

Armenia's President Re-Elected Amid Conflict

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Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, re-elected in a landslide victory Monday, is expected to keep the promotion of Russian ties a priority during his second five-year term, as his country moves closer to clinching an Association Agreement with the European Union.

Flare-ups in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, seized by Armenia in the early 1990s but still considered part of Azerbaijan, have left Armenia seeking Russian support in peace talks. Gunfire exchanges along Nagorno-Karabakh's border with greater Azerbaijan escalated in the run-up to the election.

Sargsyan, who was born in Nagorno-Karabakh's capital and largest city, Stepanakert, "sees the Russian-Armenian alliance as the main pillar of Armenia's security," said Simon Saradzhyan, a research fellow at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center. "The partnership has a stabilizing impact on the region if only because it helps to deter Azerbaijan from waging a war over Nagorno-Karabakh."

"Russia also benefits from this partnership because the latter enables Moscow to project influence in the region as well as limit influence of other external stakeholders," he added.

"While Russia's relations with Georgia have somewhat improved under [recently elected Prime Minister] Bidzina Ivanishvili, [President] Ilham Aliyev's Azerbaijan is increasingly reluctant to follow Moscow's lead, as demonstrated by Baku decision to force the Russian military withdraw from the early warning radar at Gabala by demanding an exorbitantly high lease payment."

Armenia, which borders Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran and Turkey, was one of the first countries that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited after being appointed in November. It was recently announced that Russia will sign a new agreement on military-technical cooperation with Armenia.

With both Turkey's and Azerbaijan's borders closed to Armenia — Turkey and Armenia have clashed over recognition of genocide of ethnic Armenians in Turkey during World War I — and Iran being economically weakened by sanctions from Western powers, landlocked Armenia finds itself heavily dependent on its former Soviet master, Russia.

Armenia has been cautious about European integration but is expected to sign an EU Association Agreement this November.

After a Jan. 9 meeting between EU Commissioner Stefan Fule and the president of the Armenian National Assembly, Hovik Abrahamyan, Fule emphasized in a statement that "it is in the EU's interest to see good Armenian-Russian relations; they can in turn benefit also from Armenia's partnership with the EU."

But Felix Stanevsky, head of the Caucasus Department at the CIS Institute, believes that the West is pushing Armenia "too much" toward European integration and "is demanding that Armenia make a definite choice between integration with Europe and fostering ties with Russia."

"Armenians themselves decide the fate of their country," he said, adding that the West was violating standards of diplomacy.

Russia has repeatedly tried to lure Armenia into its Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan. But Armenia has been reluctant, saying its national economic structure does not complement that of the energy-dependent union.

Edgar Vardanian, an expert at the Armenian Center for National and International Studies, thinks that Russia will continue to lead Nagorno-Karabakh peace talks as a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Minsk Group, specifically established to deal with the territorial conflict.

In Vardanian's opinion, Armenia will continue to have very strong ties with Moscow. At the same time, he believes that Russia "should try to foster development in the whole region, instead of pursuing separate policies with Baku, Tbilisi and Yerevan."

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