

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > South Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Karabakh) > Armenia > **Armenia says farewell to the Russian empire - but it's not over yet**

Armenia says farewell to the Russian empire - but it's not over yet

Monday 25 September 2023, by [SHENKMAN Yan](#) (Date first published: 22 September 2023).

Azerbaijan's attack on Nagorno-Karabakh has provoked a crisis in Armenia - and signs of a break with Russia

For the first time in a year and a half of living in Yerevan, this week someone in the Armenian capital refused to speak Russian to me.

I was standing outside the Russian Embassy, watching as protesters attempted to blockade it. It was 19 September, the day [Azerbaijani forces shelled Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh](#), the Armenian enclave that is internationally recognised as Azerbaijani territory. Stepanakert's security was supposed to be ensured by Russian peacekeepers, according to a Kremlin-brokered agreement struck in the wake of Azerbaijan's 2020 offensive against the region.

Azerbaijan's successful campaign to take control of Nagorno-Karabakh - a dramatic end to its [ten-month blockade](#) of the enclave - means Stepanakert is now home to tens of thousands of refugees. And Russia did nothing to stop it. So when my interlocutor refused to speak Russian with me, I understood.

Nobody knows what will happen to these refugees tomorrow. Azerbaijan has promised a humanitarian corridor from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, but it is yet to materialise. And while they wait, there is panic in Stepanakert. There is talk that executions are already taking place. The fear of ethnic cleansing is real.

Yerevan is also uneasy these days. The situation is critical, the war could spread to the official territory of Armenia at any moment. Sotk, a village on the border with Azerbaijan, and other Armenian villages have already [come under fire](#) in recent days.

On the very first day of Azerbaijan's hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, people in Yerevan began to come to the Government House, the official residence of Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan. First, the protesters demanded Armenian authorities send the army to save Nagorno-Karabakh. When they realised that this would not happen, the crowd started shouting: "Nikol is a traitor!"

Earlier in the summer, Pashinyan [officially recognised the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan](#) - in effect, recognising that Nagorno-Karabakh, with its exclusively ethnic Armenian population, is Azerbaijani territory. And this week, he has persistently repeated: "There is no [official] Armenian army in Karabakh and there will not be."

You can understand Pashinyan's logic. The former opposition journalist faces a stalemate: it is impossible not to support Nagorno-Karabakh. It is unbearable to watch the people of Nagorno-Karabakh, many of whom have Armenian citizenship, die. You can easily lose power for this, the people will not forgive this.

But it is also impossible to support Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia's armed forces are now weaker than ever and are unable to resist the Azerbaijani military, with its large supplies of modern weapons by [Turkey](#) and [Israel](#). Armenia has no strategic partners.

Relations with Russia, Armenia's main ally in recent years, are in a bad state. Indeed, it looks as if Russia [knew about Azerbaijan's offensive](#), but did not warn Yerevan. Russia is also responsible for Armenia's poor military provision. Armenia's multimillion-dollar contracts with the Russian Federation for weapons, concluded back in 2021, have not been fulfilled. The money has not been [returned](#) either, according to Armen Grigoryan, the secretary of the Security Council of Armenia.

Put simply, Armenia does not have the resources to fight Azerbaijan, which is backed by Turkey. A Turkish military base on Mount Ararat – a landmark that is Armenia's national symbol, but is today in modern-day Turkey – [looks down directly at Yerevan](#). Roads in the east and south of Armenia pass close to the Azerbaijani military. In addition, Nagorno-Karabakh, as a state, is unrecognised by the international community. There are no diplomatic grounds to stand up for it. This immediately nullifies the chances of Western support, which Pashinyan is trying to secure.

And there are other risks. Russian propaganda loudly trumpets that the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh is a punishment for Armenia for not listening to the Kremlin. Since the massive defeat in Azerbaijan's 2020 war, Armenia has [downgraded its participation](#) in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the Russian-backed military security treaty. (On 5 September, Armenia [recalled](#) its envoy to the CSTO.) It has refused to make itself an ally in Russia's war against Ukraine. The fact that Armenia plans to [ratify](#) the Rome Statute, which created the International Criminal Court – which has a warrant out for Vladimir Putin's arrest – is another mark against Yerevan. The Kremlin, it appears, is punishing Armenia, albeit via someone else's hands.

In Nagorno-Karabakh, Russian peacekeepers have been demonstratively inactive. But this inaction is only one step away from hostile actions. Russian troops are located not only in Karabakh, but also in Armenia itself, in Goris and Syunik in the south, not to mention the 102nd Russian military base in the northern city of Gyumri. The Russian military planes that periodically flew over Yerevan these past few years now take off from the airfield in Erebuni, to the south-east of the capital. If Russia uses all these forces against the Armenians, bloody chaos will begin in the country.

As well as its military, Russia has other potential levers of pressure on Armenia. Everyone in the Caucasus remembers how, during the Russian aggression in Abkhazia and Ossetia in 2008, Georgians were deported en masse from Russia to their homeland in cargo planes. Now the same thing could happen to the two million Armenians living in the Russian Federation. The appearance of even 300,000 Russian Armenians – with no jobs and nowhere to live – in small, economically weak Armenia could lead to social unrest, particularly since the Kremlin would blame Pashinyan's democratic government for their deportation.

There are also economic levers. Russia could cut off gas supplies to Armenia at any time. A significant part of Armenia's energy sector belongs to Armenian oligarchs associated with the Kremlin, meaning the electricity could also be cut off. Of course, all these problems can be solved; Armenia could switch to Iranian gas, it could nationalise power plants – but this would take several months, during which anything could happen.

Is Armenia headed for a coup?

As well as Russia's external threat, there are pro-Russian forces in Armenia itself. "The biggest mistake the current authorities have made since Armenia's 2018 revolution is that they didn't carry out lustration," writer Narine Abgaryan told openDemocracy. As she put it, Armenia's "old guard",

turfed out of power in 2018, has “deliberately tried to pit Armenians against one another” in the years since, through [media messaging and protests](#).

The events this week in Yerevan’s Republic Square – protesters’ attempts to storm Government House, fights with local police and blocking streets – are, Abgaryan said, “an example of this”. In reality, it looks like these events may have been an attempted coup.

“The situation is at breaking point,” said political scientist Armen Manasyan. “Usually in Yerevan, rallies, even the most radical ones, end with songs, dances and barbecues. And now I see that everything can end in a violent clash.

“People are demanding [Pashinyan] resign. It has been demanded for many months, but Azerbaijan’s aggression has exacerbated everything.

“These days, it’s not only those who have been whipped up by the pro-Russian opposition who have been protesting, but ordinary Yerevan residents who are indignant and alarmed, too.”

For Manasyan, Pashinyan [may have led Armenia’s 2018 revolution](#), but in the five years since he has been “unable to create a strong camp of his supporters”. Manasyan points to the defeat of Pashinyan’s ally, Tigran Avinyan, at the Yerevan mayoral elections last Sunday as evidence. Turnout was unprecedentedly low, at 28% of eligible voters.

“People have little choice: either a return to Russia’s zone of influence, or Pashinyan with unclear prospects and almost no resources,” Manasyan said.

A popular opinion is that Pashinyan’s government has surrendered Nagorno-Karabakh, including by refusing to send Armenian troops to the enclave. The reproach is fair, but what conclusions are to be drawn from Pashinyan’s actions are another matter. In general, he has a range of questions to answer, and not only from Armenia’s pro-Russian opposition. Most of the promises he made when he came to power have not been fulfilled. But there is no other democratic force in Armenia now besides him.

The positions of those leading the fight against Pashinyan also give pause for thought. Margarita Simonyan, the head of Russia Today, and Russian TV propagandist Vladimir Solovyov both shared on their Telegram channels a call from a Yerevan blogger for people to come out to the city’s Republic Square. It was accompanied by the phrase: “Everyone who does not come to the square today will be an accomplice in the Armenian genocide.”

The blogger who made the original video, Mika Badalyan, has previously been accused of working for the Russian Embassy. In July, Badalyan and a journalist for Russian state propaganda outlet Sputnik were detained in southern Armenia and [charged](#) with illegal weapons trafficking. Russian officials, and [Badalyan himself](#), [claimed](#) that he was detained for his active pro-Russian position.

Badalyan’s call to protest, boosted through the huge social media followings of Solovyov and Simonyan, speaks volumes about who exactly is trying to set Armenian society against Pashinyan. The Kremlin is not even [trying to hide it](#).

There are very few people in Armenia today who like what the prime minister is doing. But, as Tigran Khzmalyan, the head of the European Party of Armenia, explained: “While they don’t like Pashinyan, people admit that all other options are even worse.”

Those other options are the opposition forces associated with Robert Kocharyan, an old friend of Putin’s who was Armenian president from 1998 to 2008. It was Kocharyan who once handed Russia

a significant slice of the Armenian economy and the country's resources. But he is not alone, Russian influence in Armenia has hundreds of faces. Former pro-Russian president Serzh Sargsyan, removed in 2018, has his own political party. There are political parties who work with the Russian embassy, the FSB, Gazprom and other Russian state structures.

Khzmalyan believes the current unrest in Yerevan is "another attempt at a coup", pointing to several other episodes in recent years, including an [alleged military group in 2021](#) ("the conspiracy of the generals") and last year's [street protests](#). Yet this time, with the backdrop of Azerbaijani attacks on Armenia's borders and the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh, the triggers for protest are much stronger. "We are now risking the loss of our independence," said Narine Abgaryan. "And maybe this is our last chance to defend it."

At the time of publication, the protests aimed at removing Pashinyan have failed. Yerevan residents did not support the opposition; Pashinyan is still the lesser evil. But this is probably not the last attempt. There are already fears of the potential deportation of Armenians from Russia, where there are reports of pressure, and of potential gas supply problems with Russia. As Khzmalyan put it: "We have a difficult winter ahead."

"The dissatisfaction of people who demanded justice, who went through war, has now spilled out into the open," said Abgaryan. "Armenian society has reached a new level of tension. It is disconnected, and you can feel this physically."

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