

A SECOND VELVET REVOLUTION: ARMENIA, 2018

Key points

- 1.** The Velvet Revolution drew on a **groundwork of mobilisation** forged by earlier struggles that entrenched a **culture of nonviolent protest** and passed down collective know-how. **Credible leadership**, embodied by Nikol Pashinyan, provided confidence and direction, while high-school and university students formed a decisive critical mass.
- 2.** Organisation coalesced around **social networks**, which synchronised actions and upheld nonviolent discipline. **Targeted blockades** exerted effective pressure without excessive violence; music and symbols broadened the movement; and anticipating **military defections** hastened the tipping of the balance of power.
- 3.** Armenia's experience now faces **major challenges**: ensuring **independent institutions**, combating **corruption**, and safeguarding **electoral integrity**. **Diplomacy** must strike a balance to diversify support without a brutal rupture. Finally, preserving a **broad social alliance**, and institutionalising the role of women, youth, and civil society, appears essential to avoid fatigue and the personalisation of power.



SUMMARY



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CHRONOLOGY

MARCH 31, 2018

Nikol Pashinyan and a group of supporters **launch a march called My Step** from Gyumri to Yerevan, the capital.

APRIL 17

Parliament elects Serzh Sargsyan as Prime Minister.

APRIL 23 (MORNING)

Uniformed soldiers join the marches.

MAY 1

First parliamentary vote: Pashinyan's election fails (by 6 votes).

DECEMBER, 2018

Snap parliamentary elections: sweeping victory for the My Step bloc; deep renewal of the Assembly.

APRIL 13

Near-daily demonstrations begin across the country.

APRIL 22

Meeting between S. Sargsyan and N. Pashinyan; talks fail. Pashinyan and activists are arrested.

APRIL 23 (AFTERNOON)

S. Sargsyan resigns.

MAY 8

Pashinyan is elected Prime Minister (59 votes, 53 required).

I. CONTEXT

Armenia is a small Caucasus state of 3 million inhabitants, landlocked between Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Georgia. In the 20th century, it experienced a succession of regimes: first a short-lived independence with the First Republic (1918–1920), quickly followed by its integration into the Soviet Union.

Under the Soviet regime, Armenia functioned as a socialist republic with a constitution modeled on that of the USSR, with a single party controlling political life. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, it proclaimed its independence, and in 1995 it adopted a new constitution, establishing a democratic and sovereign state.

Despite this, in 2018 Armenia was also marked by endemic corruption (ranked 110th out of 183 countries by the Corruption Perceptions Index in 2017) and an oligarchic system, and its judiciary was suspected of verdicts being bought (5).



Map of the British Foreign Service

Armenian society has a long memory of mobilisations: under the USSR, the largest demonstrations occurred after Stalin’s death. In 1965, more than 100,000 people commemorated the genocide in Yerevan. Above all, the year 1988, with major mobilisations in Stepanakert and Yerevan around the Karabakh question, followed by the trauma of the Sumgait pogroms, constitutes the matrix of contemporary collective action in Armenia.

Between 2011 and 2015, civil society toughened itself step by step. In 2011, collectives in Yerevan had contested urban projects withdrawn or revised. In 2013, the “100 dram” campaign won the suspension of bus fare hikes. In 2015, “Electric Yerevan” peacefully blocked Baghramyan Avenue and led to the freezing of electricity price increases. These episodes forged operational skills, built networks, and founded confidence in collective capacity: **these one-off victories demonstrate the effectiveness of coordinated, nonviolent actions.**

A central figure of the Republican Party, Serzh Sargsyan led Armenia as President from 2008 to 2018. In 2015, he had a constitutional reform adopted that transferred most executive power to the Prime Minister, while stating that he would not seek that post. At the end of his two presidential terms, however, his parliamentary majority elected him Prime Minister in April 2018. For a large part of the population, this sequence — reform, promise, about-face — looked like a maneuver to stay in control. **His reversal was perceived as a betrayal and sparked the protest movement.** The “Velvet Revolution” of April-May 2018 was distinguished by its nonviolent discipline, which earned it this nickname, in reference to the Czechoslovak revolution ([see our study on the subject](#)), and by its speed: it shows that a peaceful alternation of power is possible under certain conditions (cf. infra).

II. THE PROTEST

1. CIVIC LEADERSHIP: THE FIGURE OF NIKOL PASHINYAN



Nikol Pashinyan

Born in 1975, **Nikol Pashinyan** first made his mark as an opposition journalist: in 1998 he founded Oraguir, **a daily that was shut down the following year by the authorities**, then in 1999 he took over as editor of Haikakan Jamanak, a post he held until 2012. In 2008, during opposition protests against a presidential election deemed fraudulent and the contested victory of Serzh Sargsyan, he became known to the broader public: clashes with law enforcement left ten people dead, and, accused of being one of the ringleaders, he went into hiding for a year before turning himself in to the police. **Sentenced to seven years in prison, he was amnestied in 2011.** He then returned via the ballot box: elected to parliament in 2012, he founded the Civil Contract party in 2015, then co-founded the Yelk coalition in 2017 (0). From this trajectory emerges a leadership that combines activist capital, media visibility, and a particular credibility with a disillusioned youth.

2. START OF THE PROTESTS

The spark and the launch.

On March 31, 2018, with the prospect of Serzh Sargsyan's reelection, **Nikol Pashinyan, drawing inspiration from Gandhi's great marches, set off from Gyumri toward Yerevan**, passing through northern towns. Starting with a handful of companions, he turned the march into a roving organising tool: the slogan "*Merjir Sergin*" ("*Refuse Serge*") was chanted, stages were announced live on Facebook, and meetings were held in the open air. The movement enlisted local relays, so at each stop civic activists, students, teachers, Yelk militants, and ordinary citizens weary of the constitutional maneuver joined in. **Over the roughly 250 kilometers**, the procession swelled, and **as it neared the capital it already brought together tens of thousands of people.**

A young, social-media-organised, and inclusive movement.

From the earliest days, **Facebook structured the mobilisation:** route announcements, nonviolence guidelines, rallying points, and real-time rumor correction. The repertoire blended sit-ins, rotating blockades, and micro-cultural events; **the song "*Im Kayle*" ("*My Step*")**, written by Pashinyan, became the movement's unofficial anthem, easing adoption and retention of its messages. The presence of university and high-school students, often after classes, and the visibility of women anchored an inclusive urban dynamic that was not confined to the capital (5).

Escalation of the protest.

On April 13, protests became near-daily and spread to many cities. Participants **blocked major thoroughfares and strategic buildings (Foreign Affairs, the tax service) while maintaining a peaceful line** (2). On April 17, parliament's election of Serzh Sargsyan as Prime Minister acted as an accelerant, and several dynamics intensified: turnout, the social diversification of the marches, and the multiplication of coordinated pressure points (2).

The attempt to contain it... and the boomerang effect.

A meeting between Pashinyan and S. Sargsyan on April 22 quickly broke down. Pashinyan was detained, **and the Interior Ministry authorised the use of force by riot units (2)(5).** The effect was the opposite of what was intended: rallies surged nationwide, notably in Vanadzor and Gyumri (5).

3. RESIGNATION, THEN ARDUOUS PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS... AND PASHINYAN'S VICTORY

On the morning of April 23, 2018, **uniformed soldiers joined the marches**. This visible defection cracked the coercive apparatus and reframed the political cost of repression. In the afternoon, Serzh Sargsyan resigned. **The propagation triggered by a minority march thus, in three weeks, overturned the sequence thanks to the combination of clear leadership, digital logistics, and a broadened social coalition** (2). “*Nikol Pashinyan was right. And I was wrong*” (2)(6), admitted Serzh Sargsyan. “*The street movement did not want me to be Prime Minister. I am meeting your demand, and I wish peace and harmony to our country.*”

The institutional sequence was tense: on May 1, parliament initially rejected Pashinyan's candidacy (2)(3). What followed were general strikes and massive blockades, then defections within the Assembly (2)(4). **On May 8, Pashinyan was elected Prime Minister**. In December 2018, snap elections gave a large majority to the My Step bloc and ushered in an unprecedented rejuvenation of the political class (0). This banner served as an electoral vehicle and brought together parties, grassroots groups, and nonpartisan figures: victory in the Yerevan municipal elections in September, then a landslide in the December snap parliamentary elections. Pashinyan thus quickly established himself as a reliable figure, articulating both popular and institutional legitimacy.



Mobilisation in Republic Square in Yerevan, April 22, 2018

III. DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE: ARMENIA PUT TO THE TEST

1. DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATION UNDER REGIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Armenia's democratic transformation must **take into account precarious regional balances, given its authoritarian neighborhood and the Karabakh dispute. Russia remains a security partner and its leading trading partner**. On the European side, voices are being raised, such as those of Anders Fogh Rasmussen, a Danish statesman and former UN Secretary-General, urging the EU to move beyond equidistance and offer Armenia a gradual path toward candidate status, in order to consolidate the transition and the pro-Western pivot, and to reduce the asymmetry vis-à-vis Moscow. (8)

2. INTERNAL CRISIS: THE ARMY AND THE CHURCH

In addition to Yerevan's defeats in Karabakh, **two destabilising episodes have marked political life. First, military destabilisation:** on February 25, 2021, the General Staff called for the Prime Minister's resignation; Nikol Pashinyan denounced an "*attempted coup*" and dismissed the army chief (10). The streets mobilised massively in his favor: a diverse crowd, far beyond youth, refused to let the defeat against Azerbaijan serve as a pretext for the return of former leaders. This popular surge confirmed the resilience of the democratic turn begun in 2018.

Second, religious destabilisation: on June 25, 2025, the authorities announced they had foiled a plot involving a high dignitary of the Apostolic Church, Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan; the investigation is ongoing.

A signal emerges from these episodes: Armenian democracy is, for now, resilient but exposed to various threats, both exogenous and endogenous. (11)

3. ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORTS AND ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

Following the Velvet Revolution, the Pashinyan government made the fight against corruption a central pillar of the transition. **Between 2019 and 2022, a genuine institutional architecture was built: an Anti-Corruption Policy Council under the authority of the Prime Minister; a Corruption Prevention Commission responsible for monitoring assets and the integrity of public officials; an Anti-Corruption Committee with investigative powers; and specialised courts to try corruption cases.** These mechanisms, complemented by a beneficial ownership register, the online publication of asset declarations, and the confiscation of illicit assets, helped restore public trust and give substance to the revolution's promise of transparency. **Armenia's Corruption Perceptions Index score (Transparency International) thus rose from 35/100 in 2018 to 46/100 in 2022, reflecting notable improvement despite implementation challenges and risks of long-term stagnation. (13)**

Strengthening electoral integrity became a priority in response to OSCE grievances (2017) denouncing vote-buying and pressure on voters. **From 2018 onward, substantial reforms were implemented: elimination of the controversial "*ratingayin*" lists that facilitated fraud; introduction of electronic identification devices to authenticate voters; tougher penalties against vote-buying; and greater transparency in ballot counting.** These measures led international observers to judge the 2018 and 2021 elections broadly free and competitive, marking a clear break with the contested electoral practices of the previous era.



Nikol Pashinyan during a mobilisation in Yerevan, April 13, 2018

IV. OPERATIONAL LESSONS

1. FERTIL GROUND FOR MOBILISATION

- The social gains from earlier mobilisations (2011, 2013, 2015) **established a culture of nonviolent protest and passed down collective know-how**, nurturing the shared idea that coordinated civic action can truly deliver results (0)(5).
- **Clear and credible leadership eased buy-in: Nikol Pashinyan's activist/media trajectory inspired confidence**, while his simple slogans and short horizon (resignation, elections) offered a clear and attainable direction (0).
- Youth, university and high-school students, formed a significant critical mass, and scheduling the mobilisation at compatible times, with accessible rituals, **facilitated the rapid broadening of the marches and their sustained momentum** (0).

2. ORGANISING METHODS AND CONDUCT OF ACTION

- Social media served as the movement's backbone: **Facebook and live streams made it possible to synchronise actions**, maintain nonviolent discipline, and defuse propaganda or rumors in real time (0).
- Music and symbols, **especially the song "Im Kayle," paired with a positive framing (humour et civility)**, made the mobilisation more inclusive and legible, opening it far beyond activist circles alone (0)(5).
- **Targeted blockades** (intersections, the airport, border crossings for a few hours) maximised pressure while minimising friction and violence, which produced a public narrative favorable to the movement (2)(4).
- Anticipating tipping points was decisive: **the visible defection of part of the armed forces (uniformed soldiers on April 23) signaled that the coercive apparatus was no longer monolithic**, a result of contacts and assurances prepared upstream (2).

3. THINKING AHEAD: INSTITUTIONAL LOCK-INS AND EXTERNAL ANCHORING

- Anti-corruption and electoral integrity: for a revolution or breakaway movement not to remain merely symbolic, **it is essential to establish independent institutions with legally defined powers, and to ensure that accountability mechanisms (investigative commissions, the courts, asset confiscation, etc.) are operational and protected over time**, in order to anchor citizens' trust and reduce the risk of backsliding.
- **A tightrope-walking diplomacy proved necessary**: multilateralizing support (the EU and partners) to reduce dependence on Russia without provoking a brutal rupture, along a gradual path (updating the CEPA, then a DCFTA [ALECA], and ultimately candidate status) (1).
- **Preserving a broad social alliance carried the victory**. Institutionalizing the place of women, youth, and civil society in governance helps prevent fatigue and the personalization of power. (12)

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