

What Armenia's Gyumri local elections mean for the 2026 national vote

Sara Lannebo & Hugo von Essen

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Executive summary

Armenia held elections in its second-largest city, Gyumri, in late March, setting the stage for the parliamentary elections in 2026. The ruling Civil Contract (CC) party won the most votes but failed to secure a majority on the city council, making an opposition coalition the most likely outcome.

The lead-up to election day was marred by criminal investigations, political manoeuvring and allegations of corruption – tactics we may see more of ahead of the 2026 elections. The government's attempts to suppress local opposition reflect its broader concerns about the emergence of genuine challengers at any level. Similar strategies might be used to delegitimize and divide the national opposition. At the same time, CC's defeat in Gyumri could prompt the ruling party to reconsider its narratives, strategies and policies in response to widespread discontent.

However, the opposition is fragmented, lacks clear direction and is aligned with pro-Russian forces, as well as corrupt and discredited former presidents and oligarchs. The stark polarization and forced binary choice between CC's more pro-western stance and the opposition's pro-Russia leanings ultimately benefit Pashinyan's government. The failure in Gyumri of the only credible pro-European opposition alternative, the Euro Alliance, to reach the electoral threshold could indicate lukewarm support for a European path and raises concerns about Armenia's lack of political pluralism ahead of the 2026 elections.

The Gyumri elections and their likely outcomes

Local elections were held in Gyumri on 30 March 2025. Gyumri is Armenia's second-largest city, situated in the north-western corner of the country, with a population of around [112,000](#). Residents voted to elect representatives for the city's [33-seat](#) council, which, in turn, selects the mayor.

Nine political parties or alliances participated, but only five met the [threshold](#) required to gain seats on the city council – four percent for parties and six percent for alliances. The ruling Civil Contract (CC) party of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan won the largest share of the votes ([36.2 percent](#)) but fell short of a majority of seats. Before the elections, there was speculation that CC would form a [coalition](#) with the pro-European Euro Alliance to appoint the CC candidate, Sarik Minasyan, mayor. However, Euro Alliance [failed](#) to pass the threshold, leaving Minasyan without a clear ally.

Instead, an opposition coalition appears more likely. The Communist Party of Armenia had its mayoral candidate, Vardan Ghukasyan, placed second with [20.5](#) percent of the vote. A former [mayor](#) of Gyumri (1999–2012), Ghukasyan has also [served](#) as a member of parliament for the Prosperous Armenia Party. Since the election results were announced, he has [obtained](#) the support of two other opposition parties, making him the main challenger and most likely alternative to Minasyan, although still short of a majority.

For Ghukasyan to achieve a majority on the council, he would need the backing of the third-largest alternative, Our City Bloc, led by Martun Grigoryan, which received [15.6](#) percent of the vote. However, Grigoryan has yet to outline his stance and reportedly has a [strained relationship](#) with Ghukasyan. Another scenario is therefore continuing political deadlock, through which new elections could be triggered.

A final possibility is that CC manages to secure Minasyan's position as mayor either by persuading an opposition party to switch sides, or by somehow discrediting or removing Ghukasyan as a viable candidate. Similar tactics have been used by the government in [several](#) cities, including Gyumri, in the past.

The shadowy power plays around the Gyumri elections

The Gyumri elections took place against a backdrop of political manoeuvring and criminal charges. While normally held every fifth year, early elections were [called](#) in Gyumri due to an ongoing political crisis. The city had previously been governed by a coalition between CC and the Balasanyan Bloc, named after the businessman and [former mayor](#), Samvel Balasanyan. This arrangement, which [allowed](#) the Balasanyan Bloc to install its candidate, Vardges Samsonyan, as mayor in exchange for CC appointing two deputy mayors, collapsed when CC suddenly [withdrew](#) from the agreement. After nearly a year of political deadlock, [arrest warrants](#) were issued for Balasanyan, which led to the [resignation](#) of the mayor and the city council. Pashinyan installed Minasyan as interim mayor – bypassing local government law using a parliamentary [amendment](#), a move widely criticized for handing too much power to the executive branch.

Adding fuel to the fire were the numerous criminal charges brought against opposition forces in the run-up to the elections. Ghukasyan was briefly [detained](#) in February on suspicion of illegally carrying firearms. Only days before the vote, the authorities [launched](#) an investigation into allegations of vote buying, detaining several individuals and raiding two opposition party

headquarters. Opposition groups and civil society organizations argue that these actions – which have been mirrored in other municipalities – are part of a wider campaign of repression and crackdown on dissent.

What do the Gyumri elections mean for the 2026 elections?

While the final outcome of the Gyumri elections is still unknown, their prelude, results and potential aftermath set the stage for parliamentary elections in 2026 and offer various key insights.

First, Gyumri is the most recent in a string of municipal elections where CC has lost ground locally. On the same day, elections in the village of Parakar, just outside of Yerevan, saw CC suffer a major defeat, securing only [31.8](#) percent of the votes against opposition candidate Volodya Grigoryan's decisive [56.5](#) percent. This reflects a broader trend where CC is [struggling](#) in towns across Armenia.

How well the Gyumri results reflect the overall national mood, however, is a difficult question. On the one hand, as host to Russia's 102nd military base, Gyumri is more exposed to Moscow's soft power and, according to some experts, could be more unpredictable, more extreme and less representative. On the other hand, while local and national issues might differ, overall support for Pashinyan is low, although still higher than any alternative.

Either way, the Gyumri results might prompt CC to reconsider the popularity of its policies and make adjustments. As evidenced by his "[Real Armenia](#)" national identity project and increasingly [populist](#) tactics, Pashinyan has proved himself to be both flexible and innovative. If public sentiment shifts, particularly on critical foreign policy issues such as distancing Armenia from Russia and continuing to meet Azerbaijani demands in peace negotiations, he could adjust his approach to ensure continued support.

Second, the elections highlight CC's use of heavy-handed tactics to suppress opposition, a pattern recently seen in cities such as [Yerevan](#) and [Goris](#). In [Alaverdi](#) in 2023, CC replaced the opposition mayor through a no-confidence vote. In Vanadzor, the former mayor was detained shortly after the 2021 elections and replaced by [an acting mayor](#) handpicked by Pashinyan. Similar strategies are likely ahead of next year's elections, as the Gyumri results give Pashinyan reason to worry while his party is struggling to position itself.

Third, Gyumri's elections underscored widespread political apathy, reflecting deep societal polarization and a lack of debate and engagement. Voter turnout was [42.7](#) percent, which was a significant increase on the [24.1](#) percent turnout in the 2021 Gyumri elections and much higher than Yerevan's [28.5](#) percent in 2023. However, it still lagged behind the [49.4](#) percent turnout in the most recent national elections.

Fourth, and closely tied to political apathy, the elections exposed Armenia's most pressing domestic issue: the lack of political pluralism and credible alternatives to CC. The only opposition parties to pass the threshold in Gyumri are linked to pro-Russia forces and discredited kleptocratic elites, and enjoy little trust or legitimacy nationwide, while the sole pro-European alternative failed to pass the threshold, as pro-European parties struggle nationally. This lack of viable national challengers benefits Pashinyan's party. Notably, the CC's [decision](#) to support and adopt the "EU law" in March could be seen as an attempt to co-opt pro-European sentiment and pre-empt the rise of genuine pro-European alternatives.

Conclusion

When Armenians head to the polls in 2026, eight years will have passed since the 2018 Velvet revolution, which saw the population rise up against corruption and brought the journalist, Nikol Pashinyan, to power. Since then, Armenia has lost a war – and the historically significant Nagorno-Karabakh – to its arch enemy Azerbaijan but [agreed](#) a draft peace treaty. It has also begun to distance itself from Russia as Moscow's influence in the South Caucasus waned following its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, Armenia has turned westward, formally expressing ambitions to join the EU while making uneven strides towards greater democracy.

Nonetheless, many of the promises of the revolution remain unfulfilled. Justice for the former kleptocratic elites has been minimal, corruption remains widespread and reform has largely stalled in many areas. Pashinyan's rule has brought positive change but also centralization of power, repression of opponents and shadowy tactics to maintain control. These trends were visible in the local elections in Gyumri and other cities, and bode ill for the political development of Armenia.

Ahead of national elections in 2026, Armenia faces many challenges on its path to democracy and European integration. As was demonstrated in Gyumri and across the nation, these include political apathy, high levels of polarization, little trust in politicians, parties and institutions, an underdeveloped political sphere and, perhaps most importantly, a grave lack of pluralism and credible alternatives to the ruling party. The path to EU membership will be difficult if pro-European sentiment cannot be maintained. Finally, as Pashinyan and his Civil Contract seek a renewed mandate to stay in power, they will have to explain to disillusioned voters why and how the next five years would be different to the previous eight.

The elections in Gyumri and what they tell us about Armenia's internal political development have important policy implications for the EU. To support Armenia's path to democracy and European integration, ahead of the 2026 national elections, the EU should strive to promote pluralism, reduce polarization, and foster national and local political debate and engagement. Armenian voters need credible pro-European and pro-democratic alternatives to hold the government accountable.

Given Armenia's stalled reforms and the ruling party's legally expressed commitment to pursuing EU membership, the EU should send clear signals to both the government and the population that the only viable way forward is the long-term implementation of reforms. In response to the government's coercive tactics to keep itself in power at both the local and the national levels, the EU should intensify efforts to empower civil society and independent media, enhancing their ability to monitor, expose and counter corruption, repression and the over-centralization of power.



Hugo von Essen

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies.



Sara Lannebo

Intern, Spring 2025, at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies.

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