

## What is Happening in Armenia? – A Confrontation Between Pashinyan's Government and the Armenian Apostolic Church

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*"Etchmiadzin, the center of the Armenian Apostolic Church, has been seized by an anti-Christian, immoral, anti-national, and anti-state group. I will personally lead the operation to liberate it,"* [wrote](#) Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on his Facebook page on July 8.

The confrontation between the state and the church escalated after Armenia's National Security Service arrested Bagrat Galstanyan, the Archbishop of Tavush, on June 25, on charges of attempting a coup. According to Armenia's Investigative Committee, Galstanyan, one of the leaders of the "Tavush for the Homeland" movement, along with other members, had acquired various means with the aim of organizing terrorist acts and seizing power, allegedly through a premeditated secret agreement.<sup>2</sup> Later, on June 27, Archbishop Mikael Ajapahyan of the Shirak Diocese was also arrested for the same reason. In total, around 15 people were detained on charges of organizing an uprising, including Samvel Karapetyan, a Russian citizen and businessman who owns the main energy company in Armenia. The government also arrested Vahagn Chakhalyan,<sup>3</sup> the leader of the opposition movement "Will".

Since the 2018 Velvet Revolution, which transitioned Armenia from authoritarian rule to a system based on free elections, relations between the Armenian government and the Armenian Apostolic Church have gradually deteriorated. The transformation of Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, from the head of the Tavush Diocese into the leader of the opposition movement "Tavush for the Homeland", marks a new turning point in the confrontation between church and state.

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<sup>2</sup> "Attempted coup thwarted in Armenia," *JAMnews*, June 25, 2025, <https://jam-news.net/armenian-security-services-foil-attempted-coup-release-evidence/>.

<sup>3</sup> Chakhalyan is also connected to Georgia. He was the leader of the "Javakhk" movement and was arrested in 2009. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison on charges of participating in mass unrest, purchasing, possessing, and carrying weapons, and hooliganism. Chakhalyan was released from prison in 2013 as a result of an amnesty. At the time, President Mikheil Saakashvili commented on Chakhalyan's release, stating that it was done at the request of Catholicos Garegin II and for the benefit of Russia, as urged by Bidzina Ivanishvili.

## How Did the Church Become the Main Opposition Force?

After Armenia gained independence in the early 1990s, the Armenian Apostolic Church quickly acquired a special status in the newly established Third Republic. According to Article 18 of the Constitution of Armenia: *"The Republic of Armenia recognizes the exclusive historical mission of the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church as the national church in the spiritual life of the Armenian people, in the development of national culture, and in the preservation of national identity."*<sup>4</sup> This article reflects the role the Church assumed in the 20th century, but at the same time, it raises questions about how well it aligns with the formal separation of church and state, which is enshrined in Armenian law.

These questions are not new; they were raised repeatedly during the presidencies of Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan. Their time in power was characterized by widespread corruption and the consolidation of an oligarchic system in the country. That system rested on two main pillars: on the one hand, political and military legitimacy granted by Russia, and on the other, religious legitimacy provided by the Armenian Apostolic Church. Accordingly, the relationship between the state and the Church took on a symbiotic character, as their goals and interests overlapped. However, the Velvet Revolution and the rise of Nikol Pashinyan to the premiership posed a threat not only to Russia's dominant influence in Armenia but also to the privileged status of the Church, due to the new government's strongly secular stance.

In the fall of 2018, just a few months after the revolution, Pashinyan said at a meeting with voters: *"The Church has never been as discredited as it was under the Republican Party's rule. Serzh Sargsyan and his team tried to turn the Church into an extension of the government, and in some cases, they succeeded. They even involved clergy in corrupt activities."*<sup>5</sup>

Since May of this year, Pashinyan has published several social media [posts](#) in which he accused Catholicos Garegin II of violating his vow of celibacy. It is worth noting that Pashinyan was not the first to make this accusation. In May 2018, priest Koryun Arakelyan openly criticized<sup>6</sup> Catholicos Garegin II and launched a

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<sup>4</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, 2015, art. 18, <https://www.president.am/en/constitution-2015/>.

<sup>5</sup> "You Had Turned the Public Administration System into a Place to Employ Your Mistresses. Nikol Pashinyan to the RPA," *Armtimes*, November 26, 2018, [https://armtimes.com/hy/article/149177?fb\\_comment\\_id=2106574276072942\\_2107623165968053](https://armtimes.com/hy/article/149177?fb_comment_id=2106574276072942_2107623165968053).

<sup>6</sup> "Armenia's Uprising Spreads to Its Church," *Eurasianet*, July 20, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/armenias-uprising-spreads-to-its-church>.

movement called “New Armenia, New Catholicos.”<sup>7</sup> According to Arakelyan, he expected support from Pashinyan’s government but never received it. BBC sources report that members of the new administration were even instructed to avoid publicly criticizing the Church.

This caution was expected: Pashinyan was already openly confronting oligarchs and corrupt elites in the country, and a direct conflict with the Church would have posed an additional challenge to his administration. In 2018, Pashinyan’s top priority was holding snap elections; in 2019, it was initiating legal proceedings against former president Robert Kocharyan;<sup>8</sup> in 2020, it was the standoff with the Constitutional Court,<sup>9</sup> followed by the war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The relationship between the government and the Church became especially strained after the 44-day war in 2020, when Catholicos Garegin II called for Pashinyan’s resignation.<sup>10</sup> Despite demanding the Prime Minister’s resignation, Garegin II claimed the Church was acting solely in the “national and state interest” and that its positions should not be interpreted as support for any political force, since “the Church stands above politics.” Nevertheless, clergy participated in protest rallies organized by opposition parties. In 2024, when his request to speak before the Prime Minister during the traditional New Year’s address was denied, the Catholicos refused to appear on the broadcast at all.<sup>11</sup>

The deepening tensions between the Church and the state are also tied to the post-war situation. During the negotiations, Pashinyan’s government made a decision, in the name of achieving peace, to make concessions to Azerbaijan, including returning certain villages and amending the constitution. This position was unacceptable to the Church, which immediately criticized<sup>12</sup> the proposed constitutional changes and described the decision as surrendering to Azerbaijan’s “expansionist ambitions.”

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<sup>7</sup> “The Story of a Monk Who Challenged the Head of the Armenian Church,” *BBC Russian*, September 23, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-49716278>.

<sup>8</sup> “Armenia’s Former President Kocharyan Charged for Usurping State Power,” *Eurasianet*, accessed July 27, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/armenias-former-president-kocharyan-charged-for-usurping-state-power>.

<sup>9</sup> “Armenia to Hold Referendum on Constitutional Court in April,” *Reuters*, February 9, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/armenia-to-hold-referendum-on-constitutional-court-in-april-idUSKBN2030OC/>.

<sup>10</sup> “Armenian Church Head Insists on Pashinyan’s Resignation,” *Azatutyun (RFE/RL)*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31073960.html>.

<sup>11</sup> “Armenian Public TV Snubs Church Leader’s New Year Address Amid Political Rift,” *Eurasianet*, accessed January 3, 2024, <https://eurasianet.org/armenian-public-tv-snubs-church-leaders-new-year-address-amid-political-rift>.

<sup>12</sup> “Armenian Church Also Opposes New Constitution,” *Azatutyun (RFE/RL)*, February 26, 2024, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32835725.html>.

## From Archbishop to Prime Minister Candidate

After Armenia's defeat in the 2020 war, several waves of protests erupted against Pashinyan, but none translated into real political change. In the June 2021 snap elections, Pashinyan regained his mandate, after which the opposition attempted to reignite protest movements. However, even against the backdrop of heightened tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh at the time, they failed to maintain the momentum. One of the key reasons for this was the involvement of Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan in the protests, with their low ratings, they weakened, rather than strengthened, the movements.<sup>13</sup> An exception was the 2024 protests, which began in Armenia's Tavush region, triggered by border demarcation issues with Azerbaijan. This time, the protest leader was not a politician, but a cleric, Bagrat Galstanyan, the Archbishop of Tavush.<sup>14</sup> Notably, during the protests, the Patriarch relieved Galstanyan of his diocesan duties but retained his ecclesiastical rank.

Galstanyan's actions, including calls for civil disobedience<sup>15</sup> and highway blockages,<sup>16</sup> could have resulted in legal consequences, but no case was initiated against him in 2024. As a result, many of Pashinyan's critics argue that the Prime Minister is now acting politically against Galstanyan, seeking to weaken the opposition through forceful means ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections.<sup>17</sup>

In May 2024, Pashinyan openly declared that the government planned to review its relationship with the Church and develop a special policy. He even referred to the Armenian Apostolic Church as an "agent of foreign influence."<sup>18</sup> Previously, in 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin awarded Catholicos Garegin II

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<sup>13</sup> "In Armenia, Rallies Against Karabakh Negotiations Fail to Gain Traction," *Eurasianet*, November 10, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/in-armenia-rallies-against-karabakh-negotiations-fail-to-gain-traction>.

<sup>14</sup> Chernikov R., "Arrests of Priests Continue in Armenia - Why Did Pashinyan's Conflict with the Church Begin?" *Meduza*, July 3, 2025, <https://meduza.io/feature/2025/07/04/v-armenii-prodolzhayutsya-aresty-svyaschennikov-iz-za-chego-nachalsya-konflikt-pashinyana-s-tserkovyu>.

<sup>15</sup> "Bagrat Galstanyan Urged Supporters to Block Government Building," *Кавказский Узел*, May 30, 2024, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/400457>.

<sup>16</sup> "67 Demonstrators Detained at Protests in Yerevan," *Kommersant*, May 27, 2024, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6728003>.

<sup>17</sup> "Armenian authorities arrest an archbishop and accuse him of plotting against the government," AP News, June 25, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/armenia-archbishop-arrest-pashinyan-azerbaijan-7347c25c5df06e868e3f8c630864ff79>

<sup>18</sup> "Pashinyan Amid Opposition Protests Called the Church 'Agent of Influence,'" *TASS*, May 24, 2024, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/20874301>.

the Order of Honor<sup>19</sup> “for his contribution to deepening cultural and humanitarian ties between Russia and Armenia.” Moreover, Garegin II’s brother, Ezras, leads the Armenian Apostolic Church in Russia.<sup>20</sup>

For the Kremlin, which is focused on maintaining its influence in Armenia, Bagrat Galstanyan is a reliable ally. The Archbishop supports close relations between Armenia and Russia, including positioning Russia as a security guarantor for Armenia. Armenia's opposition forces, led mostly by pro-Russian figures who held positions in Nagorno-Karabakh before the war, openly declared their support for Galstanyan after the Archbishop announced that he would run for Prime Minister in the 2026 parliamentary elections.<sup>21</sup>

### Geopolitical Context

In Mackinder's terminology, Eurasia is the geopolitical "heartland," and the South Caucasus represents its key point. Given its strategically advantageous location and its borders with Russia and Iran, control over the South Caucasus is akin to control over a vital part of the Eurasian continent. This is why the region's geopolitical orientation is of utmost importance, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine and the shifted dynamics due to the 12-day war between Iran and Israel.<sup>22</sup>

Pashinyan’s domestic policy should not be considered in isolation from his foreign policy. Through multiple steps, he has made it clear that diversifying Armenia’s foreign policy is a priority. The past over-reliance on Russia has failed to bring Armenia political stability, economic growth, peace, or territorial security. According to public surveys, only 14%<sup>23</sup> of Armenians consider Russia their main friend, down from 57% in 2019. This shift is largely attributed to Russia’s distancing from Armenia during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, ambiguous statements, and deepening ties with Azerbaijan, as well as the use of the conflict to its own advantage, including the deployment of "peacekeeping forces." Pashinyan is

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<sup>19</sup> "The Order of Honor of the Russian Federation Was Presented to the Catholicos of All Armenians," *Armenian Church*, May 10, 2023, <https://www.armenianchurch.org/en/news/the-order-of-honor-of-the-russian-federation-was-presented-to-the-catholicos-of-all-armenians/10439>.

<sup>20</sup> "Diocese of the Armenian Church of New Nakhichevan and Russia," *Armenian Church*, <https://www.armenianchurch.org/en/Diocese-of-the-Armenian-Church-of-New-Nakhichevan-and-Russia>.

<sup>21</sup> "Galstanyan Suspends Priesthood to Run for Prime Minister in Armenia," *OC Media*, 2024 <https://oc-media.org/galstanyan-suspends-priesthood-to-run-for-prime-minister-in-armenia/>.

<sup>22</sup> Khutsiberidze, L. "From the Development of Iran’s Nuclear Program to the “12-day war” - Challenges for the Wider Region". Research Institute Gnomon Wise, 16/07/2025. Available at: <https://gnomonwise.org/ge/publications/researches/276>

<sup>23</sup> *Caucasus Barometer*, 2024, <https://www.caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-am/MAINFRN/>.

working to strengthen Armenia's relationships with both the European Union<sup>24</sup> and individual European countries.<sup>25</sup> Beyond that, Armenia has formed a strategic partnership with the United States<sup>26</sup> and increased trade with India, particularly in the security field.<sup>27</sup> In this context, it is clear that Armenia aims to reduce its dependency on Russia as much as possible.

Additionally, Armenia is actively working to reset relations with Türkiye,<sup>28</sup> including temporarily abandoning its stance on seeking international recognition of what it considers the Armenian Genocide. On July 10, a historic meeting was held between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan without the involvement of third parties. Progress on a peace agreement between Yerevan and Baku would enhance Armenia's relations with Türkiye. The relative normalization of relations between these three countries opens up the possibility of transportation corridors and a reduction of Russian influence in the South Caucasus.<sup>29</sup>

Given Pashinyan's foreign policy, Russia's role becomes even more crucial in implementing hybrid warfare tactics and deepening internal polarization and unrest, especially with next year's parliamentary elections approaching. It is likely that the ongoing conflict between representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the government is part of this broader geopolitical puzzle.

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<sup>24</sup> "Joint press release: EU and Armenia reaffirm and advance their partnership during a Leaders' meeting," Council of the European Union, July 14, 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/07/14/joint-press-release-eu-and-armenia-reaffirm-and-advance-their-partnership-during-a-leaders-meeting/>

<sup>25</sup> "France, Armenia to Formalize 'Strategic Partnership'," *Azatutyun* (RFE/RL), May 26, 2025, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33424543.html>

<sup>26</sup> "U.S. Announces 'Strategic Partnership' With Armenia," *Azatutyun* (RFE/RL), January 15, 2025, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33275734.html>

<sup>27</sup> "India Emerges as Key Defense Partner in Armenia's Shift Away from Russian Arms," *CivilNet*, May 5, 2025, <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/948401/india-emerges-as-key-defense-partner-in-armenias-shift-away-from-russian-arms/#:~:text=India%20has%20already%20become%20a,to%20explore%20new%20defense%20partnerships>

<sup>28</sup> "Armenia-Türkiye Rapprochement," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/06/armenia-turkiye-rapprochement?lang=en>

<sup>29</sup> "Putin's War in Ukraine May Cost Him Control of the South Caucasus," *The Economist*, July 10, 2025, <https://www.economist.com/international/2025/07/10/putins-war-in-ukraine-may-cost-him-control-of-the-south-caucasus>