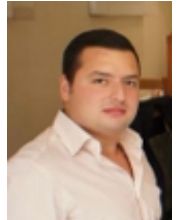


As Armenia moves closer to the EU, Russia is taking advantage of the country's economic and geopolitical vulnerabilities to maintain its influence.

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*Like many former Soviet-states, Armenia has recently pursued closer relations with the EU, much to Russia's displeasure. **Hayk Hovhannisyan** looks at Russia's increasingly punitive stance towards Armenia, such as increasing gas prices and greater arms sales to Armenia's rival, Azerbaijan. Armenia has been trying to walk a fine line not to infuriate the 'bear' to the north, but now, without further support from the West, its European integration is likely to become more complicated.*



Comments of despair and outrage flooded Armenian social media sites after images of a shattered man humiliatingly dressed in a woman's bathrobe appeared on Russian television two weeks ago. It was Khachik Harutyunyan, a 46-year-old Armenian migrant worker, whose truck had accidentally collided with a bus on a dangerous intersection near Moscow, killing 18 and injuring dozens more, including himself. On police orders, just hours after the accident, the hospitalized suspect was forcefully awakened from painkiller-induced sleep, dressed into the embarrassing outfit and taken to the courtroom for a detention ruling.

The coverage of Harutyunyan's courtroom appearance by Russia's second largest state-owned television network, *Rossiya-1*, frequently and expressively emphasized the nationality of the unfortunate driver, in the best traditions of Soviet rhetoric. Stepping up for their citizen, the Human Rights Defender of Armenia, Karen Andriasyan had to remind his Russian counterpart that according to Russia's Constitution, everyone has the right to be treated with dignity, regardless of circumstances, nationality or race. Drawing attention to the inhuman behavior of Russian officials, social activists in Armenia circulated pictures contrasting the self-confident and elegant courtroom image of Anders Breivik, a terrorist who deliberately killed 77 and injured 319 in 2011 Norway attacks, with the miserable condition of their unlucky countryman. In Armenia's capital, Yerevan, a group of young protesters tried to pass a worn-out bathrobe to Russia's ambassador.



Flags of Armenia and Russia By Alexanyan ([CC-BY-SA-2.0], via Wikimedia Commons

This incident comes at a tense moment in Armenia's relations with its CSTO partner (the Collective Security Treaty Organization was created between Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Russia in 2002). Since 2009, Armenia has been actively developing its ties with the European Union in the Eastern Partnership framework. On July 24, it completed negotiations with the EU around the establishment of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area and an Association Agreement, which will be signed in November. The High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, and the Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, Stefan Fule, qualified this as a very positive development for Armenia, which will bring the country and its citizens closer to the EU. This is apparently frustrating for Russia, which pushes its own agenda of the Eurasian Customs Union and had significant hopes of Armenia adding its name to the short list of signatories. Many Armenians regard the disrespectful treatment of their countryman as yet another link in the chain of Russia's punitive actions aimed at the European aspirations of its last stronghold in South Caucasus. Taking advantage of Armenia's vulnerable geopolitical and economic situation, Russia has activated three major vindictive strategies, aimed at putting its 'strategic ally' into total political, economic and military dependence, and hence, retaining it in its usual orbit. The arsenal of policies includes demographic drain, energy and economic blackmail, and direct intimidation by exacerbating conflict risks in the turbulent region

Russia's 1999 Federal Law On State Policy toward Compatriots Living Abroad considers anyone who has ever held a Soviet citizenship or is a descendant of such a person as a *compatriot*. This formulation clearly embraces almost everyone living in the ex-Soviet republics. The program, launched in 2006 and upgraded in 2012 by President Vladimir Putin, creates generous incentives for resettlement of the *compatriots* in a number of sparsely populated Russian regions, through granting citizenship, jobs and other benefits. The implementation of this program in Armenia, with its tiny population of around 3 million, would barely have an impact on Russia's demographic situation, but could seriously harm Armenia's resilience in the face of its 9-million-strong arch-rival, Azerbaijan.

In 1988-1994 Armenians fought and won a war with Azerbaijan over Mountainous Karabagh, an Armenian-populated region, which was placed under Azerbaijan's control in 1920s, as a punishment for Armenia's fierce resistance to Bolshevik forces. No peace resolution has been reached so far. Azerbaijan and Turkey have been blockading landlocked Armenia's vital communication lines for already two decades. With 2,600 people already resettled and another 26,000 waiting for their turn, the Compatriots program has left Armenia with less manpower, intellectual potential, and more people dependent on remittances from Russia, with all the logically ensuing

consequences. Considerable public discontent forced the Armenian government to take steps to halt the program in the spring of 2013.

From the beginning of July, Russia has increased the price of gas supplied to Armenia by more than 50 percent. The economic consequences of the new price for Armenia's population, with one in three living near the poverty line, are going to be quite grave. The third part of the entrapping strategy was Russia's sale of armaments worth \$1bn to Azerbaijan in the spring of this year. Azerbaijan has been openly declaring its intentions to restart the war over the disputed territory and is actively arming itself. In this light, Russia's actions put into doubt if Moscow's current administration fully understands or appreciates the notion of strategic alliance, presumed by the Collective Security Treaty.

Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the existential threat emanating from its Turkey-backed neighbor, Azerbaijan, dragged Armenia back into the sphere of Russian influence. But experience shows that even the most picturesque treaties, and assurances of eternal brotherhood cannot conceal Moscow's true vision of Armenia: poor and intimidated, with a population just enough to cater for the Russian military bases stationed on the Turkish border.

This is hardly what Armenians want for their country. Cooperation with the EU is widely perceived as a real chance for the turbulent region to enter a new stage of economic and political stability, and to adopt European sociopolitical institutions. This integration is not only in the interests of Armenia. The country is located in the middle of an alternative energy supply corridor for Europe from the Caspian/Central Asian regions, and potentially Iran in the future. Azerbaijan and Iran due to their political regimes, and the Central Asian countries due to their geopolitical remoteness, cannot become EU confidants in the foreseeable future. Thus, Armenia can serve as an important balancing factor and a point of influence for the European powers.

Accommodating its harsh realities, Yerevan has been so far trying to balance between Russian and Western influences. Russia's unforgiving approaches indicate that this will not be possible anymore. Thus, there are two ways for Armenia to proceed with its European integration: either the pressure from Turkey's side is alleviated, or the landlocked and blockaded country is provided with an alternative guarantee of security. Both solutions depend on further actions from the West, as Yerevan has given all the necessary signals.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUOPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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