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Putin Met With Street Protests on Visit to Armenia

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Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Russian President Vladimir Putin arrive at a CSTO session. **Vladimir Smirnov/TASS / kremlin**

YEREVAN, Armenia — Russian President Vladimir Putin was greeted with street demonstrations in the capital of this landlocked South Caucasus nation Wednesday as he arrived for talks with the members of a Moscow-led military alliance.

Hundreds of Armenians and emigre Russians took part in two days of rallies in central Yerevan to protest Putin's visit, with slogans including "Putin is a killer" and "No to war."

"We must show that not all Russians support this," said Sergei, an IT worker who recently moved to Yerevan, while attending a demonstration against the war in Ukraine.

The rocky reception for Putin on his first trip to Armenia since 2019 comes as military reversals in Ukraine make the Russian leader appear increasingly isolated on the world stage

— and as Russia struggles even to retain its influence in the former Soviet states in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

While in the Armenian capital, Putin attended a summit of the heads of state of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) — a military bloc including Russia and Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan — and was due to meet Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

“It is clear to us that our joint work within the framework of the CSTO brings visible practical results and helps to protect the national interests, sovereignty and independence of our countries,” Putin said at the gathering.

Yet, Pashinyan used his welcome speech to attack the CSTO alliance for its inaction in the ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

"We have failed so far to make a decision on the CSTO's reaction to Azerbaijan's aggression against Armenia," Pashinyan said.

“These facts are hugely damaging to the image of the CSTO.”

Outside the meeting, Armenians and anti-war Russians who have relocated to Armenia organized at least three rallies to protest against Putin’s visit, Russian support for neighboring Azerbaijan and the Ukraine war.

Many Armenians blame Moscow — which they previously considered a close ally — for what they see as its failure to assist Yerevan in its conflict with Baku.

“Russia promised to protect us, but instead it did the opposite,” Yuri Tatevasyan, 64, told The Moscow Times at a rally in the Armenian capital on Tuesday evening.

"We have nothing against the Russian people — but we do not want to be slaves of the Kremlin,” Tatevasyan added.

“We want Armenia to be a free and democratic country.”

Putin has made few trips abroad since the start of Russia’s nine-month war in Ukraine, which has been castigated by the West and international bodies, including the United Nations.

The Russian leader earlier this month declined to attend a meeting of the Group of 20 leading industrialized nations, where world leaders “strongly condemned the war.”

Putin has lost his “first among equals” status at CSTO gatherings due to the Ukraine war, according to Andrei Kolesnikov, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, although regional leaders remain wary of the Kremlin.

“The members of the CSTO are also afraid of Putin's Russia,” Kolesnikov added.

With Russia traditionally playing a key mediation role in Armenia’s long running conflict with Azerbaijan, Yerevan is keen to secure the Kremlin’s support.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have fought two wars over Azerbaijan's Armenian-majority

populated exclave of Nagorno-Karabakh since the break-up of the Soviet Union. Six weeks of fighting in autumn 2020 claimed the lives of more than 6,500 troops from both sides and ended with a Russian-brokered ceasefire.

“We have to keep in mind that Russian peacekeepers are the guarantors of security,” former Armenian lawmaker Arman Abovyan told The Moscow Times.

And even the Russian emigres protesting Putin’s visit this week were aware that Yerevan cannot afford to alienate the Russian leader.

“Putin is still welcomed in Armenia, unlike in many countries,” Russian IT worker Sergei, who declined to provide his surname, told The Moscow Times.

“Armenia does not want to quarrel with the Russian authorities.”

AFP contributed reporting.

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