

“BIG BROTHER” OR “FALSE ALLY”: PERCEPTION OF ANTI-RUSSIAN SENTIMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RESULTS OF THE 2026 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN ARMENIA

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative analysis of the geopolitical and regional aspects—as well as the significance—of the elections to the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia held on June 7, 2026. Particular attention is paid to the actions of the political opposition, which sought to capitalize on Armenia’s economic dependence on Russia. Pro-Western political forces in Armenia relied on support from the US and the EU, leveraging the fact that Russia had pursued an unfriendly foreign policy in recent years by drawing closer to Azerbaijan and Türkiye. The image of Russia as a military ally—which had replaced the Soviet-era “Big Brother” myth—was undermined by the 44-day war in Artsakh in 2020, the subsequent occupation of part of Armenia’s sovereign territory, and Russia’s failure to honor its allied obligations during the ethnic cleansing of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh carried out by Azerbaijan starting in 2023. A negative perception of Russia took hold in Armenian public discourse, leading to the defeat of pro-Russian political forces in the parliamentary elections of June 7, 2026. These results demonstrate that, for Armenia’s re-elected leadership, security issues and the prospects for developing cooperation with the EU—as well as implementing the strategic partnership agenda between Armenia and the European Union—are of paramount importance, particularly in light of Armenia’s integration into regional transport networks.

Keywords: *National Assembly elections, group identity, Armenian-Russian perceptions, Armenian public discourse, Russia’s image, military ally, ethnic cleansing.*

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, European and Eurasian integration processes—viewed through the lens of transforming Russian-Armenian relations—are attracting close attention from scholars across the globe. A significant challenge inherent in this process is the contentious nature of many fundamental principles and tenets underlying the formation of integration blocs involving Russia; this lack of consensus does not

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always facilitate a comprehensive approach to resolving issues related to foreign policy, economic, military, and humanitarian cooperation.

The relevance of this topic is further underscored by the fact that the post-Soviet geopolitical landscape has become a theater where the interests of global power centers collide and a struggle for access to energy and other natural resources unfolds. A critical factor complicating effective cooperation between Armenia and Russia is the influence of external forces—specifically, opposition from the United States and the West to Russia's efforts to politically and economically consolidate Armenia amidst the intensifying rivalry among global power centers.

On June 7, 2026, elections to the National Assembly of the RA took place. They had a complex geopolitical context and were expected to bring clarity to the relations among Armenia's political forces (OSCE ODHIR 2026a, 2026b). To make sense of the results, we must establish what has changed in Armenia's political life and in citizens' perceptions. The research task is to uncover the nature, basis, direction and social consequences of the transformation of public perceptions. This highly topical problem can be addressed through analysis of public discourse, expert surveys, monitoring of media coverage, and sociological and political-science analysis of historical events and official documents.

Eighteen political units (electoral blocs and parties) took part in the NA elections from start to finish. The total number of voters was 2,503,990 citizens, and 1,476,769 citizens (58.98 percent) took part in the vote. The official number of voters also includes citizens who are physically absent from Armenia, many of whom have emigrated since the 1990s. According to expert estimates, the outflow of people from Armenia in 1991-2000 alone amounted to about 1.3 million (Khojabekyan 2002, 308-309; Atoyan, Karapetyan and Atoyan 2023). Net migration remained negative in the following years as well. Many Armenian citizens have settled permanently abroad without renouncing RA citizenship. We can estimate their approximate number from various sociological surveys. For example, a survey we conducted immediately after the 2021 National Assembly elections in Armenia showed that approximately 500,000 citizens of the Republic of Armenia had been absent from the country for a very long time (Atanesyan and Mkrtichyan 2022, 25).

The RA authorities have always tried to take advantage of this reality, regarding the transfers sent to Armenia by migrants as an important financial and economic factor. Thus, "in 2024, individuals sent \$5.8 billion to Armenia from abroad through banks" (Hergnyan 2025). In January–April 2026, "the inflow of cross-border transfers received by individuals from abroad amounted to 2.08 billion USD, compared with 1.77 billion USD in the first 4 months of last year. Among the leaders in transfers to Armenia are Russia, with 1.32 billion USD, and the USA, with 269.6 million USD" (ARKA News Agency 2026). Private transfers benefit not only the well-being of Armenia's residents but the entire Armenian economy. Incidentally, a significant share of Armenia's exports comes from enterprises under the control of Russian capital.

Public perceptions of Armenian-Russian relations

Relations between Russia and Armenia occupy a special place in integration processes; they are underpinned by deep-seated socio-economic, political, and historical-cultural

ties, which serve as the foundation for maintaining and enhancing various forms of cooperation. This fact further underscores the need to analyze and synthesize the experience of developing Russian-Armenian relations, as examining this subject helps define a shared platform for positioning the national interests of both Russia and Armenia. Beyond economic calculations, to understand the results of the current parliamentary elections and their consequences we must analyze other circumstances that shape public perception of Armenian-Russian relations. Reality is somewhat distorted in our picture of the world, so people's perceptions work less on goal-rational lines than on a historical-political and socio-cultural foundation formed over time. On the other hand, the fundamental characteristics of identity largely determine the particularities of perceptions. At the current stage of Armenia's historical development, it is especially important to examine these perceptions in the context of the 2020 Armenian-Turkish 44-day Artsakh war.

Losing that war confronted Armenian society with major losses of positive identifications. Identifications are conditioned by perceptions, and the sum of identifications forms social identity, which is fed by attributions to and valuations of different social groups and depends on perceptions of those groups (Harrod and Serpe 2026). The loss of positive identifications produces an identity crisis, which inevitably shows up in a reassessment of how people perceive their relationship with other significant groups (in this case, Russians). The crisis realities of post-war Armenia were bound to affect relations with Russia. Alongside this influence, a gradual and ambivalent transformation of the traditional perceptions of those relations began.

During the Soviet period, the official false concept that ideologically justified the nature of relations among the peoples of the USSR shaped certain Armenian stereotypes of Russians. The field of public perception of Armenian-Russian relations was defined mainly by the templates of the "blessed Russian," the "big brother," and the "savior nation." Here we are dealing with stereotypes rooted both in the Armenian literature of the tsarist period (Khachatur Abovyan) and in Soviet-era propaganda. When great tension arose with official Moscow in the early stage of the Republic of Armenia's independence, these stereotypes began to erode. In response to Armenian centrifugal aspirations, the USSR's military-political leadership organized the ill-fated Operation "Ring." Military operations against the civilian population of the Shahumyan, Shushi, Martakert and Hadrut districts of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, carried out from April 30, 1991, depopulated three dozen villages of Armenians. A great test for the traditional perceptions of Armenian-Russian relations was the killing of 14 Armenian policemen by Russian soldiers of the Soviet army on May 6 in the village of Voskepar in the Noyemberyan district of the Armenian SSR. Armenian public consciousness was shaken by such a blow, but an attempt was immediately made to distinguish between the Russian soldier and the Soviet soldier carrying out a criminal order. That distinction, however, destroyed the communist myth of the "liberating Soviet soldier," which fit poorly with the consciousness of Armenians who had served in the Soviet army and had fought heroically in the Second World War.

In this context—and time and again following some psychological shock—Armenians would restore Russia to the status of their protector. Virtually the entire

history of Armenian culture over the last two centuries has been a succession of Armenian-Russian conflicts—some merely psychological, others manifested in concrete actions—yet all of them, without exception, ended in reconciliation (Lurie 2017, 208-209). According to the ethnologist, the Armenians wanted to see ‘ideal Russians,’ and they managed to do so even when real Russians were shooting at them (Lurie 2017, 226). One simply had to wait, and the Armenians began to wait for the Russians themselves to understand who their friend is and what their interests are (Lurie 2017, 216). In this context, one gets the impression that Russia is looking for friends in entirely the wrong places—and that is precisely why it is losing all its geopolitical battles.

The point is that, depending on specific situations, some negative attributions can become salient and give rise to conflict-prone patterns of group behavior. When social identities are incompatible, large-scale intergroup conflicts are possible, including military clashes. In this case, it is very important to distinguish the friendly environment of the “We” (the ally) from the groups perceived under the category “They,” and naturally from the “enemy,” who should usually be perceived as such by the “ally” too. And even if the “ally” holds no such perception, it must necessarily arise in the future.

To understand this peculiarity, one must bear in mind that within this attribution Russia appears in the image of the “ally,” since corresponding value imperatives operated among Armenians as their modern picture of the world was formed. These were later instrumentalized and determined the stability of the Armenian model of perceiving Russia. A positive self-description of the “We” image necessarily presupposes a positive perception of the significant traditional “ally” image. In a certain historical context, having an ally had become an existential condition for Armenians (Lurie 2017, 207; Shestopal 2018).

Group identity implies that a group serves as the bearer of a specific identity. The formation of identity can be viewed as the result of interaction with the “non-self.” From a methodological standpoint, the other groups with which a given group interacts serve as a key criterion for assessing its identity. At the group level, identity is also formed within a positive framework; this requires cultivating a positive attitude toward significant groups by emphasizing one’s own group’s positive qualities and evaluating other groups through the lens of those qualities.

Institutionalization of relations and the transformation of perception

In the new historical conditions after the collapse of the Soviet Union, diplomatic relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Russian Federation were established on April 3, 1992. Of course, the establishment of diplomatic relations between newly independent Armenia and the Russian Federation marked an entirely new political reality: Armenia was no longer a part of Russia. These new realities also brought corresponding transformations in the public perception of Armenian-Russian relations. Accordingly, the question of Armenian-Russian relations turned into a question of Armenia-Russia relations, and the social perceptions of that question were transformed in parallel. Stereotypes about Russians were pushed largely into the sphere of everyday relations, giving way in the domain of political consciousness to ideas

about relations with Russia as a separate state. These ideas are partly based on traditional templates and partly formed in the context of new legal and political interstate processes.

On August 29, 1997, the Republic of Armenia and the Russian Federation concluded the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between the RF and the RA, which established allied relations between the RA and RF (MFA of the RF 1997). In public perception, allied relations form the image of the “ally,” which replaces the template of the “big brother.” They greatly transform the nature of perceptions from ideological to institutional. This transformation strips them of their sacral character, making the public valuation of Armenian-Russian relations dependent on how effectively the formal allied obligations of the RA and RF are actually fulfilled.

In the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between the RF and the RA (Article 3), the RA and RF committed that “The High Contracting Parties shall jointly take all measures available to them to eliminate a threat to the peace or a breach of the peace, or to counter acts of aggression against them by any state or group of states, and shall provide each other with the necessary assistance, including military assistance, in the exercise of the right of collective self-defense in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter” (MFA of the RF 1997)

That Treaty is the foundation of the institutionalization of Armenian-Russian relations, and institutionalization produces stable patterns of collective behavior and corresponding expectations (Mkrtichyan, Vermishyan and Balasanyan 2016). An important orientation point of this behavior is the image of the “ally,” which is thematized semantically in public consciousness and can even lead to internal conflicts. But even then the image of the “ally” remains stable as long as the concept of the “We” group’s self-construction has not changed. In this respect, one can say that the Armenian mentality was characterized by a long-term positive coloring of the ally, even when negative episodes are observed in the relations between allies.

But when negative episodes undermine the institutional foundation of the relationship, the ally as such may also be reassessed. The 44-day Artsakh war and the clashes that followed had a very strong resonance among Armenian citizens. “We ask for help, and they tell us to apply in writing. Is help given through written notes?” This is the generalized view of ordinary Armenian citizens, formed in September 2022 and May 2023 regarding the RF’s fulfillment of allied obligations during Azerbaijani encroachments on and military incursion across the RA’s state border. People believe that friends should not wait for official letters in order to help each other. For the ordinary Armenian citizen, what is incomprehensible is not only the role of the Russian state authorities but also the absence of a pro-Armenian response from Russian society. After all, Russians should apparently not put an equals sign between the two conflicting sides, since one (Armenia) is Russia’s ally and the other (Azerbaijan) is not. And Azerbaijan would hardly have attacked the RA’s state border if it had not been sure that this border would not be regarded as a CSTO border. In the perceptions of RA citizens, Azerbaijan’s arming with Russian-made weapons did not fit well with the fulfillment of allied obligations. Russian officials always spoke of Russia’s commitment to maintaining the military balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but they failed to do even that.

This is how ordinary Armenian voters think, those who do not delve into the subtleties of the geopolitical game and do not make complex strategic calculations. For them, what matters is Russia's failure to fulfill its allied obligations in the context of violations of the RA's state borders.

There are also other circumstances that give rise to negative perceptions of Armenian-Russian relations. However much Armenians strive to preserve in their picture of the world the image of Russia as a faithful ally, the real Russia does not coincide with the ideal Russia. In modern conditions, the diversity of information flows deals a heavy blow to traditional ideas. The influence of the media on the internal thematization of external relations is very great here. In Russia's case, the following themes that shape that country's image can be singled out:

- relations between the RF and RA in various fields (economy, migration, security, the military sphere, culture, freedom of speech, etc.) and attitudes toward Armenians,
- the Russian-Ukrainian war and the RF's international relations,
- events inside Russia.

Russian media constantly report that relations between the RF and the West are steadily deteriorating, that Russia's ties with Türkiye and Azerbaijan are becoming more active, that internal security problems are numerous, and that cultural figures in various fields have left Russia (Aleksanyan 2025). At the same time, Western-oriented Armenian (and not only Armenian) media talk a great deal about the certain diplomatic support shown by the authorities of France and other European countries in the post-war situation. They cover meetings of Armenian officials with European politicians and criticize Russia's attitude toward Armenia. In this respect, the German newspaper Tagesspiegel's treatment of the Artsakh war is noteworthy: "Russia's role in the South Caucasus remains ambiguous, since the supposed protector of the Armenians is at the same time both Türkiye's trading partner and its geostrategic rival. The territorial, demographic and military asymmetry between Armenia and Azerbaijan also characterizes the unequal involvement of the powers protecting them. While since 1992 Türkiye has supported its Azerbaijani 'brother people' with logistical and military advisers, Russia waited six weeks to see how the Armenian armed forces would be worn down in their fight against Azerbaijanis, jihadists and Syrian mercenaries" (Tagesspiegel 2020)

Armenia's Europeanization and the June 2026 parliamentary election outcomes in the context of the perception of Russia's image

Active propaganda in the media undoubtedly contributes to the spread of negative perceptions of Russia among Armenians. Therefore, many Armenian citizens prefer the Armenian authorities' complementary approach (Atanesyan and Mkrtichyan 2023; Atanesyan, Reynolds and Mkrtichyan 2024, 3-12) in foreign policy matters, and even Armenia's possible membership in the European Union. In 2001, Armenia became a full member of the Council of Europe, and on November 24, 2017, the Republic of Armenia concluded the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the European Union. In March 2025, the Parliament of Armenia adopted the "On

Launching the Process of the Republic of Armenia's Accession to the European Union," aimed at developing democratic institutions, improving the population's well-being, and strengthening security, resilience, and the rule of law.

It is especially educated young people, who lack the Soviet-era experience of shared public life with Russians, who aspire to the European Union. For this reason, anti-Russian sentiment reaches greater proportions among young Armenians. They regard Russia as the greatest obstacle to that process and a threat to the RA's sovereignty. Armenian citizens fear that Russia is pursuing a neo-colonial rather than an allied policy toward Armenia. These concerns intensified when, in the run-up to the 2026 elections to Armenia's National Assembly, Russia created obstacles and imposed bans on the import of Armenian agricultural products, disregarding EAEU norms and calling into question the active cooperation between the Republic of Armenia and the Russian Federation under the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union of May 29, 2014.

The 2026 National Assembly elections in Armenia should be viewed against the backdrop of all these events (see Table 1). The election results are notable for the shifts that have occurred in the foreign policy orientation of Armenian society. A number of political parties participating in the campaign adopted anti-Russian stances; although some failed to clear the minimum threshold required to secure seats in the National Assembly, collectively they garnered more than 60% of the vote. These political forces embraced a strategy of consistent Europeanization for Armenia, asserting that the country's security would be strengthened through cooperation with the EU and the United States.

Armenia's Central Election Commission has announced the final results of the country's parliamentary elections, with three parties securing seats in parliament. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's pro-European ruling party, Civil Contract, won 64 of the 105 seats, while the pro-Russian opposition parties—"Strong Armenia" and the Alliance "Armenia"—secured 29 and 12 seats, respectively (see Table 1).

Table 1. Political parties in the National Assembly of the RA based on the results of the elections held on June 7, 2026

Party/Alliance	Votes	%	Seats	%
Civil Contract	726,819	49.74	64	60.95
Strong Armenia	340,006	23.27	29	27.62
Armenia Alliance	144,983	9.92	12	11.43
Total	1,476,769	58.98		105
Registered voters	2,503,990			

Source: The Central Electoral Commission of the RA 2026

The reaction of Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson M. Zakharova was striking; following her lead, other official Russian institutions began asserting that the Armenian authorities had flagrantly violated democratic procedures for holding free elections (MFA of the RF 2026). This marked the first time Russia neither recognized the

Armenian Prime Minister nor offered congratulations, taking the view that the election campaign and the voting process themselves took place amidst harsh repression by the Armenian authorities against opposition parties and movements, as well as their activists and supporters.

Rossotrudnichestvo has announced the results of the “In which countries is Russia loved the most?” survey; Armenia ranked among the top three, while Tajikistan took first place, followed by Serbia. Other countries with the warmest attitudes toward Russia included Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Syria, Ukraine, Bulgaria, and China (Tass 2020). In other words, among Armenians a vast change has taken place in the image of Russia, from “big brother” to “false ally.”

The failure of the Russian peacekeeping mission, and the ethnic cleansing and forced expulsion of the Armenians of Artsakh from Nagorno-Karabakh carried out by the Azerbaijani authorities in 2023 with their permission, once again forced people to recall the disgraceful Treaty of Kars. A hundred years later, history seems to be repeating itself: Russia and Türkiye are reaching agreements about the boundaries of Armenian statehood in place of the Armenians.

After this, we can state unequivocally that a clear trend toward a change in foreign policy orientation is already noticeable in Armenia. After all, the guarantee of one's own existence cannot be entrusted to someone else. It is the nation-state that ensures a nation's political independence, economic autonomy, citizens' physical inviolability and social prosperity, and the preservation and development of national culture.

Conclusion and discussion

Russians' public perceptions in post-Soviet Armenia derive from the history of roughly two centuries of Armenian-Russian relations and are given meaning against the backdrop of legal-political, socio-economic and cultural historical developments. These perceptions differed in different periods: the Russian is a “big brother,” the Russian is an “ally,” the Russian is a “traitor,” and so on. The image of the ally was institutionalized mainly in the post-Soviet period, based on official relations between the RF and the RA.

Labor migration to Russia contributed to the formation and maintenance of this “ally” stereotype. The largest Armenian Diaspora community is located in Russia, which is likewise a very important and influential factor in the emergence of pro-Russian sentiment. Thus, perceptions of Russian-Armenian relations are formed and institutionalized under the influence of the corresponding security, economic, socio-cultural and psychological factors.

Nevertheless, there are factors that to some extent hinder the reproduction of Russia's positive image. Russian pressure on Armenia thwarted the conclusion of the Association Agreement with the EU. The deterioration of Russia-West relations was manifested as Russian displeasure with Armenia's complementary foreign policy. Advocates of European integration in Armenian society began to protest against this Russian stance. Public discourse often pointed to Russia's continued arming of Azerbaijan with modern offensive weapons, which led to a violation of the balance between the armed forces of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Those weapons were used against the Armenian civilian population in the Artsakh war. Russia's positioning as Türkiye's partner is also noticeable. There is a disagreement between Armenia and

Russia over the perception of the enemy: Azerbaijan, perceived by Armenians as an enemy, is Russia's "friend," while the European Union, Russia's enemy, is Armenia's.

The education sector is the most Europeanized area of public life in Armenia, and educated young people recognize the harm caused by Russia's controversial policies. This awareness spreads through the media and is reflected in the statements of various politicians and government officials. All of this led to the defeat of pro-Russian political forces in the 2026 elections to Armenia's National Assembly.

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Ethics Statement

The author confirms that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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