

# Armenia

Last update:	2 juni 2020
Population:	2,963,243 (2020)
Prime minister:	Nikol Pashinian
President:	Armen Sarkissian
Governemental type:	Parliamentary republic
Ruling coalition:	My Step party
Last election:	9 December 2018 (Parliamentary elections)
Next election:	
Sister parties:	Armenian Revolutionary Federation - Dashnaktsutsyun

Armenia's political climate has been uprooted by mass protests, later dubbed the Velvet Revolution, that took place in April/May of 2018, resulting in the deposition of a president and government that had been led by the Republican party for some 15 years. The mass protests were triggered by the announcement that then-President Serzh Sargsyan would be seeking out the post of PM despite his earlier pledges to not do so. Sargsyan had overseen a constitutional amendment, accepted through a referendum in 2015, which transformed Armenia into a parliamentary republic in April 2018. This was at the same time as the election of the new prime minister. Most of the president's power would be carried over to the new prime minister and his cabinet. The opposition had been critical, believing that this was simply an attempt by Serzh Sargsyan to remain in power in a different capacity after the end of his second and final presidential term. They were proven right with his sudden turnaround, triggering mass protests led by opposition politician Nikol Pashinyan. After weeks of peaceful mass protests, Sargsyan was forced to resign, and Pashinyan was elected PM. In October, Pashinyan stepped down so the parliament would be dissolved, thus paving the way for early elections. Pashinyan's alliance won the elections, which for the first time were declared free and fair by international observers, convincingly, thus solidifying the results of the Velvet Revolution and demonstrating his immense popularity. He now has the mandate to fulfil all his promises of developing democracy and rule of law in Armenia. The next parliamentary election in Armenia will be held on December 9 2023.

## Political Situation

The Republican Party of Armenia dominated Armenian politics for decades. Chairman of the party, Serzh Sargsyan, became president in 2008. Under his rule, the grip of the party and its strongmen over the country was solidified. Even though elections were generally viewed as fair and free, they weren't competitive and there were many allegations of vote-buying. The ruling party dominated the government with a majority in parliament, marginalising the opposition. During the 2017 parliamentary elections, many parties in parliament lost all their seats. The Republican Party won an absolute majority and entered a coalition with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutyun (ARF-D), as it had in 2012.

In this climate, protests sparked by civic initiatives became very common in Armenia's capital Yerevan as well as in Gyumri and Vanadzor, its second and third largest cities respectively. These initiatives have mainly been organised by a post-Soviet generation of young civic activists without any political party affiliation, who address a range of issues including the environment, cultural preservation, consumer rights, prices of basic commodities, labour and employment issues, as well as human rights.

Although civic initiatives in Armenia address very specific and sometimes narrowly focused issues (e.g. saving a waterfall, public park, preventing a public transport price hike etc.), their emergence is informed by and articulates much broader concerns about corruption, the absence of rule of law, lack of democracy, rise of oligarchic capitalism, and the failure of formal political elites to address the concerns of ordinary Armenian citizens. The introduction and spread of social media, including Facebook and YouTube, as well as live-streaming technology, has allowed civic activists to access information more easily and to organise and mobilise much more effectively and rapidly. Most of the initiatives of recent years – with the biggest ones up until 2018 under the hashtags #NoToPlunder or #ElectricYerevan - have at least been partly successful.

## **Velvet revolution**

In early April of 2018, outgoing President Sargsyan was nominated by his ruling Republican Party as a candidate for the post of Prime Minister. With an absolute majority in parliament, there was no doubt he would be elected. This move was highly controversial. Sargsyan just ended his second and final presidential term in April 2018. During his term, he and the Republican Party launched an initiative that would change the constitution and transfer crucial powers from the President to the PM. The opposition from the very start feared this was simply a ploy for Sargsyan to remain in power as PM, but when the constitutional changes were accepted during a referendum, Sargsyan had explicitly pledged not to seek the post of PM. When in late March 2018 he did do so after all, the move underlined the corruption and nepotism that had underlined Sargsyan's rule.

In reaction to the nomination, the opposition called for protests. Most notable was Nikol Pashinyan, MP and one of the leaders of Yelk, an opposition alliance of three parties (including Pashinyan's own Civil Contract party), with 9 seats in parliament. In the following days, large crowds gathered in central Yerevan, blocking its streets and intersections. This culminated in a march on parliament when Sargsyan was officially elected as PM in a parliament session, while the crowds faced off with a police cordon outside.

Apart from a couple of small clashes and some hard-handed arrests there were practically no cases of mass beatings or crackdowns. Within days the protests had not only spread to the outskirts of Yerevan but also to other cities and towns across the country. Attempted talk between Pashinyan and Sargsyan on April the 22<sup>nd</sup> ended with the latter walking out after 3 minutes, angered by the presence of journalists and Pashinyan's insistence on his resignation. After the talks, Pashinyan and most leaders of the protest were arrested. Instead of demotivating the protesters, this caused the pouring out of an unprecedented number of people onto the streets, with students taking over the lead as the politicians were jailed.

Under such massive public pressure, Sargsyan resigned his post while Pashinyan was released alongside other protest leaders hours earlier on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April. The ruling Republican Party was not yet ready to give in, however. Calling for new PM elections within several days, the party held on to its power. Pashinyan called for continued protests. Talks between the government and protest leader broke down on April 25. Pashinyan, enjoying the support of all parliamentary opposition parties and even former coalition partner of the Republican Party, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, announced his candidacy for PM. The vote on May 1<sup>st</sup> was inconclusive. The Republican Party didn't bring forward their own candidate while refusing to support Pashinyan. A new vote was set for May 8<sup>th</sup>. Finally, under continuing protests and increasing public pressure on its MPs, the Republican Party agreed to provide the needed votes in parliament for Pashinyan to become PM. The party said it would do so not out of support for Pashinyan but in order to avoid a political crisis. Pashinyan won the vote on May 8<sup>th</sup> with 59 votes against 42. As Prime Minister, Pashinyan promised to hold a snap election as soon as possible. To make early elections possible, Pashinyan resigned, thereby dissolving the parliament and requiring elections. The parliamentary elections took place on the 9th of December and were won by Pashinyan's My Step Alliance.

## **Human Rights**

Reports have always shown that human rights violations remain an important issue in Armenia. The former authorities interfered in a number of peaceful protests that took place throughout the years. In several instances, police dispersed protesters using force. Local human rights defenders continued to raise concern over high numbers of reported beatings and ill-treatment in police custody.

The US State Department has noted "systemic corruption" as one of the most frequent and serious forms of human rights violation in Armenia, saying the former authorities were not doing enough to tackle it. Local anti-graft watchdogs like the Anti-Corruption Center (ACC), which operates as the Armenian branch of Transparency International, was highly sceptical about the former government's assurances of intention to tackle corruption. Armenia ranked 107th out of 174 countries and territories evaluated in Transparency International's 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI).

The post-revolutionary government of PM Nikol Pashinyan has made human rights and a fight against corruption its key points, next to eradicating monopolies and separating business from politics.

Violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity are serious problems as well. A few incidents were recorded when women's rights activists were threatened and assaulted, as well as threats made to the Women's Resource Centre following its calls for gender equality legislation. The anti-discrimination draft bill, prohibiting all forms of discrimination, was abandoned after the former government initiated the process to join the Eurasian Economic Union. While PM Pashinyan has singled

out the role of women in the Velvet Revolution and expressed hope it was only the beginning of women's active participation in politics, his cabinet includes only 2 female ministers of a total of 20. When confronted about this, he apologised. When it comes to violence against women, in January, Armenia signed but still has to ratify, the Council of Europe (CoE) Istanbul Convention on Prevention and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention).

According to a Reporters Without Borders' report regarding freedom of the media, there is a significant degree of pluralism and relatively little state censorship, as a law prohibits censorship in media. But still, there are laws through which defamation and libel can be punished by prison terms. Journalists have faced pressure, violence and charges under such laws. While it is too early to say whether and how the new government will affect change in this regard, it should be noted that PM Pashinyan, himself a former journalist, has so far been notably public and accessible to the media.

### **Armenia-EU relations**

In the wake of a positive conclusion to four years of negotiations between Armenia and the EU on an Association Agreement, it seemed that Armenia could start to look forward to deeper cooperation with the EU, which would hopefully bring strong economic and political benefits. However, only months before the planned signing of the Association Agreement, President Serzh Sargsyan, after a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, suddenly decided to make Armenia a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) instead, thereby precluding the AA. On 2 January 2015, Armenia became a full member of EEU. The move is widely believed to be the result of strong Russian pressure in the areas of economy, energy and security. The Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was signed on 24 November 2017. It replaces the former EU-Armenia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. As of August 2020 22 EU countries have completed the internal procedures necessary for the ratification of the CEPA, and 5 states – Spain, Belgium, Portugal, Greece and Italy, are very close to the completion of that ratification process.

Armenia and the EU are committed to further cooperation aimed at the continuous improvement of areas including democratic institutions and judiciary, the promotion of human rights and the rule of law, good governance, the fight against corruption, the strengthening of the civil society, and others.

### **Nagorno-Karabakh conflict**

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory called Nagorno-Karabakh. The people of Nagorno Karabakh had attempted to legally obtain their independence in the early 1990s through the referendum in accordance with the Soviet constitution provisions for the self-determination of ethnic groups residing within the Union of Soviet Republics. As it is already known, this decision sparked a full scale war between two nations and the result of this referendum was rejected by the Azeri Government. An Armenian populated enclave within the internationally recognised borders of Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh has been de facto independent from Azerbaijan since the war in the early 1990s, that ended with a truce signed in 1994. The now 'frozen conflict' has been ongoing for over two decades without a peace agreement. There are still frequent shootings across the frontline, with dozens of deaths each year. Each side blames the other for military casualties. The latest escalation was the so-called "April War" in April 2016 when an attack by Azerbaijani forces resulted in some small territory loss for the Armenian side.

Azerbaijan lost swathes of territory during the conflict, and more than 600,000 ethnic Azeris from Karabakh and nearby regions were forced to flee. More than 300,000 ethnic Armenians who used to live in Azerbaijan were also displaced by the conflict. Internationally, Nagorno-Karabakh is considered part of Azerbaijan, but its Armenian inhabitants call themselves citizens of the Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) Republic. Although self-governed, it depends financially and militarily on Armenia.

Peace negotiations mediated by the Minsk Group, under the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), have seen little progress.

Frustrated by the lack of a diplomatic solution, Azerbaijan's leadership has threatened to retake the territory militarily. Armenia believes that the conflict settlement should be based on the Nagorno-Karabakh people's right to self-determination and uninterrupted land communication with Armenia, under the jurisdiction of the Armenian side. Armenia also seeks international guarantees for the security of Nagorno-Karabakh. Not stabilising the regional conflict, both countries have different supporters who are entangled in the dispute. Turkey has promised to stand with Azerbaijan while Russia pledged to defend Armenia. Furthermore, the conflict affects oil and gas exports from the region, since Azerbaijan produces much of the resources which are being exported to Europe and Central Asia.

The latest escalation was in July 2020 between the Armenian Armed Forces and Azerbaijani Armed Forces.

### **Developments on Constitutional Court**

The Armenian parliament has adopted proposed changes to the constitution that would lead to the removal of Constitutional Court judges, potentially opening the door for Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to exert more influence over the South Caucasian nation. A total of 89 members of the National Assembly -- all affiliated with the ruling My Step bloc -- backed the draft constitutional amendments in the first and second readings on June 22. The votes were boycotted by the two opposition parties represented in the 132-seat legislature -- the Prosperous Armenia Party (BHK) and the Bright Armenia Party (LHK). The draft changes, unveiled last week by the My Step bloc of Pashinian, would lead to the immediate dismissal of three of the nine Constitutional Court members. It would also require the court to elect a new chairman. The current court chairman, Hrayr Tovmasian, and six other judges have been under strong government pressure to step down over the past year. Pashinian has accused them of maintaining close ties to the country's former government and impeding his judicial reforms. The seven judges have refused to quit.

## **Elections**

### **Electoral System**

Armenia changed to a parliamentary representative republic in April 2018 after constitutional changes were adopted in 2015, following a controversial referendum with a voter turnout of only 51 per cent, barely enough to make the vote valid. The president remains the head of state and the head of government but will hold mainly ceremonial powers. The executive power is exercised by the government, with the prime minister having the most influential position. The legislative power is exerted by both the government and the parliament. The parliament - the National Assembly - consists of 101 MPs that are directly elected every five years through a two-tier proportional system which includes national and district candidates. Regulations are based on the constitution and the Electoral Code, amended in 2005. It also rules on details like the proportion of female and male MPs in the National Assembly and the voting eligibility for Armenians living abroad. The country has a multi-party system, with a government usually consisting of a coalition, even if just a symbolic one: the ruling party usually manages to garner a majority on its own. The threshold to enter the parliament is 5 per cent for single parties and 7 per cent for blocs.

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### **Parliamentary Elections**

On 9 December 2018, Nikol Pashinyan won convincingly with his My Step Alliance in the early parliamentary elections with 70.4 per cent of the votes. With this win, Pashinyan holds the majority in parliament which allows him to impose the demanded reforms coming out of the Velvet Revolution last spring.

11 parties participated in the elections, but only two other parties besides the My Step alliance will enter the National Assembly: Prosperous Armenia Party (BHK), led by tycoon Gagik Tsarukyan, with 8.4 per cent and Bright Armenia, a former ally of Pashinyan's, with 6.4 per cent. The former ruling party, Republican Party (HHK), gained only 4.7 per cent of the votes falling short of the required 5 per cent threshold. Its occasional coalition partner, Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsyutsyun, also failed to pass the threshold gaining only 3.9 per cent.

### **Campaign**

The turnout was 48.6 per cent which is 12 per cent lower than with the previous elections. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) observers called the elections "democratic", saying they were held in freedom and there was genuine competition without vote-buying and pressure on voters. The previous parliamentary elections were marked by fraud, but according to the OSCE, this was not the case this time. They also noted the positive media environment, with many TV channels -- including state channels -- providing reasonably balanced coverage. For the first time debates were held between the leaders of all participating parties.

The ousted HHK claimed there to be irregularities, but European observers said they saw no proof for those claims. HHK and some

other critics also accused Pashinyan of inflammatory rhetoric and even hate speech during the campaign. His rhetoric was dividing the society into “us” (those who supported the revolution) and “them” (those who support the Republican Party, unspecified oligarchs and corrupt officials).

## Aftermath

All the parties who participated in the elections accepted the result. The Prime Minister will be appointed by the President. The candidate will be the one who is proposed by the majority, in this case, that will be Nikol Pashinyan. The result of this election gives him a huge mandate to implement any and all reforms he envisions. His My Step does not plan to enter any coalitions.

## Results Elections 2018

Party	Percentage	Seats
My Step Alliance	70.43%	88
Prosperous Armenia Party	8.27%	26
Bright Armenia Party	6.37%	18
Republican Party of Armenia (HHK)	4.70%	0
Armenian Revolutionary Federation	3.89%	0
Menq Alliance	2.00%	0
Sasna Tsrer Party	1.82%	0
Country of Law Party	0.75%	0
Citizen's Decision Social Democrat Party	1.66%	0
Christian-Democrat Rebirth Party	0.51%	0
National Progress Party	0.33%	0

## Presidential Elections

On 2 March 2018, the National Assembly elected the country's next president: Armen Sarkissian. Sarkissian was nominated for the post by the outgoing President Serzh Sargsyan and the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (HHK) in January 2018. He was also endorsed by the HHK's junior coalition partner, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutyun), and businessman Gagik Tsarukian's alliance, which is officially in opposition to the government.

To win the election he needed three-quarters of the parliamentarians to vote for him. Of those 79 seats, the ruling HHK and Dashnaktsutyun together have 65. 100 parliamentarians participated in the voting, 90 of them voting for and 10 against Sarkissian. In other words, the faction led by businessman Gagik Tsarukian sided with the ruling parties, as was expected due to its missing support for the opposition Yelk alliance, which is going to court against the election. Important to notice are the three MPs of the HHK, Dashnaktsutyun and/or Tsarukian Bloc who voted against Sarkissian, noticeable because only 7 Yelk members participated in the vote. The election was held through secret ballot so that the MPs remain unknown.

The opposition Yelk alliance, the fourth political group represented in parliament, has rejected Sarkissian's candidacy. In a joint statement with several non-governmental organisations, it said to doubt his eligibility because, according to the constitution, one can only be elected if he or she has been an Armenian citizen for the past six years leading up to the election. Sarkissian, a former ambassador to the United Kingdom, had said to have renounced his British citizenship in 2011 to re-adopt his Armenian passport, but the opposition found that a British local magazine published a record from the UK registry of companies referring to Sarkissian as a British national in 2014. The opposition has demanded proof of his claims from British authorities but until now he has failed to provide such proof. As of March 2018, the issue has not been solved. Sarkissian's presidential term will begin on 9 April.

## Social Democratic Parties

### Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaksutyun (ARF-D)

Party Leader: the party is led by a Supreme Council

Number of seats: 7 (elections 2017)

<http://www.arfd.info/>

The Armenian Revolution Federation was established in 1890 in Tbilisi. During the First Armenian Republic established in 1918 the party was in power, but it was banned following the Sovietisation of 1920. The party, however, continued to function in the diaspora. The party was reintroduced in Armenia after 1988, but was banned in 1994 by then President Levon Ter-Petrosyan on allegations of terrorism. The president took this and other allegations (following the constitution) to the Supreme Court. The Court concurred only with one of the president's accusations, that the ARF broke the Law on Parties by having non-Armenian citizens in its leadership. In 1998 then-president Robert Kocharian re-allowed the party and asked it to support him in his campaign for the presidential elections. The support was, however, more pragmatic than ideological. The ARF aims for "the creation of a free, independent and united Armenia" and is prominent in Nagorno-Karabakh, the break-away region of Azerbaijan de facto independently governed by local Armenians. The "Dashnaks" hope to once reunite the entire Armenian diaspora on the united Armenian lands. The party therefore is popular among the diaspora Armenians and receives much financial support from them. The main objectives of the party are the establishment of a minimum wage of 50,000 Drams, the establishment of an anti-corruption entity, and a minimum retirement benefit.

The party describes itself as essentially national, socialist, democratic and revolutionary. It is based on social justice, democracy and national self-determination for the Armenian people. The ARF is internationally recognised as a social democratic party, and became a full member of the Socialist International (SI) in 2003. Currently, the party is seeking to intensify the relationship with the Party of European Socialists (PES) and has officially the status of an observer.

The ARF has an extensive network of local organisations, also beyond the Armenian borders, and is structurally well-functioning.

### Citizen's Decision Social Democratic Party

Party Leader: Suren Sahakyan

Number of seats: 0

Citizen's Decision was founded in November 2018 after the Velvet Revolution. The party's origins can be traced back to the Mashtots Park Movement. During this protest activists occupied the Mashtots Park in an attempt to stop construction and preserve public green areas in Yerevan.

The party is not currently represented in parliament, but during their 2018 parliamentary election campaign they voiced criticisms of prime minister-turned-revolutionary leader Nikol Pashinyan for alleged shortcomings and advocated reforming the Constitution, the Electoral Code and instituting transitional justice.

The party advocates for the welfare state, redistribution of wealth, environmentalism, universal healthcare, free education, gender equality, support for trade unions and direct democracy. They also advocate for maintaining neutral relations with Russia, as well as establishing peace in the Caucasus region and self-determination of the Republic of Artsakh.

## Other Parties

### My Step Alliance (My Step)

Party Leader: Nikol Pashinyan

Number of seats: 88

<https://armenpress.am/eng/news/955824.html>

The My Step Alliance is a political alliance formed by Pashinyan's Civil Contract party, which is the leading party, the Mission Party and various representatives of the civil society. It was formed in August 2018, before the Yerevan City Council election, 2018. The leader of the alliance is the Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan.

On 31 March, at the beginning of the 2018 Armenian revolution, Nikol Pashinyan and a group of supporters began a march from Gyumri, Armenia's second largest city. The campaign, named "My Step", was declared with the intention to prevent Sargsyan's election as prime minister on 17 April. On 23 September 2018 the alliance participated and won in the Yerevan City Council election. The alliance ran in the Armenian parliamentary election, 2018. They won 88 out of 132 seats.

After the party's victory, Pashinyan stated that the Republic of Armenia again will become an industrial country and that the image of the country's economy will change in 2019. Moreover, he expressed the wish for several reforms to be made during 2019 to receive people's trust vote. Goal is, that the winner of all upcoming elections is chosen because of free expression of the citizen's will.

#### Bright Armenia Party (BAP)

Party Leader: Edmon Marukyan

Number of seats: 18

<https://brightarmenia.am/>

Bright Armenia is a liberal political party founded on December 12, 2015. In the Armenian parliamentary election in 2017 and in the Yerevan City Council election in 2017, it took part in the elections as part of the Way Out Alliance (YELQ) gaining few seats. In the Yerevan City Council elections in 2018 it run as a part of Bright Alliance. The Alliance won three seats, where Bright Armenia won two seats.

Leader of the party is Edmon Marukyan. He and his party called for raising relations with EU to the strategic partnership level. Bright Armenia also believes in maintaining cooperation with Russia, and ensuring that the interests of Armenia are not compromised in favor of other countries.

The Party is driven towards the development through liberal and progressive solutions and reforms. Their vision is that of a modernized Armenia with equal opportunities, where the citizen is not means but a purpose. Moreover, Democracy is a principle of initiative, as well as a basic value, by which it is driven. As a value, the Bright Armenia attaches importance to the development of democracy in Armenia and in institutions contributing to it. As a principle of action, it highlights the pluralisms and respect for freedom of expression.

#### Republican Party (Hayastani Hanrapetakan Kusaktsutyun) (HHK)

Party Leader: Serzh Sarkisian

Number of seats: 58 (elections 2017)

<http://www.hhk.am/en/>

The conservative Republican Party (HHK) was founded in 1990, and sees itself as the follower of the ideas of the Armenian national hero Gareghin Nzhdeh. According to his teachings, the trust in the nation's power, will, capacities, and future depends on the recognition of the nation. The party therefore stresses the importance of the nation over other religious, social or partisan entities.

The party has its roots in the National Independence Party founded in the 1970s in Soviet Armenia, pursuing Armenia's independence as its goal. The main founder, Ashot Navasardian, as well as former and now deceased leader Andranik Margaryan, were political prisoners in Soviet times. Current leader Serzh Sarkisian hails from Nagorno-Karabakh.

Political stability is the biggest interest for the HHK. Other important issues are the growth of the country's GDP, of its employment

rate and its retirement payments. The party is conservative in its values, but rather neo-liberal in its economic policies. In 1998, the comparably small HHK was joined by the political branch of the Yerkrepah Union, an organisation of Karabakh war veterans, and became one of the more influential parties of Armenia.

The HHK has been in governance since 1998, when it was part of the Unity bloc, a coalition with the People's Party. This bloc was dissolved in 2001 as a result of different opinions about new president Kocharian. After the 2003 elections, the HHK became the biggest party in parliament when many non-partisan MPs aligned with it. These parliamentarians generally are from the wealthy local elites and have the same interests as HHK: stability in their powerful position. The party has been in power ever since. The 2017 parliamentary elections were again won, leading to the formation of a coalition with the social-democratic Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaksutyun (ARF-D).

### Prosperous Armenia Party (BHK)

Party Leader: Naira Zohrabyan

Number of seats: 31 (elections 2017)

<http://www.bhk.am/en>

The Prosperous Armenia Party was formed in January 2006 by millionaire businessman Gagik Tsarukyan, who used to be a close associate of the president. BHK is a liberal conservative party, and the core party of the Tsarukyan Bloc in the National Assembly, which includes smaller, lesser-known parties. The party started out as rather pro-presidential and traditionally supported the governmental side. After the 2007 elections, Prosperous Armenia formed a coalition with the HHK. During the 2012 elections, the party managed to win 37 seats. The BHK nevertheless chose not to join the governing coalition, but for some times avoided calling itself an opposition party. However, it gradually became more and more critical of especially the economic policies of the government. This climaxed in a short but tense standoff between Tsarukyan and president Sarkisian in March 2015, after which Tsarukyan stepped down and announced that he would quit active politics. Tsarukyan's successor, BHK MP Naira Zohrabyan, started rebranding BHK into a 'real' opposition party. However, in the most important issues, the party has so far sided with the government. In February 2017, shortly before the parliamentary elections, BHK declared that Tsarukyan would return as party leader.

## Biographies

### Nikol Pashinian

Prime Minister

Nikol Pashinyan, born in 1975, is the leader of the My Step Alliance and the Civil Contract Party. He convincingly won the parliamentary elections on 9<sup>th</sup> of December, 2018. My Step Alliance gained 70.4% of the votes and therefore the majority in the parliament.

Pashinyan was originally a journalist, being the editor of The Armenian Times, which criticised Serzh Sargsyan's government. He started his political career within the movement of former president Levon Ter-Petrossian, the Armenian National Congress. He supported Ter-Petrossian in the elections of 2008, which had a violent aftermath with 10 people dying in clashes between protesters and the police. Several opposition politicians were charged afterwards, which led Pashinyan to go into hiding. Later he turned himself in and was released like many other political prisoners in 2011, after spending two years in jail.

In 2015, the Civil Contract was registered as a political party. The party participated in an alliance in the parliamentary elections of 2017 and gained 2 seats of the 9 seats won by the alliance.

Pashinyan became the face of the protests in Spring 2018 which resulted in the Velvet Revolution and the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan and his government. Pashinyan became the prime minister in May and early parliamentary elections took place in December that same year, which he won with his My Step Alliance.

### Edmon Marukyan

## Chairman of Bright Armenia

Edmon Marukyan was born on January 13, 1981, in Kirovakan, Armenia, then part of the Soviet Union. Marukyan graduated from the Moscow Institute of Commerce and Law in 2002 with a Bachelor of Law degree. In 2006, he qualified as a Specialist for the Protection of Human Rights and Interests in the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Warsaw. In 2007, he has graduated from the Public Administration Academy of the Republic of Armenia with a Master of Law degree. Three years later, in 2010, Marukyan received his Masters in Law studying Human Rights and International Law at the University of Minnesota Law School. Since 2001, Marukyan has been actively involved in human rights activism in Armenia. He has been the head of several non-government human rights organisations. Since 2001, he has specialised in the protection of human rights and has been considerably involved in the strengthening of democracy and civil society in Armenia. In 2005, as a human rights NGO representative, he became an observer at the Public Monitoring Group, observing the rights of persons taken into custody at criminal-executive institutions within Armenia.

In the 2017 parliamentary elections, Marukyan led the proportional list of the Way Out Alliance, which won 9 seats out of 105 in National Assembly, becoming the 3rd political power out of 4 entering the RA National Assembly.

In addition to his committee assignments, Marukyan has been a member of the Armenian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe since 2017. As part of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe group, he serves on the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination.

## Serzh Sargsyan

### Outgoing President

Born in 1954 in Nagorno-Karabakh, Serzh Sargsyan (also Sarkisian in Western Armenian) started his career as a metal turner, until he became head of the communist party's youth department. As tensions rose over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, Sargsyan became chairman of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic Self-Defence Forces Committee and was subsequently elected to the Supreme Council of Armenia in 1990. He organised several battles in the Nagorno-Karabakh War and is considered to be one of the founders of Nagorno-Karabakh's and Armenia's armed forces. Sargsyan started his national political career in Armenia in 1993, when he became the Armenian Defence Minister. In 2007, he became Prime Minister, but one year later he won the presidential elections, being widely considered to have been picked by his predecessor Robert Kocharian to succeed him. He had the backing of the ruling Republican Party in a strong victory in the first round. The elections were marred by violent protests that resulted in 10 deaths after clashes between police and protesters. Sargsyan became the third President of Armenia.

During his presidency he has pledged to comply with the Council of Europe's demands for an end to the government's crackdown on the opposition. In 2011, however, protests against Sargsyan started up again. A striking moment for his presidency were the protocols with Turkey in 2009, aimed to normalise the relations between the two countries, and open the border between them which had been closed since 1994. The process, initiated by Sargsyan, was hailed as a unique chance from the beginning, but ended without any results when Turkish authorities tied the normalisation process to a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the interest of Azerbaijan. Furthermore, Sargsyan has made an appeal to the UN to help bring peace to Nagorno-Karabakh while warning for increasing war rhetoric from the Azerbaijani side.

In April 2018, Sargsyan resigned after days of protests in Yerevan against his government, which critics accuse of corruption and authoritarian rule. The protestors opposed Sargsyan becoming prime minister, as he was accused of moving between roles of president and prime minister to maintain his grip on power after his presidency term came to an end. He is now leader of the Republican Party.

## Armen Sarkissian

### President

Armen Sarkissian, born in 1953, will soon be the fourth president of Armenia, succeeding Serzh Sargsyan. After studying physics and mathematics in the United Kingdom, he worked at Cambridge University and taught at Yerevan State University.

In 1991, he was appointed Armenia's very first ambassador to the UK. For a short time between 1996 and 1997, he served as the country's prime minister, and was later appointed as ambassador for a second term, until 1999. After that, he worked as an advisor and intermediary for British companies until he served as ambassador for his third term in 2013. He founded several international organisations and centres like, for example, the Eurasia House International and the Eurasia Centre at the Judge Business School

of Cambridge University. He holds high positions at universities and institutes across the globe, including the East West Institute and Harvard university.

For the presidential elections in March 2018, then president Serzh Sargsyan offered him to be a candidate for the ruling HHK. Accepting the candidacy, he won the elections with 90 of 105 MP-votes for and 10 against him. His election remains controversial because of a dispute over his citizenship. Opposition groups claim he is not eligible to run for office because he might not have had Armenian citizenship for the past six years leading up to the election, which, according to the constitution, is a crucial criterion.

### Gagik Tsarukyan

Leader of Tsarukyan Alliance

Gagik Tsarukyan was born in 1956 and is known for his wealth as a self-made man and former Olympic wrestler. His business Multi Group includes large companies in the alcohol, dairy and gas branch. He entered politics in the early 2000s, with his party Prosperous Armenia. He has very close ties to former President Robert Kocharyan, both as business partners and in politics. Some critics claim it was also Kocharyan who pushed Tsarukyan towards politics, saying that without his influence Prosperous Armenia would have never existed. In 2007, at entering national politics, Prosperous Armenia won 18 seats in the parliament.

During the years that followed, his party developed more and more as an opposition party, which eventually led to a clash between him and the president Serzh Sargsyan. The president accused him of parliamentary absenteeism and started to investigate his businesses and those of his allies. After this clash, Tsarukyan officially stepped down as political leader, leaving Prosperous Armenia to his right-hand Naira Zohrabyan and pulling back from political life, focussing entirely on his business empire.

A few months before the elections in April 2017, Tsarukyan returned to the political arena as leader of the Tsarukyan Alliance, which includes his own former party Prosperous Armenia and several smaller parties. It won 31 seats and is the second strongest party after the ruling Republican Party (HHK). In the light of the controversial presidential election in March 2018, his alliance chose not to support the only other opposition party in parliament, the Yelk Alliance, in going to court against the candidate of HHK and the possible election of current president Serzh Sargsyan as next prime minister.

He remains in the position of a strong self-proclaimed opposition leader, although his actions have until now largely been supportive of the ruling parties. His business empire requires him to keep good contacts with the government elites, as it was seriously threatened during the 2012 clash.

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