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Is Europe ready to fill Russia's vacuum in the Caucasus?

In the war with Azerbaijan, Armenia has always counted on Russia's support — but deep frustration over the latter's inaction is eroding existing trust

The deadlocked negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the blockade of the Lachin corridor and the military build-up at the borders — fears of a new war in the South Caucasus are spreading. In this dangerous situation, Armenia is relying on diplomatic confrontation with the supposedly allied Russia, as neither political support nor weapons can be expected from Moscow. The Russian leadership feels pressured to assert its own role in the South Caucasus. Armenia, on the other hand, is slowly turning towards the West. The increasing tensions are also a sign that the time of Russian regulatory power in the region is coming to an end. Is Europe ready to fill the emerging vacuum?

The current situation brings back memories of the run-up to the last war in 2020: more and more amateur footage of Azerbaijani military convoys is appearing both in the direction of Nagorno-Karabakh, which belongs to Azerbaijan under international law but is populated by a majority of Armenians, and on the border with Armenia and in the Azerbaijani enclave of Nakhichevan. In addition, there is an increase in flights of Azerbaijani cargo planes from allies Israel and Turkey into the country, with independent observers suggesting that these may be arms shipments. A partial mobilisation of the Azerbaijani military for training purposes, the footage of a battery of Armenian multiple rocket launchers being moved towards the border, as well as the recent firefights with casualties and deaths, raise fears of the worst.

A Russian vacuum

The continuing blockade of the Lachin corridor and the question of opening supply routes, as well as fears of an imminent genocide in Nagorno-Karabakh expressed by the former chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Luis Moreno Ocampo, all render the future uncertain. Internal disputes in the leadership of the non-

recognised Republic of Artsakh over the right course to take with Azerbaijan – between a tough stance and a willingness to engage in direct talks – reinforce this. It is true that Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan recently recognised Nagorno-Karabakh's territorial affiliation to Azerbaijan, as this was the only way for him to get Azerbaijan to also recognise Armenia's territorial integrity and border demarcation. The Armenian leadership, however, insists on a secure status for the Armenians living in Karabakh. But without international support, it is too weak to actually press this demand.

This support has traditionally been provided by Russia. 2,000 Russian soldiers are technically peacekeeping the Lachin Corridor, the only supply artery in Nagorno-Karabakh. But this is mostly in theory, in practice these troops are conspicuous for their inactivity. And they did not prevent the establishment of an Azerbaijani checkpoint – a clear violation of the 2020 ceasefire agreement. On the contrary, it happened within sight of their base. Politically, too, Russia has apparently recognised its weakness and therefore changed its priorities in the South Caucasus. Whereas Moscow used to be interested in preserving the status quo, it now talks openly about the Karabakh Armenians having to accept Baku's rule over the disputed territory.

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Disappointment with Moscow has been growing in Yerevan since 2020. The Kremlin is seemingly estranged from Pashinyan, who was legitimised by a popular revolution and democratic elections, and wants the old, Moscow-affiliated, authoritarian cliques back in the capital. Consequently, last September, when a new escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan led to roughly 400 deaths and Azerbaijan was able to seize militarily well-situated Armenian territory, Moscow did not stand out either by condemning Azerbaijan or by providing assistance. Even though Russia was supposed to offer such assistance according to a bilateral military agreement and within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Armenian demands for action came in vain at that time. In addition, it is an open secret in Armenia's capital that Russia has not supplied weapons or ammunition in recent months – despite Armenian payments.

Yerevan is beginning to feel that it has nothing left to lose in the face of the military threats at its borders and Russia's (on the quiet) change of sides. Recently, the Armenian Foreign Ministry accused Moscow of 'absolute indifference' to Azerbaijani attacks on Armenian territory. And Pashinyan followed up in early September by stating that Russian peacekeepers had 'failed in their mission' by allowing the blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh and that it had been a 'strategic mistake' on Armenia's part to rely on this partner. Speaking to the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, Pashinyan explained that Armenia's security architecture had been '99.999 per cent linked to Russia', leaving the country with little military support or ammunition supplies after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine: 'Having tasted the bitter fruits of this mistake in hindsight, we are [now] making feeble attempts to diversify our security policy', Pashinyan said. Has he thereby made public a risky change of course?

Putting words into action

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova maintained that it was important to take responsibility for one's own actions instead of trying to shift the blame. Putin's spokesman Peskov even felt compelled to follow up by saying that while 'new events' had changed the situation in the region, this did not mean that Russia would 'limit its activities in any way'. Moreover, Russia would continue to play the role of security guarantor.

But Pashinjan's words are also followed by deeds: Last week, Armenia sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine for the first time since the Russian invasion of the country started. The delivery was personally accompanied by Anna Hakobyan, Pashinjan's wife. Although the Armenian leadership is very sympathetic towards Ukraine, it had so far refrained from any small gesture because of its own dependence. The fact that this gesture was made this week was probably no coincidence.

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Quite surprisingly, Armenia and the US announced that they would hold a joint military exercise in mid-September to train peacekeepers. The theme is probably pretextual since Armenia has not been known to play a strong role as a peacekeeper, even though it has some experience from Kosovo and Afghanistan. And so, irritation promptly followed from Moscow. The beginning of the ratification of the Rome Statute (founding treaty of the

International Criminal Court (ICC)) by the Armenian parliament caused even more displeasure. Officially, Armenia wants to be able to accuse Azerbaijan before the ICC. But this step also means that Putin can no longer travel to Armenia in the future, because he would then be arrested there.

Armenia's leadership is taking a risky step. In any case, it is not expecting a strong reaction from Moscow, at most small steps such as banning the import of individual goods (Armenian dairy products were already banned from import months ago). However, there is also a warning that in the event of another war, Russia will very probably not stand up for Armenia. On the one hand, since Russia is too tied up in Ukraine, it simply cannot intervene. On the other hand, it also raises the question of whether Moscow *wants* to do so at all: Pashinyan would very probably not survive another lost war politically. Is Moscow thus hoping that, in this case, an old-school leadership possibly more loyal to Moscow would once again take the helm in Armenia and the young, fragile Armenian democracy would prove nothing more than a brief intermezzo?

The dream of a democratic, European Armenia

If the new course of the Armenian leadership proves to be sustainable and successful, Europeans will face a difficult question: Are we ready to fill the Russian vacuum in the South Caucasus or do we leave the field to Turkey, Azerbaijan's closest ally? And are we ready to help the young Armenian democracy?

Russia has about 10,000 soldiers stationed in Armenia, on the borders with Azerbaijan, Iran and Turkey, and also has 2,000 soldiers in Azerbaijan along the Lachin corridor. Without cooperation with Russia, the air defence system, for example, would be virtually ineffective except for individual elements. Since this year, the EU has already been doing more with a civilian observer mission than it has ever dared to do before. And the mission enjoys the highest level of trust in Armenia. People would like to see the mission extended to the Azerbaijani side of the border and to include robust, i.e. also military, elements and capabilities.

If you ask young people in Armenia, the dream of a democratic, European

Russia's time is limited. In 2025, its mandate on the Lachin corridor will end and Azerbaijan will then be the first country in the South Caucasus without any Russian military presence. And

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also, the existence of the largest Russian military base in Gjumri, Armenia, is only contractually fixed for a limited period of time, currently until 2044. Since Russia has no land connection to Armenia, and Georgia, which is striving to join the EU and NATO, lies in between, and since Russia is likely to be preoccupied with internal problems after a probable defeat in Ukraine, an eternal Russian presence in Armenia does not seem to be set in stone.

In any case, Pashinyan's change of course strikes a chord with Armenia's young generation. For more than 30 years, the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh was the cement of the Armenian nation and seemed to determine the entire political agenda. With the recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh's affiliation to Azerbaijan, this period has come to an end. If you ask young people in Armenia, the dream of a democratic, European Armenia is the unifying element and the great hope for the future. But is Europe ready to embrace this hope? A visa-free regime for Armenia, which already has close ties to the EU through its diaspora, would be a first step; a stronger presence – possibly also militarily – would be a second. In the long run, a debate on a European perspective for Armenia is becoming more and more likely.



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