



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Russia will not stand idly by and watch Armenia turn to the West



Russia will not easily stop trying to influence the situation in Armenia, which is again shaken by political turbulences and open wounds from defeat in a protracted conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan.

Thousands of Armenians have been protesting for days in the capital, Yerevan, demanding the dismissal of Nikol Pashinyan's government.

They are furious about his concessions to Azerbaijan and his attempts to pacify the interstate conflict, in particular his decision to hand over four abandoned border villages to their neighbour.

The majority of Armenians have suffered trauma as a result of last year's Azerbaijani conquest of the province of Karabakh, which over one hundred thousand Armenians later abandoned, effectively ending the protracted conflict.

Prime Minister Pashinyan, who came to power in 2018 through a wave of civil protests, has been pursuing a determined but risky course of shifting away from Moscow. Earlier this week, he **confirmed** in parliament that Armenia will leave the Russian-dominated military alliance CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation).

"It turned out that the members of the alliance are not fulfilling their contractual obligations, but are planning a war against us with Azerbaijan," said the Armenian PM.

Revolt because of betrayal

This announcement is the most serious indication yet of Armenia's withdrawal from the alliance with Russia and five other former USSR states. At the same time, **reports** emerged that Belarus, Armenia's ally in Russia's version of NATO, has been supplying advanced weapons to Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Armenian government's outrage is understandable, as Belarus would never betray its military ally by aiding its enemy without the

Kremlin's knowledge and approval.

Moscow's propagandists reacted arrogantly and angrily to the disobedience of the Armenian Prime Minister: "Who are you to leave the CSTO whenever you want?" Sergey Mardan, one of Moscow's most influential mouthpieces, questioned him. "Armenia has no oil, no gold; it's a geopolitical dead end. It just has eggplant. Pashinyan is an enemy of Russia," said Mardan.

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In recent days, the government in Yerevan has deployed the police to quell the mass demonstrations, but it is unlikely to have the power to stabilise political unrest in the long term.

The protests appear to be a nationalist revolt because of the trauma of the military defeat against Azerbaijan and the loss of territory. However, the country's pro-Russian media strongly supports them, indicating that they could easily become an open pressure on the government's policy of distancing itself from Russia.

The leader of the protests, Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, said himself during the weekend that he wanted Armenia to enter into a "new dialogue" with Moscow.

Support from the USA and the EU

Russia will not miss the opportunity to **instrumentalise** these protests to exert more influence and pressure on Armenia. Despite its focus on military operations against Ukraine, Moscow is motivated to prevent Armenia's withdrawal from its orbit, which has already

gained momentum.

The US Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia, James O'Brien, was in Yerevan last Tuesday. During this visit, the two countries announced their joint intention to elevate their relations to a "strategic partnership".

This implies that Washington would support Armenia in trade, military matters, its judicial system, and democracy.

This is a continuation of Prime Minister Pashinyan's **meeting** with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen last April, which resulted in a four-year EU economic aid package for Armenia totalling €270 million.

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As a result, the destabilisation and subsequent removal of Prime Minister Pashinyan from power appear to be an inevitable reaction of Moscow to his very open efforts to bring the country out of the zone of Russian influence and closer to the West.

In this respect, Russia is relying above all on Armenia's still enormous economic dependence, which it can easily use to exert political pressure on the government and the prime minister.

Russian companies (Gazprom) still have a practical monopoly on the Armenian energy market and control over the food supply, as almost all grain and corn imports come from Russia.

Sanctioning intermediaries in trade with Russia

Russia's real interest in maintaining control and influence in Armenia stems from the fact that since the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine and the introduction of sanctions, this country has become one of the most significant centres for circumventing sanctions.

Through its corrupt business centres, which generally have favourable connections to Russia, exports from Armenia to Russia have increased several hundred times in the last two years. These are goods that are subject to sanctions, yet they reach Russia through the mediation of Armenian businessmen and their companies.



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It is only a matter of time before Moscow's actions against Armenia and its government take on more severe and radical forms. Despite appearing to be an authentic civilian expression of anger, Moscow could potentially instrumentalise the current protests as a tool to weaken Pashinyan's government and install pro-Russian forces in Yerevan.

Since Moscow has already applied a similar model in the countries in its backyard (Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova), it is certain that it will repeat it in Armenia.

Whether and how successful it will be depends solely on the counterweight that the West could create with its support programmes for the Caucasus state.

The sanctioning of Armenian intermediaries in the Russian import of missing Western goods deserves greater attention from both the EU and the US, as Armenia is one of the more significant channels for circumventing sanctions.