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Foiled Coup in Armenia? Conflict with Church Leadership Escalates

Yerevan reports the thwarting of a violent coup with Moscow's fingerprints

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On the afternoon of June 27, 2025, dramatic scenes unfolded in Etchmiadzin, the seat of the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, located 20 km west of Yerevan. Special police units moved in to detain Mikael Ajapahyan. The archbishop, along with other church leaders, had openly opposed the government, but hundreds of people—including clergy and ordinary citizens—blocked the path until the uniformed officers withdrew. When the wanted man voluntarily turned himself in to the authorities later that evening, asserting his innocence, he became just one of fifteen high-profile arrests within a matter of days. Nikol Pashinyan's government claims to have thwarted a violent coup attempt. Critics, however, accuse it of launching a politically motivated campaign against the Armenian Church and the opposition, and of betraying the country to its archrivals, Azerbaijan and Turkey. Societal divisions appear more entrenched than they have been in decades. One year ahead of the pivotal parliamentary elections in the summer of 2026, the current escalation is unfolding against the backdrop of an increasingly polarized debate over the country's direction, as Armenia stands at a historic crossroads in its foreign policy.

Recap: revolutionary start sobered by tough realities

Pashinyan's government began in 2018 with an extraordinary level of public trust. Brought to power by the "Velvet Revolution"—a historic wave of mass protests against corruption and abuse of power by the previous administration—public approval for the new prime minister and his party, "Civil Contract," initially soared to an impressive 85 percent.ⁱ Pashinyan, who had served in the Armenian parliament since 2012, focused on a broad reform agenda centered on social justice and the fight against corruption. Although known for his critical stance toward Russia, he emphasized his intention to maintain strong relations with Moscow—not least due to Armenia's heavy dependence on Russian energy, security, and economic ties. In contrast, Pashinyan adopted a confrontational approach toward neighboring Azerbaijan, particularly when he declared during a 2019 visit to the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh (referred to by Armenia at the time as the "Republic of Artsakh")

that it was "Armenia. Period."ⁱⁱ Whether and to what extent this "provocation," as critics called it, influenced Baku's decision to launch a military offensive in the Nagorno-Karabakh region in September 2020—and ultimately to take full control of the area in 2023—remains difficult to prove. What is certain is that Pashinyan's domestic political opponents continue to hold him responsible for this devastating defeat and for the resulting flight and displacement of over 100,000 Karabakh-Armenians to this day.ⁱⁱⁱ

"Real" Armenia at the crossroads of peace?

Pashinyan, for his part, executed a dramatic policy pivot in response to the new geopolitical landscape. He declared that the guiding principle of his administration would now be to consolidate the "real Armenia" within the borders of the current republic, to open it to its neighbors, and to transform it into a regional model of success—abandoning, at least rhetorically, the dream of reclaiming lost

territories.¹ Just weeks after the war's end, in October 2023, his government unveiled a bold initiative titled *"Crossroads of Peace"*^{iv}, envisioning the reopening of long-sealed borders and investment in new connectivity projects involving not only the three South Caucasus states, but also Turkey and Iran. Since then, Yerevan has actively promoted the plan and pursued rapprochement even with once-hostile neighbors.

Polls suggest that while an overwhelming majority of Armenians desire peace with Azerbaijan, only a minority believe that it is actually possible.^v

Critics, however, see less of a historic opportunity and more of a humiliating capitulation. To them, the policy amounts to a moral surrender and a sell-out of Armenian national interests to an adversary—Azerbaijan—that, they argue, has no genuine interest in reconciliation, but merely seeks to extract unilateral concessions before sabotaging the process altogether. Baku's demands go well beyond political recognition of the post-war status quo: they include constitutional amendments to remove perceived Armenian territorial claims, the withdrawal of international legal cases, and the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group, the long-defunct body once tasked with resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Yerevan has signalled a general willingness to comply—but only as part of a comprehensive peace deal, not as preconditions absent reciprocal gestures.^{vi}

Yet trust is in short supply. Azerbaijani officials have themselves made sweeping territorial claims—ranging from calls for a "corridor" through Armenia's southern Syunik province to the rebranding of the entire country as "Western Azerbaijan." Meanwhile, the destruction of Armenian cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh is flaunted on social media in ways many Armenians find deeply offensive. With

parliamentary elections looming, pressure on Pashinyan to deliver tangible results is mounting. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, for his part, shows little urgency to sign the long-negotiated peace agreement.

Criticism from the Church

Among the most vocal critics of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's recent policies are senior figures of the Armenian Apostolic Church, including its supreme head, Catholicos Karekin II. As the world's oldest state church, it sees itself as a guardian of Armenian identity—an institution forged in centuries of existential threats from more powerful, often non-Christian neighbours. The perceived "abandonment" of Nagorno-Karabakh—understood not merely as a territorial concession but as the tacit acceptance of widespread cultural destruction, including the loss of churches—has provoked ecclesiastical ire. The Church's stance is bolstered by the influential Armenian diaspora, many of whom view Yerevan's recent rapprochement with Ankara with deep suspicion.^{vii} Unlike previous administrations, Pashinyan no longer demands Turkish recognition of the 1915 genocide as a precondition for diplomatic engagement—an omission that many Diaspora-Armenians, often descendants of genocide survivors, find unforgivable.²

Yet the Church's moral authority is not without blemish. Many of its senior clerics enjoyed close ties with Armenia's former ruling elites, whose reputations were marred by corruption and mismanagement. Since the 2020 ceasefire, the Church has increasingly aligned itself with opposition forces drawn from these same discredited circles. In the aftermath of Armenia's defeat, the Catholicos publicly called for Pashinyan's resignation. But it was Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan who, in the summer of 2024, captured national attention. Following the government's decision to return four previously

¹ Compared to the time before the First World War, when significant populations of Armenians lived not only in Eastern Anatolia, the Levant and the Middle East, but also in other areas of the South Caucasus, the Armenians have lost an estimated 80 percent of their historical settlement area.

² Pashinyan's visit to President Erdogan in Istanbul on June 21, 2025 was the first formal bilateral meeting between the two heads of government Armenia : [Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan visits Recep Tayyip Erdoğan - DER SPIEGEL](#)

occupied villages in the Tavush region to Azerbaijan—a move linked to the final demarcation of borders after the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh—Galstanyan embarked on a five-day protest march to Yerevan.³ Upon arrival, he addressed tens of thousands, demanding the government's ouster and proposing himself as interim prime minister. The Catholicos reportedly endorsed the initiative. Though the movement ultimately fizzled, it left behind a residue of mistrust and political unease.^{viii}

Blessed are the double standards

Despite securing a renewed mandate in 2021, Pashinyan's popularity has waned. Critics accuse him of authoritarian tendencies, a lack of reform momentum, and selective enforcement of his anti-corruption agenda.⁴ The mayor of Yerevan has become a frequent subject of scandal, and Pashinyan's wife, the flamboyant journalist Anna Hakobyan, has faced allegations of using opaque state funding to promote an educational initiative tied to her foundation—an effort some see as covert electioneering. A 2025 poll put support for Pashinyan's Civil Contract party at just 15%, though it still outpaces all rival parties.^{ix}

By contrast, public trust in the Armenian Apostolic Church remains remarkably resilient—at least in the abstract. When it comes to individual clerics, the picture is murkier. Many are known to run businesses on the side, flouting both biblical injunctions against wealth and the Church's own celibacy rules. In 2015, investigative journalists accused the Catholicos of siphoning off millions in state funds into a private Swiss bank account.^x

Analysts point to a deeper, more troubling legacy. A significant number of priests are believed to have served as informants for the Soviet KGB—a history that remains largely unexamined.^{xi} Today, many senior clerics maintain close ties to Moscow and espouse socially conservative, even reactionary, views. The Catholicos's brother serves as bishop to the Armenian community in

Russia, and Karekin II himself has received multiple Russian state honours. As recently as six months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he accepted a medal for fostering Russo-Armenian relations.^{xii}

Pashinyan, by contrast, has grown increasingly distant from the Kremlin. In 2020, he effectively suspended Armenia's participation in the Russian-led CSTO military alliance after Russian troops stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh failed to deter Azerbaijani aggression. Even after the 2020 ceasefire, when Russian forces were nominally tasked with safeguarding transport routes, they remained conspicuously passive during renewed fighting in 2024. This reinforced Yerevan's conclusion that Moscow was no longer a reliable partner and spurred a search for new allies. Armenia has since deepened ties with India and pursued a bold pivot toward the West, culminating in a symbolic vote in the Armenian parliament in spring 2025 to initiate EU accession talks. In Moscow's zero-sum worldview, this was seen as a provocation—if not a betrayal.^{xiii}

A recent offer from Washington to lease the Syunik Corridor in southern Armenia for 100 years—thereby enabling the connection Azerbaijan seeks to establish to its exclave Nakhchivan, without compromising Armenia's territorial integrity—could represent a historic opportunity to resolve the conflict. The prospect of such U.S. involvement is likely to set off alarm bells in the Kremlin, as it would signal a significant decline in Russian influence in the region.

Just over a decade ago, under Russian pressure, Armenia had withdrawn from a nearly finalized EU Association Agreement and instead joined the Eurasian Economic Union. Today, however, most Armenians support the westward turn. The Church, however, remains wary. To many of its leaders, the EU's liberal values are not a beacon of progress, but a threat to tradition.

³ To this day, there are a few tiny Azerbaijani exclaves on Armenian territory as well as an Armenian one on Azerbaijani territory.

⁴ [Armenia indicators - Transparency.am](#) a whole mix of international indices has been showing stagnation since around 2021 after the clear successes of the first years of government.

Confrontation course at full throttle

Tensions reached a new pitch in May when Prime Minister Pashinyan publicly criticised the state of several church buildings, posting photos that purportedly showed churches being used as storage facilities. The clergy responded with indignation. What had simmered beneath the surface now boiled over. Pashinyan went on the offensive, accusing senior clerics of serially violating their vows of celibacy—claiming, with theatrical certainty, that the Catholicos himself had fathered an illegitimate child. The Prime Minister’s partner, Anna Hakobyan, took the rhetoric a step further, branding the clergy the country’s “chief paedophiles.” Much of this unseemly exchange played out on the Prime Minister’s Facebook page, where the tone descended into a vulgarity that many Armenians found both bewildering and embarrassing. The bishops, for their part, framed Pashinyan’s attacks on individual misconduct as a wholesale assault on the Church itself, rallying the faithful to close ranks around their embattled spiritual leader. Among those who answered the call was Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Armenia’s first post-independence president and a long-time rival of Pashinyan. On June 7th, he made a pointed visit to the Catholicos in Etchmiadzin, signalling his allegiance. In response, Pashinyan called for Karekin II’s resignation—a demand that exceeded his constitutional remit. Church and state are formally separate in Armenia, and as recently as 2018, Pashinyan had rejected a similar call from within his own political camp. This time, however, he vowed to “liberate the Church from the grip of sin.”

Events quickly spiralled. Archbishop Arshak Khachatryan was nearly arrested on the grounds of the “Armenian Vatican,” while protest-marcher Bishop Galstanyan was taken into custody. But the real shock came with the arrest of Samvel Karapetyan, a Russian-Armenian tycoon (often labelled an “oligarch”) and owner of the Tashir Group, which controls Armenia’s electricity grid. Karapetyan had publicly positioned himself as a defender of the Church against Pashinyan’s encroachments. His arrest struck many as a thin-

skinned overreach—an act of political theatre teetering on the edge of legality.

Attempted coup d’état with Kremlin handwriting?

Soon after, Pashinyan claimed the arrests had thwarted a coordinated coup attempt involving clerics, businessmen, and former military officers. The alleged plot, he said, included plans for violent attacks. Authorities released a recording of Bishop Galstanyan discussing regime change, along with what they claimed was a written coup blueprint.^{xiv} But the document appeared to be dated from the previous year, and Galstanyan’s lawyer dismissed both items as fabrications. Critics pointed to the flimsy evidence and accused the government of manufacturing a pretext to tighten its grip on the Church and silence dissent ahead of the 2026 elections. Several MPs from the nationalist Dashnaktsutyun party were also detained as alleged co-conspirators.⁵ The Church, for its part, offered no clear denial—only counteraccusations and a fog of evasive rhetoric.

Remarkably, this was the fourth alleged coup attempt in just three years. In September and November 2023, Armenia’s National Security Service (NSS) claimed to have foiled plots linked to the Nagorno-Karabakh war. In September 2024, it reported intercepting a Russian-funded mercenary group allegedly planning to seize power.

Whether or not these plots were real, the scenario is not entirely implausible. Some in the opposition and the Church see themselves as engaged in a last-ditch battle to save the nation from “traitors” in government. A narrative has taken hold that Pashinyan is deliberately dismantling the Armenian Church to curry favour with Ankara and Baku. Those who believe they are on a divine mission to save faith and fatherland may be more inclined to embrace extreme measures. As early as 2021, Archbishop Khachatryan lamented that none of Armenia’s former presidents had succeeded in removing Pashinyan by force.^{xv}

⁵ [Armenia’s crackdown on opposition continues](#)

In this worldview, Russia is cast as a spiritual and geopolitical ally. A Kremlin hand in recent events is not inconceivable. Russian commentators have openly condemned Yerevan's westward drift and issued thinly veiled threats.^{xvi} Moscow is not only irked by Armenia's EU aspirations and democratic reforms; it also fears losing its regional leverage if a peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan is signed. For decades, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and hostility toward Turkey provided Moscow with a pretext to station troops and sell arms to both sides. A genuine peace would render that business model obsolete. Relations between Moscow and Baku, meanwhile, have sharply deteriorated.

The Road to 2026

With parliamentary elections still more than a year away, few doubt that Moscow will deploy its full arsenal—both overt and covert—to shape Armenia's political landscape. Yerevan has denied recent Ukrainian intelligence reports that Russia is expanding its military presence in Gyumri, in northern Armenia. But Moscow is openly recruiting Armenian fighters for its war in Ukraine, particularly among disillusioned and displaced men from Nagorno-Karabakh.^{xvii} The recruitment pitch includes a chilling promise: after serving in Ukraine, they will be "empowered" to liberate their homeland by force. One figure looms large in this scenario: Samvel Karapetyan. Well-connected in Kremlin circles, he is increasingly compared to Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia's shadow ruler. Tellingly, Karapetyan has announced plans to launch a political party.^{xviii} The Armenian government responded with lightning speed, expropriating his stake in the national electricity grid under the banner of "energy sovereignty" and "limiting foreign influence."^{xix} Representatives of the opposition immediately filed an appeal with the Constitutional Court. Speaker of Parliament Alen Simonyan's call to ban Russian TV channels in

Armenia underscores how seriously the government views the threat.^{xx}

Outlook

The recent turmoil lays bare the immense pressure under which Armenia's government now operates. The challenges—both domestic and geopolitical—are formidable. Prime Minister Pashinyan faces a growing array of adversaries, many of whom are not merely hoping for his failure but actively working to bring it about. If, as seems plausible, Russia has indeed played a covert role in recent events, then Armenia's democratically elected leadership is contending with opponents who do not play by the rules of constitutional order or fair political competition. Should concrete evidence of a Kremlin-backed coup attempt emerge, a firm legal response against proven conspirators would be justified. But even that would not excuse the rhetorical excesses that have alienated even some of Pashinyan's supporters. In a region as geopolitically volatile as the South Caucasus, Armenia needs more than just resilience—it needs allies.

The late-June visit of EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas was widely seen as historic. Her pledges of continued support from Brussels and EU member states were warmly welcomed.^{xxi} But symbolic gestures must be matched by substance. Armenia's Western partners must help the country diversify its energy sources, strengthen its economy, and build democratic resilience from the ground up.

For ultimately, the strongest guarantor of any democracy is its people. It is the government's task to bring the public along on the difficult path toward regional reconciliation, open borders, strategic decoupling from Russia, and deeper integration with the West. Encouragingly, on July 1st, Pashinyan pledged to refrain from using inflammatory language in public discourse. But words alone will not suffice. His administration must also deliver on its promises—particularly on reform and rooting out corruption within its own ranks.

- ⁱ International Republican Institute (IRI), „Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia“, März 2019
IRI Armenia Poll 2019, Frage 4: Job approval rating of PM Paschinjan
- ⁱⁱ Paschinjan-Rede in Stepanakert, 5. August 2019, zitiert u. a. in *Eurasianet*:
<https://eurasianet.org/pashinyan-declares-karabakh-is-armenia>
- ⁱⁱⁱ UNHCR-Bericht (Oktober 2023); „Over 100,000 ethnic Armenians fled Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia“
<https://www.unhcr.org/news/over-100000-ethnic-armenians-flee-nagorno-karabakh-armenia>
- ^{iv} Official website of the Armenian government: <https://crossroads.gov.am>
presentation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 2023
- ^v [International Republican Institute \(2023\): Public Opinion Poll Armenia](#)
- ^{vi} Statements von Präsident Aliyev, Frühjahr 2024
z. B. in: CivilNet.am, 19.03.2024: „Aliyev: Armenia must change its constitution for peace“
- ^{vii} See for example https://macau.uni-kiel.de/receive/macau_mods_00004022
- The almost complete destruction of Armenian cultural assets after the expulsion of Armenians is a deep-seated part of a collective trauma and is based on experiences such as in Eastern Anatolia, the Nakhichevan region or Baku.
- ^{viii} <https://www.dw.com/en/armenia-archbishop-challenges-pashinyan-and-azerbaijan-deal/a-69188453>
- ^{ix} Caucasus Barometer 2025 <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/952253/support-of-ruling-party-declines-as-more-armenians-feel-unrepresented-survey-shows/>
- ^x [Journalists declassify HSBC account of Catholicos of All Armenians](#)
- ^{xi} See, for example, Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden*, NYU Press, 2003, pp. 174–176 or Memorial Reports on religious oppression in the USSR or Armenian Weekly, "KGB and the Armenian Church: Shadows of the Past," April 12, 2011.
- ^{xii} [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated 04.11.2022 No 796](#)
- ^{xiii} <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1211823>
- ^{xiv} investigative.am/news/36437
- ^{xv} <https://hetq.am/hy/article/175254>
- ^{xvi} On the one hand, for example, the deputy. Russian Prime Minister with economic sanctions.
<https://tass.ru/ekonomika/23003291> However, the Russian ambassador's "warning" that the West was planning to open a "second front" in Armenia was particularly threatening <https://oc-media.org/russian-ambassador-warns-the-west-is-attempting-to-open-a-second-front-in-armenia/>
- ^{xvii} Ukrainian intelligence report, May 2025
quoted in: Ukrainska Pravda, 24.05.2025 / "Russia recruits Karabakh Armenians for war in Ukraine"
- ^{xviii} <https://news.am/eng/news/816534.html>
- ^{xix} <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/816590.html>
- ^{xx} <https://kyivindependent.com/armenian-speaker-urges-ban-on-russian-tv-broadcast/>
- ^{xxi} https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/armenia-remarks-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas-joint-press-conference_en

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