Familiar Script, New Stage: Russia's Covert Campaign in Support of Armenia's Counter-Revolution

In recent weeks, amid escalating tensions between Russia and Azerbaijan, the South Caucasus has entered an unprecedented phase. For the first time, Moscow appears to be simultaneously waging hybrid warfare against both Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Kremlin's posture, marked by heightened anxiety, seems driven by the prospect of Baku and Yerevan nearing a peace deal independently of Russian mediation—something unseen since the late 1980s. The direct meeting between President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in Abu Dhabi on July 10, 2025, along with Pashinyan's visit to Türkiye, his talks with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the subsequent positive developments, have effectively sidelined Moscow and visibly unsettled it.

This nervousness peaked when the United States proposed that control over the so-called Zangezur corridor be assumed by a private American company—a suggestion publicly conveyed to the conflicting sides by the U.S. ambassador in Ankara. This move helped eliminate the last major obstacle in the peace talks. While unprecedented, the situation brings to mind a familiar observation I often heard during my travels to Armenia and Azerbaijan in the 2000s and 2010s: when asked which side Russia supported in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, the accurate reply was that Russia supported the conflict itself—not the parties. That insight now seems more relevant than ever.

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In this hybrid war, Russia clearly retains greater leverage over Armenia than over Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan is significantly less dependent on Moscow, enjoys comparatively strong and stable alliances, is immune to energy-related coercion, and lacks any meaningful pro-Russian political opposition. This article will therefore concentrate more on Armenia, which—despite Pashinyan's Western pivot—remains more vulnerable to Russian pressure. In Armenia, Russia is employing a full spectrum of non-kinetic warfare tools, along with active measures that have been refined and tested over time, particularly in Georgia, which has served as a laboratory for Russia's hostile tactics since the 1990s.

Russia's Strategic Patience to Topple Nikol Pashinyan

From the outset, Russia viewed Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution with suspicion. The protests resembled the kind of color revolutions Moscow typically resists in its "near abroad." Pashinyan's rise triggered fears that he might steer Armenia westward; yet, he avoided calls to leave Russian-led blocs, such as the EAEU or CSTO, and stressed foreign policy continuity—calming initial Russian concerns.

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Unlike its reactions to Ukraine or Belarus, Moscow didn't intervene in Armenia, banking on Yerevan's isolation and reliance on Russian security guarantees. But doubts persisted. Putin remained uneasy about Pashinyan's civil society ties, anti-oligarch rhetoric, and potential democratic spillover. Russia responded by reinforcing influence through the church, military, business elites, gas pricing, infrastructure control, and propaganda. Adopting a "wait-and-see" approach, Moscow worked behind the scenes to weaken Pashinyan.

Cautious of former President Mikheil Saakashvili's fate in Georgia, Pashinyan moved slowly. Reforms were partial, elite renewal modest, and anti-corruption efforts limited, targeting only segments of the entrenched "akhperutyun" clans. Moscow tolerated Pashinyan until the 2020 war with Azerbaijan, when it withheld intervention and then brokered a ceasefire, gaining peacekeeper access to Nagorno-Karabakh. It blamed Pashinyan for the defeat and backed the opposition, but their unpopularity thwarted efforts to bring about regime change. Frustrated by Pashinyan's outreach to the West—especially in the EU monitoring mission and arms deals—Moscow stepped up pressure, while Armenia sought to diversify alliances.

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine accelerated Armenia's pivot. Though still a CSTO member, Yerevan publicly criticized the bloc, skipped summits, and deepened ties with the West. Armenia began importing arms from India and France, replaced Russian guards at Yerevan's airport, and ratified the Rome Statute soon after the ICC's arrest warrant for Putin. For Moscow, these moves signaled a serious erosion of its grip over Armenia.

Coalition Against "Real Armenia"

Following the complete loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories in 2023—once again under the passive watch of Russian "peacekeepers"—Pashinyan moved toward a more decisive pivot to the West. He introduced the idea of the "Real Armenia," in contrast to the "Dream Armenia" imagined by nationalist forces, the Church, and much of the diaspora. "Real Armenia" is not just a geographical notion—referring to the current 30,000 km² Armenian state, without Nagorno-Karabakh or other irredentist claims—but also a deeper reflection on Armenian identity, the

idea of a modern Armenian nation, and its place in the world.

This "Real Armenia" mourns the loss of powerful historical myths, territorial aspirations, and the belief in a centuries-old alliance with Russia as protector. It calls for a crucial shift: reconciliation with Armenia's "Turkish" neighbors—Türkiye and Azerbaijan—and a renewed closeness with Europe, while maintaining Armenia's Eastern roots and its aspiration to serve as a bridge between East and West.

In this vision of "Real Armenia," there is little space for Russia. It is premised on breaking free from post-colonial and post-Soviet dependency on the former tutelary power. The insistence on clinging to Nagorno-Karabakh came at a steep cost—politically and economically—for Armenia's sovereignty. Now that Nagorno-Karabakh is lost—through what many see as Russia's betrayal—there is no compelling reason to sustain reliance on Moscow. Securing lasting peace with Azerbaijan, underpinned by Western and Turkish guarantees, has thus become a matter of national urgency.

The Russian Playbook in Action: Is Armenia 2025 a Replay of Georgia 2012?

It is often observed that Russia does not treat diplomacy as a primary tool of influence in its so-called "near abroad." For Moscow, diplomacy is reserved for adversaries or partners it deems worthy—such as Washington, major European powers, China, or India. Toward Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Georgia, or Armenia, however, diplomacy is replaced by brute force or, when that proves too costly, by "active measures": covert destabilization efforts, economic pressure, propaganda, and disinformation.

This playbook—Russia's toolkit for managing former Soviet republics—took shape over time. It has included notable failures, such as Georgia in 2003 or Ukraine more recently, where miscalculations ultimately led to military intervention. Still, many elements of this toolkit have proven relatively effective and are regularly used across the region.

In Armenia, the main forces working to destabilize Pashinyan's government include: the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC); billionaire Samvel Karapetyan and several other Russia-based Armenian oligarchs such as Ara Abramyan and Ruben Vardanyan (now imprisoned in Azerbaijan); the Armenian opposition, particularly the Republican Party and the ARF (Dashnak Party), both with pro-Russian leanings; as well as parts of the Russian-based Armenian diaspora, media personalities, and retired military and intelligence officials close to Moscow.

When examining these actors, the resemblance to the Georgian case is striking: the Church, a Russian-made billionaire entering politics, and old elites with Moscow ties—all coalescing against a reformist, Western-oriented leader. The ingredients are familiar, and the atmosphere is reminiscent of 2012.

Let's now take a closer look.

The Church and the Protection of "Traditional Values"

Russia's decision not to intervene during Armenia's 2020 military defeat was clearly aimed at sparking a public uprising and toppling Pashinyan through a kind of reverse Velvet Revolution. But the plan failed. Despite protesters storming his residence, Pashinyan held on and went on to win parliamentary elections, defeating a deeply unpopular and discredited opposition.

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With the political opposition weakened, focus shifted to the Armenian Apostolic Church—widely seen as the most trusted institution in Armenian society. As a guardian of national identity that withstood centuries of foreign rule, the Church held strong symbolic power. As Russia's formal military and diplomatic clout in Armenia diminished, it increasingly viewed the Church as a valuable instrument of influence.

Church leaders blamed Pashinyan for the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and called for his resignation. The scenario echoed in Georgia in 2012, when the Orthodox Church helped unseat reformist President Saakashvili. Given similar levels of religiosity in both countries, the AAC's opposition to Pashinyan was expected to seriously undermine him. With the patriarch taking the lead, the Church was poised to become the core of a new resistance movement.

Since June 2025, Armenia has faced an institutional crisis without precedent. Pashinyan launched a direct attack on AAC leadership, accusing senior clergy of corruption and betrayal. The arrest of two high-ranking archbishops triggered outrage among religious communities and the opposition. The conflict turned personal and symbolic: Pashinyan labeled the clergy a "criminal-oligarchic" network, accused them of terrorism, and claimed they were plotting a coup in coordination with pro-Moscow elites. In response, Church figures and opposition voices branded him a "traitor," "a Turk," "a Muslim," or even an "MI6 agent." Moscow weighed in on June 30 with a statement of "official concern" from Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, aligning itself with Pashinyan's critics.

Like the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), the AAC serves as a key channel of Russian influence in the South Caucasus. Though canonically independent and not formally subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church, both maintain close ties with the Moscow Patriarchate.

Consider the GOC: its current Catholicos-Patriarch, Ilia II, was educated in Russia (Zagorsk-Sergiyev Posad) and has met with President Putin—a rare honor, given that no Georgian president or prime minister has had such a meeting since 2008. His likely successor, Archbishop Shio, has deep roots in Moscow, having led the Georgian Church's Moscow-based diocese since 2001 and earned his doctorate from the St. Tikhon Theological Institute, which operates under the authority of the Moscow Patriarchate.

In the Armenian Church, similar connections exist. The brother of Catholicos Karekin II, Archbishop Ezras Nersisyan, heads the Armenian Diocese of Russia and has been instrumental in cultivating ties with the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian state institutions, including the Kremlin and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2025, President Putin awarded Archbishop Ezras the prestigious Order of Alexander Nevsky for his role in strengthening religious cooperation within Russia.

Oligarchs with Russian Ties

The case of Samvel Karapetyan—a Russian-Armenian billionaire who built his business empire in Russia and later invested heavily in Armenia—is a textbook example of the Russian playbook at work. Karapetyan acquired significant assets, including the Electric Networks of Armenia and several large shopping centers in Yerevan. On June 18, Armenian authorities arrested him for publicly calling for the overthrow of the constitutional order, and the Parliament quickly passed legislation to national-

ize the Electric Networks, removing them from his control overnight.

Despite being based in Russia, Karapetyan has remained deeply involved in Armenian public life, maintaining close ties with political figures and the Armenian Apostolic Church. His investments and public statements have made him a visible figure, often aligned with pro-Russian and Church-supportive positions—leading to speculation that Moscow sees him as a key proxy for soft power in Armenia. The Kremlin has stated it is "closely monitoring" his legal case.

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Russia has long relied on oligarchs with roots in other post-Soviet states to project influence. These individuals often acquire strategic assets—such as energy, banking, media, and mining—giving them economic leverage and political clout in their home countries. Karapetyan's control over Armenia's electricity distribution network aligns perfectly with this model.

His case draws immediate parallels with that of Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia. Both men entered politics when opposition forces were in disarray and had no prior political background, which played to their advantage. Each had cultivated a public image as a generous philanthropist and Church benefactor, offering a clean and charitable contrast to the unpopular political establishment.

Notably, neither seemed drawn to politics for its own sake. Ivanishvili was famously reclusive—rarely photographed or interviewed before entering politics—and even after taking power, he avoided public engagements, revealing a distinct lack of charisma or public empathy. Karapetyan likewise avoided the spotlight until mid-2025, when he broke his silence to defend the AAC and issue political statements.

According to multiple sources familiar with both men before their political debuts, neither initially had political ambitions. Their decisions to enter politics were driven by pressure—fueled by fears of losing their fortunes or endangering their families. It is not hard to guess where that pressure originated.

Will Russia Be as Successful in Armenia as It Was in Georgia in 2012?

The answer to whether Armenia is heading down a Georgian-style path is far from certain, largely because key differences in both local and international context—along with lessons learned—set today's situation apart. Crucially, both the Armenian leadership and Western actors appear more aware of the Georgian precedent and its pitfalls.

Back in 2012, Bidzina Ivanishvili positioned himself as both a populist benefactor and a reformer—promising "restoration of justice," "free money," more democracy, an independent judiciary, and improved ties with Russia. These messages appealed to a Western audience weary of Saakashvili's excesses, as well as to an urban Georgian electorate. At the time, few in the West saw Ivanishvili's ascent as problematic. Many even welcomed it, naively believing the Kremlin-linked oligarch would de-escalate tensions with Moscow while keeping Georgia on a pro-European track. In hindsight, it's clear that Ivanishvili's pivot to Russia was carefully calculated and gradual.

Today, the context has fundamentally changed. In

Europe, illusions about Russia have largely evaporated. There is broad recognition that appeasing Moscow leads only to subjugation. Russia is now widely seen as a systemic threat—not just to its neighbors but to Europe's own security and democratic systems. No pro-Russian oligarch posturing as a conservative alternative to liberal democracy is viewed as a credible or acceptable partner.

In 2012, hybrid warfare was poorly understood in Europe. The term itself was unfamiliar, and Russia's methods, even after the 2008 invasion of Georgia, were under-analyzed. That is no longer the case. Europe today is far more attuned to the Kremlin's interference tactics, as demonstrated by the muted response to Romania's annulled 2024 election or the heightened awareness around Moldova's 2025 vote.

Pashinyan, it seems, has internalized these lessons. Though initially more cautious than Saakashvili, he now appears more determined. Unlike Saakashvili, who never dared to challenge the immense power of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Pashinyan has openly confronted the AAC, accusing its leadership of corruption and betrayal. In contrast, Saakashvili's restraint failed to win the Church's support, which ultimately sided with his pro-Russian rivals.

Nor did Saakashvili pursue legal action against powerful pro-Russian oligarchs. Ivanishvili's well-known Russian ties did not lead to prosecution—only a revoked citizenship, later reversed under EU pressure. At the time, Saakashvili knew that Western allies would not support bold moves against opposition figures, fearing democratic backsliding.

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Pashinyan, however, seems emboldened—because he believes the West now understands what's at stake. His preemptive offensive against the Church and a Kremlin-aligned oligarch suggests he expects more tolerance from Western capitals than Saakashvili could count on in 2012.

There is also the factor of Russia's declining power. With its military bogged down in Ukraine and many tools of coercion weakened, Moscow's grip is looser. While Russia retains considerable leverage in Armenia—militarily, economically, and through media influence—some instruments are less effective. Notably, Russia has refrained from imposing economic sanctions on Armenia, despite Yerevan's increasingly unfriendly gestures. One reason is Armenia's crucial role as a hub for sanctions evasion since the Ukraine invasion—making it too strategically valuable to punish harshly.

The contrast is striking with Georgia. While Russia has held back against Armenia and even Azerbaijan—despite diplomatic tensions—it is the Georgian Dream government that has moved to block Armenian exports to Russia. This is all the more troubling given that roughly 80% of Armenia's imports and exports, including gas, transit through Georgia. Tbilisi's participation in Moscow's hybrid war, in this light, appears not just cynical but shameful.

A Different (Global) War Party

Among the many tools in the Russian playbook, one stands out for its failure in Armenia: the invocation of "peace." This narrative—so effective in Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, and even parts of Europe—simply does not work in the Armenian context.

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Armenians have drawn a hard-earned conclusion over three decades of independence: Russia, and any supposed "friendship" with it—more accurately described as subordination—does not guarantee peace. Since the 1990s, Armenia has conceded almost everything to Moscow—strategic autonomy, military sovereignty, economic levers, and even elements of cultural identity. As a colleague from the Armenian diaspora once said, Armenia had become "Southern Kaliningrad with a UN seat." The phrase may sound harsh, but it captures the depth of Armenia's concessions. And yet, peace never came. Instead, Armenia suffered catastrophic wars in 2020 and 2023, losing both lives and territories it held sacred, while Russia stood by—passive and complicit. Over 130,000 people were displaced, and thousands of young men died in vain.

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As a result, the vast majority of Armenians no longer view Russia as a peace guarantor, and no political force associated with Moscow can credibly claim to be one. The idea, promoted by Russian media and segments of the Armenian opposition, that Russia would have protected Nagorno-Karabakh had Pashinyan not been in power, has gained little ground. Russia's abandonment of Armenia—whether due to unwillingness or inability to confront Azerbaijan—is now plain to see.

This may seem paradoxical to Georgian observers, where pro-Kremlin actors still peddle the "peace with Russia" line. But in Armenia, the opposite is true. The longing for peace is strong—perhaps even stronger than in Georgia—given the recent, traumatic wars. Pashinyan understands this. His push to normalize ties with Azerbaijan and Türkiye has positioned him as the most credible political figure capable of delivering lasting peace.

The opposition, by contrast, offers no viable peace strategy. Their rhetoric focuses on retaking Nagorno-Karabakh—a goal that, without another war against Azerbaijan (likely involving Türkiye), is unattainable. This allows the government to brand them as the "party of war," while portraying itself as the only force genuinely pursuing peace.

Avoiding Georgian Mistakes

Let us underscore a few key points.

First, it is essential to ensure that segments of the political class and broader public—those who are not pro-Russian but are critical of the government—do not become alienated and inadvertently pushed into alignment with Kremlin-backed forces. A wide range of political actors, journalists, and opinion leaders harbor concerns that Pashinyan's bold moves could signal the onset of authoritarian tendencies.

This situation echoes Georgia in 2012, when many pro-Western citizens backed the Georgian Dream out of frustration with democratic shortcomings under Saakashvili. Today, many of those same individuals regret that decision, recognizing that Ivanishvili's rule has caused far greater damage to democracy and civil liberties, while openly serving Moscow's interests and derailing Georgia's European aspirations.

To avoid a similar trajectory in Armenia, the government must maintain open dialogue with its critics. It is equally important to provide explicit assurances that measures taken in the name of countering Russian influence or preventing coups will not be used to undermine the rule of law or fundamental rights. If necessary, Western partners should be brought in to support this dialogue—ideally through regular, structured engagements where concerns can be raised and addressed.

The decision to hold the European Political Community (EPC) summit in Yerevan in spring 2026 sends a powerful message of European trust in Armenia. It is now up to the country to meet this moment with responsibility and resolve.

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Finally, if regional players like Azerbaijan and Türkiye are serious about curbing Russian dominance in the South Caucasus, they must support Armenia's efforts to break free from Moscow's grip. That means concluding peace with Yerevan on terms that do not publicly humiliate Pashinyan, avoiding a backlash that could revive pro-Russian forces under the narrative of "Pashinyan the traitor" ■