organising protests in several European cities to show their support for the student-led movement.[7]

From the outset, the students have emphasised that their initiatives and protests are non-violent with a strong focus on the fulfilment of their publicly communicated demands. These demands initially encompassed four key points, including the release of all documents related to the Novi Sad train station's renovation, the call for an investigation into the criminal responsibility of those who physically attacked students and professors, the dismissal of criminal charges against arrested and detained students at protests as well as the suspension of initiated criminal proceedings against them and a 20 percent increase to the higher education budget.[8]

At the initial stages of the protests, students repeatedly refused invitations from the president of Serbia for dialogue insisting that the institution headed by him is - according to the Serbian constitution - not competent to fulfil their demands, pointing at the judiciary and Public Prosecutor's Office as competent institutions. Instead, ad-hoc protests were held in front of the government-controlled public broadcasting company (Radio Televi-

sion of Serbia, RTS) to demand objective reporting about the protests and at the Public Prosecutor's Office to denounce institutional inaction and call for the release of unlawfully detained activists.[9]

Daily blockades and protests were used not only as a platform to spotlight calls for institutional accountability, transparency and the respect for the rule of law, but also as a mechanism to enforce the fulfilment of the demands. Due to their organised structure, demonstrated integrity and collective responsibility, the students succeeded in mobilising citizens from diverse social and professional backgrounds - including farmers, taxi drivers, journalists, artists, medical staff, academics and others - who all joined the demonstrations in support of the students' demands. High school students also participated by occupying their high school buildings.

In the early days of the protests, the students emphasised that they were not interested in politics, highlighting that their activism was directed solely towards the fulfilment of their demands. As the movement evolved, their demands evolved from incident-based calls for accountability to the questioning of political legitimacy. In May 2025, after six months of continuous blockades and protests, the students came forward with a demand for snap elections, noting that the continuous inactivity of the responsible institutions, which had not responded to their demands, led them to this step. This marked a significant shift, as the protests formally shifted from anti-corruption protests into anti-government protests. Despite calling for snap elections, the students explicitly stated that they did not want to be considered as potential electoral candidates themselves.

The students continue to find creative ways to launch new initiatives and further expand the reach of the movement. They launched the "ask a student" initiative, with the aim of initiating direct communication with the local population in smaller towns and rural areas in Serbia in order to dispel falsehoods communicated by pro-government media about the movement. They have also encouraged citizens to form so-called "citizen assemblies" in line with the model of direct democracy with a view to tackling the most pressing political and social questions in their own communities.[10] Most recently, a platform for the safe and anonymous reporting of corruption – SKIK – was launched. It aims to expose injustices by drawing on information provided by citizens who "feel a moral duty to speak out against corruption and wrongdoing".[11]

Government Response and Escalating Tensions

Serbia has a long history of student activism and uprisings, most notably the anti-government protests of the 1990s that helped bring down Slobodan Milošević in 2000. The current student mobilisation echoes past movements in terms of its youth-led energy, symbolic use of public space and demands for accountability. But there are also key differences: whereas earlier movements merged around political parties and opposition leadership, the current one remains more decentralized, horizontal, leaderless and self-organised. Having no formal leaders is a deliberate choice to ensure democratic decision-making and protect individuals from retaliation.

Since 2012, President Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party has consolidated authoritarian control through concentrating executive power, capturing state institutions, and realising dominance over the majority of national media outlets. In his first public statement after the tragedy, the president denied that the canopy of the railway station was renovated, a claim that was later proven to be false. Subsequent government response to the blockades and protests began with the denial of government responsibility, combined with the targeting of protesters by pro-government tabloids. This then evolved into justifying the violent behaviour of individuals towards peaceful protesters and escalated into the use of excessive and disproportionate force against protesters by the national security forces.

Government officials and pro-government tabloids accused the students of being fi-

nanced by foreign powers and being initiators of a so-called "coloured revolution" - labelling them terrorists solely for stating their opinion.[12] The Security Information Agency and the Ministry of Internal Affairs invited students for interviews and pro-government tabloids published sensitive personal information of students who spoke out publicly.[13] Perpetrators, who were charged with criminal offences, because they attacked and injured students on several occasions during peaceful protests, were later pardoned by the president.[14] Pressure was also exercised on academic institutions supportive of the protests which included, but was not limited to, government funds being withheld, payment of salaries being delayed, teachers being fired and a public smear campaign being orchestrated against members of the academia.[15]

Students' protest march in Kragujevac. 14 February 2025. Source: Reuters

Reports of the alleged use of a sonic weapon during the 15th of March 2025 protest in Belgrade marked a turning point in the escalation of government responses to demonstrations. Witnesses and civil society groups claimed that a sound canon was activated during a moment of silence for the Novi Sad victims, causing panic and injuries among protesters. The authorities initially denied possessing such equipment, later admitting the police do own sonic devices but that one was never used.[16] This contradictory communication fuelled calls for an independent international investigation.[17]

The mass protest held in Belgrade on the 28th of June 2025 saw a further increase in disproportionate government response and an escalation of violence. Widespread allegations of human rights abuse by security forces against protesters occurred, including the disproportionate use of force (also against minors), arbitrary arrests and detention, ill-treatment in detention and threats of severe physical and gender-based violence.[18]

To counter the mobilisation of protesters, the government organized pro-government rallies. A group calling itself "Students who want to study" (Students 2.0) that set up a camp in Belgrade's city centre, was widely recognized as a government-backed counter initiative joined by retired members of controversial special forces accused of human rights violations, protected by the state police and applauded by the president.[19]

Despite the large scale and persistence of the protests, the government currently remains

in power. Its resilience stems from a combination of its control of state institutions and the media, orchestrated smear campaigns against opponents and the crack down on activists. Yet a survey implemented by the non-governmental organization CRTA in September 2025 found that the share of citizens with a moderate or undefined attitude towards anti-government protests is decreasing - 58 percent support them, 39 percent do not. It also recorded that almost two-thirds of citizens see snap elections as a possibility to resolve the political crisis.[20]

The government's response to the protests should also be looked at in terms of Serbia's broader geopolitical positioning. President Vučić's administration has long navigated between European integration on the one hand and strategic partnerships with Russia and China on the other, while leveraging this ambiguity to consolidate control within the country. The state's repressive response to the protests reflects a government that relies on authoritarian methods to preserve internal stability while simultaneously trying to maintain the appearance of international cooperation. The student movement poses not only a domestic challenge but a geopolitical one - it challenges the government's ability to present itself abroad as a stable and reform-oriented partner while violently suppressing dissent within the country.

First anniversary of the fatal November 2024 Novi Sad railway station canopy collapse. 1 November 2025. Source: Reuters

International Responses

International engagement with the student-led protests in Serbia was initially slow and relatively limited. International media coverage remained narrow with only minimal engagement from the international community. For the duration of the still-ongoing protests, the majority of high-ranking officials across the European Union (EU) have responded with silence, most likely due to political and economic interests in Serbia, which received candidate status as an EU accession country back in 2012. President Vučić has been on the political stage in Serbia for the past three decades and is considered to be a guarantor of stability despite the authoritarian nature of his rule.

The adoption of the European Parliament's "Resolution on polarisation and increased repression in Serbia" in October 2025 marks a turning point in EU response to the protests.

The resolution provides a detailed analysis of the situation in Serbia that has developed since the Novi Sad tragedy, and for the first time offers a critical assessment of the government with regard to its ongoing human rights violations, restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, the decline of media independence, as well as its non-compliance with relevant legal procedures when concluding international economic and infrastructure agreements. The resolution condemns the intimidation of journalists and civil society and retaliation against the academic community. [21]

Prior to the resolution, a group of UN human rights experts issued a joint statement raising alarm over the response of the authorities to peaceful protests in Serbia, while noting the excessive use of force, arrests without legal justification, unlawful surveillance and intimidation of peaceful demonstrators. The experts noted: "What we are witnessing in Serbia is a systematic attempt to silence critical voices and dismantle the independence of academic institutions. This is not just a student protest - it is a test of human rights accountability and democratic resilience." [22]

The concerns raised by the European Parliament and the UN align closely with the issues raised by students, who continue to emphasise the link between corruption, the lack of institutional accountability and democratic decay. While the international response did not alter the government approach in the short term it does provide the movement with even greater legitimacy, amplifying its calls for accountability.

What's at Stake

The current mobilisation of students, joined by wider civil society, constitutes one of the most significant tests of Serbia's democratic path in recent years, exposing deep tensions between calls for accountability and a government that remains resistant to structural change and lasting reforms. The movement has evolved into a struggle over the question whether Serbia will continue a path of authoritarianism and corruption or shift towards genuine democratic reforms.

For civil society in Serbia, the protests offer both hope and challenge. On one hand, they demonstrate that youth-led activism can gather momentum, cross geographic and religious divides and challenge dominant narratives. On the other, state push-back, and the absence of fair conditions for political participation mean that sustaining momentum could be challenging.

While rooted in the Serbian context, the implications of the protests have the potential to extend beyond Serbia's borders. The protests have resonated with youth and civil society in neighbouring states that face similar democratic challenges. They offer a model of student mobilisation intersecting with broader societal grievances in an authoritarian context. They show that activism finds new forms when institutional trust erodes, even in countries often portrayed as set in their political trajectory. The student-led protests have challenged the prevailing power structures in Serbia and opened space for democratic change.

For the EU the events in Serbia present a critical moment to reassert its credibility as a defender of democracy and human rights. A failure to respond decisively to the current situation in Serbia risks further distancing pro-European voices and deepening the perception that the EU tolerates an authoritarian rule for the sake of economic gain and apparent short-term stability.

How the current crisis resolves will shape Serbia's immediate future and echo across the Balkans and beyond. The real test will be whether they generate sustainable and lasting institutional reform or dissolve into another cycle of protests without transformative change. If the protests can transition into meaningful political change, they could offer hope to citizens in similarly constrained political environments. If the transformation fails, because of

continued repression or manipulated elections, the message could be that protests were not persistent enough. Whether the student-led movement becomes a turning point or spirals into another cycle of repression will depend on the willingness of institutions - national and international - to respond to citizens' demands for justice, transparency, and genuine democratic reforms.

What is evident is that Serbia has yielded a generation of young people who are more politically aware and engaged and who have no intention of giving up on their fight for a more peaceful and democratic society.

Recommendations

To the Student Movement and National Civil Society:

- Maintain non-violent principles: Continue emphasising peaceful protest methods, transparent decision-making through plenums, and independence from political parties to preserve legitimacy and avoid government framing as violent or foreign-backed.

- Document systematically: Establish secure channels for reporting human rights violations and maintain public archives of evidence for future accountability processes, including police brutality and corruption.

- Prepare for political transition: If a student list is established, ensure transparent candidate selection mechanisms, and robust election monitoring networks.

To the Serbian Government:

- Engage in dialogue: Respond in good faith to student demands and consider snap elections under conditions ensuring free and fair electoral processes.

- Cease intimidation: Stop "informative interviews", surveillance, doxxing of activists, and labelling protesters as "terrorists"; dismantle government-backed counter-protest groups.

- Guarantee fundamental freedoms: Protect freedom of assembly, press, and association without police violence, arbitrary arrests, or reprisals.

To the European Union:

- Apply consistent political pressure: Publicly recognize the legitimacy of student demands, continue to condemn police brutality, and implement the October 2025 European Parliament resolution calling for accountability.

- Support civil society: Increase funding for independent media, human rights defenders, and election monitoring; provide protective measures for activists facing persecution.

- Use economic leverage: Review financial assistance in light of human rights violations to ensure EU investments don't indirectly support corrupt practices and consider targeted sanctions against individuals credibly implicated in corruption or serious abuses.

To International Organizations (UN, Council of Europe, OSCE):

- Investigate violations: Establish an international commission of inquiry to investigate excessive force, and other human rights abuses; conduct country visits by UN Special Rapporteurs.

- Monitor compliance: Issue regular public reports on Serbia's compliance with international human rights obligations and European Convention commitments.

- Observe elections: Deploy robust OSCE election observation missions for any upcoming elections, monitoring both election day and the pre-election environment.

To International Media and Diaspora:

- Maintain sustained coverage: Continue reporting even as protests extend over time; amplify student voices while protecting their safety.

- Investigate and expose: Document corruption networks, international connections enabling authoritarianism, and human rights violations with evidence supporting accountability.

- Mobilise advocacy: Organise solidarity protests, lobby host governments to address Serbia's situation in bilateral relations, and counter disinformation through diaspora networks.

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