

only in the form of visits by several high-ranking Armenian officials, such as the visits of then-minister of diaspora Mkhitar Hayrapetyan in 2018, Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan 2018, Deputy Speaker of the Armenian Parliament Hakob Arshakyan in 2018, but also Armenia deployed an 83-person humanitarian mission to Aleppo in February 2019, comprising military doctors and demining personnel that oper-

ated until the end of last year's developments.

As for the current realities, it should be noted that Armenia's Syrian policy continues to prioritize the development of relations with the new Syrian authorities. After the change of power in Syria, the Armenian Embassy and the Consulate General of Armenia in Aleppo continue to function fully, and contacts have already been established with the new Syr-

ian authorities. On January 27, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Republic of Armenia Vahan Kostanyan traveled to Damascus and met with the Foreign Minister of the Syrian Arab Republic Asad Al-Shaibani. During the negotiations, all possible areas of bilateral cooperation were discussed. In turn, the new Syrian authorities met with the representatives of the Armenian community in Damascus, Latakia, and Aleppo,

assuring them of peaceful and safe living conditions. Ahmed al-Sharaa, the head of the new Syrian administration, also met with Syrian Christians, including the Armenian Apostolic Church, promising to protect their rights.

To make the policies made in this direction more effective, Armenia should also try to use the opportunities that are created by various partner states that have already established

active relations with Damascus including, for example, the UAE, Qatar, France, Germany, and the United States. Another important step in the Syrian context is Yerevan's joining the coalition against the Daesh (Islamic State) terrorist group within the framework of the recently signed Charter on Strategic Partnership between Armenia and the United States. The fight against terrorism, the restoration of the unity of Syria, and

the consolidation of the society are among the key issues facing the new Syrian authorities. Furthermore, the potential return of Armenia's humanitarian mission to Aleppo could serve as an essential step in strengthening bilateral relations with the new Syrian authorities, thereby reconfirming that Yerevan has exclusive interests in Syria, which are above the intra-Syrian, geopolitical, and regional competition.

Reasons for Yerevan's move towards Europe, its challenges

How will Moscow react?

ANALYSIS Armenia's move towards Europe has led to the enhancement of the regional standing of Azerbaijan and Turkey and a reduction in Russia's influence, prompting the West to continue urging former Soviet countries to distance themselves from Russian influence.

Recently, the Armenian parliament approved a bill to join the European Union in its first reading. The bill was passed with 63 votes in favor and 7 against. This bill was initiated by several civil organizations through a petition that gathered enough signatures to be considered as a bill. These organizations are urging Armenian authorities to kick off the process of joining the European Union. The bill had previously been approved by the cabinet.

This move comes amid escalating tensions between Armenia and Russia, which have called into question Armenia's potential membership in the EU and forced it to choose between joining the EU or remaining part of the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). This situation adds further challenges to Armenia's accession process if it moves forward. To address these concerns, Nikol Pashinyan, Armenia's Prime Minister, announced the possibility of holding a direct public referendum on joining the EU or staying in the EEU. In any case, Armenia's decision could rebalance the power dynamics in the South Caucasus, which has been witnessing a series of complex geopolitical shifts.

Moving closer to Europe

Over the past five years, Armenia has shifted its domestic and foreign policies away from the influence of Russia, its strategic ally, especially after its defeat in the war with Azerbaijan and the loss of control over the mountainous Nagorno-Karabakh region in 2023. Armenia has accused Russia of failing to provide military support and is now seeking to strengthen its economic and military cooperation with the EU and the United States. Overall, Armenia's move towards closer ties with the EU can be summarized as follows:

- Support from political and social forces for EU membership: A group of pro-Western political parties in Armenia, including the Republican Party, the Republic Party, and the European Party of Armenia, along with several civil organizations, collected over 60,000 signatures in October 2024 to present a bill to parliament to kick off the process of joining the EU. This number exceeds the 50,000 signatures required for the petition to be considered by the parliament. If the parliament rejects a petition after discussion, another petition for a referendum will be put forward, requiring at least 300,000 signatures.

- The Armenian government's plan to open a way toward Europe: The Yerevan government announced its

support for this initiative on January 9, 2025, and referred it to the National Assembly of Armenia, where it is expected to be approved after extensive discussions. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan emphasized that the final decision will be made through a referendum, and after the bill's approval, a roadmap for accession will be drawn up in cooperation with the EU, strengthening Armenia's foreign policy based on its interests within the framework of external balancing.

- EU efforts to strengthen ties with Yerevan: Cooperation between the EU and Armenia dates back to 2009 when the EU launched the Eastern Partnership program to strengthen cooperation and provide direct support to six former Soviet countries, including Armenia. Under this program, Yerevan was granted trade preferences with EU countries. In November 2017, the EU signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with Armenia. Subsequently, in 2021, the European Commission announced Armenia's inclusion in the next phase of the Creative Europe program (2021-2027). Pashinyan confirmed at the Global Armenian Summit at the end of 2024 that his country would not miss the opportunity to join the EU.

- Increased EU-Armenia cooperation in recent years: The EU has consistently pro-



vided economic support to Armenia, amounting to over 211 million euros from 2017 to 2020. In September 2023, the EU approved an additional 5 million euros in aid to help Armenia care for its citizens displaced from the Nagorno-Karabakh region and to enhance social resilience. Pashinyan even attended the fourth summit of the European Political Community in July 2024 and emphasized the importance of

cooperation between Yerevan and Brussels. In May 2024, the EU announced the opening of a new liaison and support office in Yerevan.

- Armenia's efforts to move away from Russian influence: The bill on Armenia's EU membership is the latest step in Armenia's policy to distance itself from Russian influence. Since its independence, Moscow has been the primary guarantor of Yerevan's sovereignty and security, a role that was weakened after Armenia's military defeat against Azerbaijan. Armenia's efforts to move away from Moscow include the ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court in October 2023, which issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin, indicating his potential arrest if he travels to Yerevan.

Future challenges in joining EU

Armenia's accession process to the EU will face numerous internal and external challenges, which are discussed below.

- Opposition inside Armenia: Arshak Karapetyan, Armenia's former Defense Minister and leader of the opposition group

Armenian Front, described Yerevan's current moves towards the West as a "gamble" and warned that former Soviet countries seeking integration into the EU at the expense of relations with Russia face serious threats.

- Economic consequences of leaving the Eurasian Economic Union: Andrey Klimov, Deputy Chairman of the Committee on International Affairs in the Russian parliament, emphasized that joining the EU would lead to Armenia's exit from the Commonwealth of Independent States and the EEU, with significant economic consequences.

- Regional powers' concerns: Neighboring countries such as Turkey and Azerbaijan are cautious about the increasing European influence in Yerevan, while Iran also resists the EU's presence, which could threaten its regional projects.

- Concerns over Russian retaliation: Observers speculate that Russia's lack of support for Armenia during the recent war against Azerbaijan may have been a reaction to Armenia's move towards the West, raising concerns about similar consequences if Armenia joins the EU.

- Complexities of the accession process: Analysts noted that geographical factors could hinder Armenia's accession to the EU, as the country is not directly connected to EU territory, potentially pushing its application behind other candidates.

Future scenarios

Given these dynamics, Armenia faces three potential scenarios for EU membership: 1) Acceptance after lengthy and complex negotiations, 2) Explicit rejection related to Georgia's membership, or 3) The creation of a free trade zone with Armenia while keeping it within the European framework without actual EU membership. If any of these options are implemented, they are likely to shift the balance of power in the South Caucasus, especially after the peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which is nearly 80% complete. This would reduce Russia's influence and prompt the West to continue urging former Soviet countries to distance themselves from Russian influence.



Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan (R) shakes hands with European Council President António Costa on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference in Munich, Germany, on February 14, 2025.