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Russia’s Neighbors Can Lose Faith in Its Security Bloc. Breaking Trade Ties Is Harder.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, CSTO Secretary General Taalatbek Masadykov, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov attend a summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in Moscow on Nov.11, 2026. **Pavel Bednyakov/Pool via REUTERS**

On November 11, members of the Russian-backed Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) voted to strip Armenia of its organizational voting rights after Yerevan had spent years boycotting the security group’s activities.

The move's lack of reverberations is the latest in a years-long series of incidents pointing to the organization's irrelevance to regional security. In the fall of 2022, the CSTO failed to act when Azerbaijani forces took up positions within Armenia's internationally recognized territory. That same year, the CSTO was diplomatically missing in action during rounds of

fierce border fighting between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as during the two states' rapprochement in 2025.

Most importantly, of all the CSTO's members, only Belarus has made major contributions to Moscow's all-important war effort in Ukraine. The others — Armenia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan — have largely skirted the issue in public.

Yet, as one Russian-backed post-Soviet intergovernmental organization has largely fallen by the wayside, another's significance has quietly endured: the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

Like the CSTO, Armenia's place in the EAEU has been put into question by Yerevan's growing ties to the West. Yet Armenian policymakers have approached the question of the EAEU with a caution not applied during its ongoing exit from the CSTO.

The EAEU is composed of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. Formed in 2014, it was billed as the Eurasian equivalent of the European Union customs union.

In contrast to the CSTO, the EAEU has achieved modest success. A number of barriers to trade, capital, and the movement of labor have been removed between members. The organization's 2025 report claims that mutual trade has more than doubled in total volume since 2015. Unlike the CSTO, which counts Uzbekistan, Georgia, and Azerbaijan among states that have left the group to date, the EAEU has never lost a member.

Tellingly, as Armenia made a point of non-engagement with the CSTO amid its geopolitical drift westward in recent years, it has continued to participate in the EAEU's structures. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan attended the summit of EAEU leaders in Kyrgyzstan this August.

Related article: CSTO Strips Armenia of Voting Rights

However, this year marked a notable rupture in the EAEU for Armenia. Since the spring of 2026, Russia has rolled out a wide array of trade bans on Armenian goods seemingly designed to economically punish the country's growing ties to the EU.

It is true that Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has increasingly voiced aspirations for a European Union application. However, as of yet, no formal process of exiting the EAEU is underway.

Even amid the Russia-Armenia trade war, Yerevan continues to signal interest in engagement with the EAEU. In October, Armenian Economy Minister Gevorg Papoyan filed a request for the organization to recognize the Russian trade restrictions as unlawful barriers.

"If these restrictions are recognized as a barrier, then Russia is obligated to lift them within 30 days — such are the EAEU procedures," Papoyan said.

While Pashinyan has condemned Russia's trade restrictions, he, at least in public remarks, remains hesitant to declare any firm ambitions regarding an exit from the trade bloc.

“We have begun preparations, as we promised our people, to create an alternative so that they will have an opportunity to make a decision. We are not preparing to leave the EAEU,” Pashinyan stated in early November.

When asked about the potential for European Union membership, leading Armenian policymakers continue to speak of a formal EU application as a future goal.

“Next year could be realistic," Pashinyan remarked in November 2026. "The year 2028 could also be realistic. We have launched a process that will lead us to a final decision on submitting a formal application for European Union membership.”

At the same time, a number of Armenian elites are hesitant to leave the EAEU. The Armenian prime minister has announced that he will make three separate trips to Russia this coming December, a likely sign that he is still hoping to resolve the ongoing trade disputes with Moscow.

In an op-ed recently published in November by Armen Grigorian, secretary of Armenia's Security Council from 2018 until August of 2026, the former high-ranking official sought to temper expectations of an easy economic pivot from the EAEU to the EU.

"Armenia does not have the ‘speed’ needed to break out of the economic gravitational field of the EAEU and Russia," he argued, describing potential EU membership for Armenia as an "illusion."

This enduring caution by Armenian elites speaks to the difficulty of undoing the links forged among EAEU members. Russia, by far the largest economy in the EAEU, has been Armenia's leading trade partner since 1991. Critical Armenian industries, from agriculture to energy, are almost entirely reliant on this relationship.

Russia has been waging a trade war against Armenia for months now. Yet Yerevan's decision-making process seems more marked by ongoing cost-benefit calculations than by the anger or apathy seen in Armenia's evaluation of the CSTO.

Related article: Armenia Appeals to Eurasian Economic Union for Removal of Russian Trade Restrictions

Underlying the EAEU's continued relevance to member states is the fact that while political and security ties have frayed between post-Soviet states since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, many post-Soviet economies have in fact become more enmeshed with Russia.

For Eurasian states already economically wired into Russia, the Western sanctions regime introduced against Moscow in 2022 generated new opportunities to get rich by way of sanctions evasion routes and Russia's broader economic reorientation.

Armenia-Russia trade doubled in 2022, but Armenia is by no means the only country where this has happened. Over the course of the first year of the full-scale invasion, Kyrgyzstan, another small EAEU member, saw exports to Russia double and imports from China triple, conceivably largely for re-export to Russia.

While 2022-23 saw the most dramatic growth in trade, the overall trade turnover between EAEU states and Russia has remained well above the pre-war average. Kazakhstan, the second-largest economy in the EAEU and a crucial transit hub for goods into Russia, has seen reasonable growth in trade from $25 billion in 2021 to $29 billion in 2025.

Western sanctions enforcers have paid attention to this development, applying secondary sanctions to a handful of Kyrgyz firms they suspect of transporting militarily sensitive goods to Russia. For the most part, however, this trade is largely in consumer goods not eligible for secondary sanctions.

The story of this economic surge is not one of any particular institutional shift or innovation by the EAEU. Non-EAEU members Georgia, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan have all seen comparable spikes in trade with Russia since 2022.

Instead, it is a story of firms taking advantage of shifting geoeconomic realities that significantly raised the potential of trade relations with Russia.

For energy resources as well, post-Soviet Eurasian states have seen new benefits of ties to Russia. Central Asian countries today purchase substantially more Russian gas than they did in 2022, a trend bolstered by rising demand for energy in the region and Russia's reduced options for export markets abroad.

While Russia's political influence in what it sees as its backyard has declined since 2022, its economic influence has not. Even as the Kremlin carries less political weight abroad, close trade relations with Russia will continue to offer countries like Armenia opportunities, these states will be tempted to maintain or, at the very least, be afraid to lose.

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