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Armenia: a non-binding pledge to leave the CSTO

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In remarks to parliament on 12 June, Armenia's prime minister Nikol Pashinyan said that his country would leave the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). When an opposition MP asked why Armenia is still a member of this alliance even though it is not satisfied with its membership, he replied that the country's withdrawal from the CSTO would take place at an "appropriate time." However, he did not say what specific steps his government would take to do so. On the same day the country's foreign minister, Ararat Mirzoyan, clarified that the prime minister had not said that Armenia was leaving the CSTO, but merely that it would take a decision on when to leave this organisation. Pashinyan's remarks were widely covered by the media. By the morning of 13 June, there had been no official response or comment from the Russian foreign ministry, nor any reaction from the CSTO itself.

Commentary

- Armenia's attitude towards the CSTO and towards its alliance with Russia has been unequivocally and openly critical since the war with Azerbaijan in the autumn of 2020, and especially since the brief round of fighting in September 2022, when targets on Armenian territory came under attack but neither the CSTO nor Russia came to Armenia's aid. Armenia has effectively suspended its activities within the CSTO; for example, it has refused to contribute to the organisation's budget and cancelled its participation in this year's exercises. At the same time, it remains part of the CSTO's system, and its membership allows it to purchase Russian military equipment at lower prices, although deliveries are often delayed.
- Armenia's possible exit from the CSTO does not mean an end to bilateral military cooperation with Russia. A unit of the Russian Border Forces under the Federal Security Service (FSB) is set to leave the Zvartnots airport in Armenia's capital Yerevan this summer at the request of the Armenian government, which insists that its presence has failed to improve the country's security; meanwhile, Armenia has been expanding its military cooperation with countries such as India and France. Nonetheless, Russia has retained the bulk of its military presence in Armenia. Its assets include the 102nd Military Base in Gyumri (which will continue to operate until 2044), as well as units of its border forces along Armenia's borders with Turkey and Iran; so far, Armenia has not contested their presence. Russia also has significant assets in key sectors of the Armenian economy such as energy and transport, and certain (albeit shrinking) soft power resources. It also remains Armenia's main trading partner, accounting for a dominant share of both Armenian imports and exports. In this situation, a formal exit from the

Russian-controlled CSTO would not bring any tangible benefits to Armenia, but rather cause additional tensions in its relations with Russia; it is known that the US and France have unofficially advised Armenia not to take this step.

- Everything suggests that Pashinyan's statement was accidental and unplanned, as evidenced by the foreign minister's clarification. However, the prime minister's remarks about leaving the CSTO are consistent with the pro-Western turn that Armenia has been taking over recent months. As part of this shift, an unprecedented summit in the Armenia-EU-US format took place in Brussels on 5 April; it was attended by Prime Minister Pashinyan, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. The Western participants endorsed Armenia's European aspirations (Armenia has declared its interest in joining the EU) and expressed their readiness to provide support and assistance for Armenian reforms and economic development (see '*Armenia: between the West and the threat of war*'). On 11 June, the governments of Armenia and the US announced that they would establish a Strategic Partnership Commission. As a result of such initiatives, as well as certain symbolic gestures Armenia has recently made (on 2 June, the Armenian ambassador to Ukraine visited Bucha and condemned the Russian invasion, sparking harsh criticism from Russia) Armenian-Russian relations have continued to deteriorate. However, Armenia has been careful not to downgrade them; for example, on 8 May Prime Minister Pashinyan visited the Russian capital and met Vladimir Putin (on 24 May, the Russian foreign ministry summoned the Armenian ambassador for consultations; he has already returned to Yerevan).
- Pashinyan made his remarks at a time of anti-government protests in Yerevan led by Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan of the Tavush diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church, who is the leader of the Tavush for the Homeland movement. These demonstrations were triggered by Armenia's handover of four villages in Tavush province to Azerbaijan; the protesters have been calling on the prime minister to resign (see '*The archbishop's revolt: the culmination of anti-government protests in Armenia*'). On 12 June, the demonstrators clashed with police outside parliament; at least 90 people were detained and about 100 required medical attention. Against the backdrop of this tense domestic situation, Pashinyan's remarks on leaving the CSTO have the potential to exacerbate the internal conflict and deepen the polarisation of society. They could also provoke Russia (and/or Azerbaijan) to step up political or military pressure on Armenia.