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**THE EUROPEAN UNION
MISSION IN ARMENIA:
POTENTIAL FOR EXPANSION
IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS?**

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Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenian-Azeri ethnic tensions in the South Caucasus have severely escalated. This culminated in the First Karabakh War between 1988 and 1994, where Armenia prevailed (RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2006). The war concluded without a formal peace agreement and Armenia took control of border territories internationally acknowledged as Azerbaijani (Mulcaire, 2015). This included Nagorno-Karabakh, a region within Azerbaijan inhabited by an ethnically Armenian population that has historically been governed by an autonomous Armenian administration (RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2006). This region has been the focal point of the recent conflict. This Info Flash will examine the ongoing Armenian-Azerbaijani border crises, which especially affects the welfare and human rights of the Nagorno-Karabakh region's population. It will discuss the complex alliances and balance of forces in the South Caucasus. This is essential to understanding the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA), an ongoing EU operation seeking to facilitate a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

The First War's unresolved issues contributed to the Second Karabakh War in 2020, in which Azerbaijan prevailed over significantly outclassed Armenian forces (ICG, 2023). The subsequent armistice agreement saw Azerbaijan recover its internationally recognised territory, except for the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh. An essential component of this deal is free access between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh along the Lachin Corridor through Azerbaijani territory (Demourian, 2023). Russian President Vladimir Putin acted as a mediator in the most recent conflict, officially pledging military peacekeepers to enforce the treaty's provisions (Al-Jazeera, 2022). Russia is the primary peacekeeping force between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Although there is a joint Russian-Turkish peacekeeping and demining operation in Azerbaijan, no other international peacekeepers besides Russia's are authorised to act in the Nagorno-Karabakh region or Lachin Corridor (Fraser, 2020).

The 2020 agreement is not a lasting peace treaty and military forces from Azerbaijan and Armenia, along with pro-Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh troops, have engaged in border clashes since the end of the war. The situation escalated in December 2022 when Azerbaijan instigated a blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh (Demourian, 2023). The Lachin Corridor is currently inaccessible, disrupting food supplies and transport. Connections to power stations in undisputed Azerbaijani territory have been cut, leaving the population without electricity (Sewell, 2023). This has created a severe humanitarian crisis for the region's residents. The lack of food imports has led to severe rationing; without electricity, hospitals, schools and most businesses have ceased operations (Sewell, 2023). Russian peacekeepers have been unable to prevent Azerbaijani aggression on the border or ensure the free flow of goods into Nagorno-Karabakh (Al-Jazeera, 2022).

The EU's Involvement in Armenia

In this context, the EU and the Armenian government, led by prime minister Nikol Pashinyan, formed the EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA) in January 2023 (EEAS, 2023). The EUMA is a civilian deployment within the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (EEAS, 2023). It aims to contribute to Armenia-Azerbaijan border stability through civilian monitoring in order to prevent escalations. It is not mandated to use military force and is only authorised to operate within Armenia's internationally recognised borders (Ghazanchyan, 2023). This excludes Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin Corridor, which are essential to any peace resolution.

During the last decade, Armenia has tried to shift its alignment away from Russia, in line with similar trends observed among other former Soviet Republics. In 2013, Armenia prepared to join the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the EU (Gardner, 2013). However, the Armenian government, then led by Serzh Sargsyan, abruptly changed course and joined the Eurasian Economic Union, presumably due to heavy Russian pressure (Gardner, 2013). In 2018, however, Armenia's Velvet Revolution removed Sargsyan's pro-Russian government, replacing it with Pashinyan's pro-European one (Lanskoy, 2019). This event is classified into the broader trend of anti-Russian Colour Revolutions in ex-Soviet republics (Lanskoy, 2019).

Pashinyan has pursued closer ties with the EU. His government ratified the Armenia-EU Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement in 2021 (European Commission, 2023). This began judicial reforms to meet EU standards, a first and essential step for potential accession to the EU. Armenia now enjoys generous free travel agreements with the EU and free trade agreements covering a majority of Armenian goods (European Commission, 2023). Although Pashinyan has made sceptical public remarks concerning the EU, his administration's policies have brought Armenia closer to the EU and further away from Russia (Kuzio, 2023).

Strategic Situation in Armenia

The ongoing EUMA mission must be understood in the context of Armenia's increasing orientation towards the EU and disillusionment with Russia. The latter is Armenia's primary official ally and is responsible for upholding the 2020 ceasefire agreement (CSTO, 2012). Both are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military alliance of six ex-Soviet states that obliges reciprocal defence between members equivalent to NATO's Article 5 (CSTO, 2012). Despite this, Russia did not intervene in the 2020 War and has not enforced the armistice by ending the ongoing Azerbaijani blockade (Al-Jazeera, 2022). In September 2022, Armenia invoked the CSTO's mutual defence articles in response to escalating Azerbaijani border aggression. Russia responded with a monitoring mission but did not intervene with military action (Tadevosian, 2023). The death of Russian peacekeepers due to Azerbaijani border incursions has not led to decisive action (Al-Jazeera, 2022).

Furthermore, Armenia has condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with prime minister Pashinyan proclaiming that Armenia is not an ally of Russia (Reuters, 2023). It is unclear whether Pashinyan's remarks relate to Armenia's alliance with Russia in general, or only mean Armenia is not supporting Russia against Ukraine (Reuters, 2023). No plans exist for Armenia to withdraw from the CSTO (Tadevosian, 2023). Russia has not been a reliable Armenian ally, but neither has the EU; at the same time, other actors do not offer Armenia a better option.

Reasons for Russian inaction include the ongoing war in Ukraine, which receives most of Russia's military resources. This focus has made Armenia a secondary theatre. Russia also has close international business ties with Azerbaijan. Most Azerbaijani oil, gas and energy are transported through Russia's North Caucasus pipelines toward the European market, yielding significant transit earnings for the country (Paylan, 2023).

Additionally, Azerbaijan is a close ally of Türkiye. Both nations have close ethnic and linguistic ties, and authoritarian governments. Ankara provided Baku with significant military aid during the 2020 War, including foreign fighters and Bayraktar military drones (MEE, 2020). Armenia has criticized the Türkiye-Azerbaijan partnership, highlighting how both nations participated in the Armenian genocide and continue to deny those events today (Tsvetkova, 2020). Yerevan's position is that Azerbaijan's blockade is causing another Armenian genocide in Nagorno-Karabakh, and Armenia has launched a genocide case in the International Criminal Court (Sewell, 2023). Turkish support for Azerbaijan adds additional pressure on Russia not to act, as Russia has sought good relations with Türkiye (Tsvetkova, 2020). As a result, Armenia is effectively surrounded by Azerbaijan and Azerbaijan's allies.

The EU also has pursued closer relations with Azerbaijan; the Union is Azerbaijan's largest trading partner. Azerbaijan is also a member of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), which promotes greater long-term integration (Strategic Communications, 2021). Azerbaijan is also an EU Strategic Energy Partner and member of the Eastern Europe Energy Efficiency and Environment Partnership (EESP), which facilitates imports of Azerbaijani gas (Delegation of Azerbaijan, 2021). Involvement with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, including close trade relations with both, can possibly complicate the EU response to the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis.

Challenges to the EUMA and Long-term Possibilities

Armenia presents an exceptionally challenging strategic situation. Azerbaijan has a significantly larger, more capable and well-funded military, as evident through the 2020 War (ICG, 2023). Azerbaijan also has direct or indirect support from the major South Caucasus powers. The EUMA has approximately 100 members and is not a military operation (EEAS, 2023). As such, no military coordination or interoperability exists between Armenia and EU forces. Armenia is part of the Partnership for Peace and Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO, which involve economic, political and military support to remove unexploded ordnance, eliminate corruption and fight terrorism (NATO, 2021). Armenia participated in NATO operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan on a voluntary basis, and individual EU and NATO states have provided Armenia with military aid (NATO, 2021). Although these programs involve a degree of Armenian military interoperability with Western forces, Armenia does not enjoy EU or NATO military protection.

Only Russia is authorised to deploy armed peacekeepers in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, limiting the EUMA's effectiveness. Although most of the international community has supported the EUMA's efforts, Russia and Azerbaijan have criticised the EUMA as foreign meddling (Ghazanchyan, 2023). To resolve this crisis, the EUMA and other EU agents must first ensure that the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh receive humanitarian aid. Ensuring the sufficient food and water supply is essential. Moreover, unified EU action is needed to pressure Azerbaijan to end the blockade. Any lasting peace agreement must recognise the security needs of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the human rights of the Nagorno-Karabakh population. Continuing the Azerbaijani blockade may result in significant civilian deaths and make any long-term peace settlement unattainable (Sewell, 2023).

The EU may begin military coordination with Armenia. As a sovereign nation, Armenia can request foreign military forces to act as peacekeepers along its internationally recognised borders. Such an EU military mission could effectively document and reduce clashes on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. With the EUMA already in effect, there is already the institutional organisation and knowledge for a military mission (EEAS, 2023). While this mission would lack the authority to patrol Nagorno-Karabakh or the Lachin Corridor, Armenian peacekeeping forces from the central Armenian government and the local Nagorno-Karabakh government could continue to oversee these areas (Ghazanchyan, 2023). An EU military mission managing the internationally recognised borders would thus free up these forces to focus solely on the disputed territories. However, as Azerbaijan would most likely protest this move, it could complicate any long-term Armenia-Azerbaijan settlement and the ability of the EU to act as a neutral arbiter (Ghazanchyan, 2023).

From a geopolitical perspective, possible EU military peacekeepers could parallel the Union's support for Ukraine against Russia. Russia's inability to protect its official ally has severely damaged its credibility and faith in its armed forces (Tadevosian, 2023). An effective EU military peacekeeping mission would further discredit Russia and increase the popularity of EU coordination in Armenia.

Should the Russian peacekeeping mission withdraw, these forces will likely be deployed in Ukraine for the ongoing war. While the two-thousand strong Russian peacekeeper force would have a limited impact, it could still reinforce Russia's endeavours (Demourian, 2023). A Russian withdrawal from Armenia would eliminate Russian influence in the region and undermine international Russian credibility.

Russia's other significant investments in the South Caucasus are in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which are internationally recognised Georgian territories (Avdaliani, 2023). Like Armenia, Georgia has also expressed interest in greater EU coordination. Georgia also faces a challenging strategic position, as it requires EU and Western support to face the Russian-backed separatists (Avdaliani, 2023). Expanding the EU assistance to Armenia could potentially serve as an introductory point to wider EU operations in the South Caucasus. A successful EU operation in Armenia, even within the existing EUMA framework, provides immediate and future opportunities to discredit Russian power.

Conclusions

Armenia is a secondary theatre for the EU and Russia, as Ukraine takes precedence. Armenia recognises this status, evident in its disappointment with the CSTO Treaty. However, it can only leave the CSTO if it has an alternative option for its defence. A nominal Russian ally is better than having no allies. This situation offers a chance for the EU to enter the South Caucasus as a credible security actor. Successful EU support and mediation of the border dispute would help advance public support for Armenian accession to the EU. This would bring the country out of Russia's sphere of influence and protect it from its aggressive neighbours. Armenian EU membership remains speculative at this stage, although the present Armenian government is leaning towards a pro-European stance.

EU support at this stage may prove decisive. The EU must balance the benefits and risks of transforming the EUMA operation into an armed peacekeeping force. At present, the human rights of Nagorno-Karabakh are at serious risk. This process will likely increase Russian interest in Armenia, as they are motivated to counteract a perceived encroachment into their sphere. Currently, the EUMA is not mission-appropriate, being too small and underpowered to prevent Azerbaijani border aggression and blockades. A review of the current mission and an expansion in size and resources will hence be needed. The EU should also be prepared to offer armed peacekeepers should Armenia request or require them. A prompt EU response would counteract regional Russian influence and, most importantly, prevent humanitarian suffering.

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