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Will Pashinyan return from Brussels “with peace for an entire generation”?³

A joint meeting between RA Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken is scheduled to be held on April 5, 2024, in Brussels.

According to the Secretary of the RA Security Council Armen Grigoryan, the meeting is going to be devoted to issues related to the development of Armenia. *“It is planned to discuss aspects of trilateral cooperation that will contribute to the development of Armenia. The event also aims to strengthen Armenia's resilience”*, – Grigoryan told *Armenpress*, leaving aside clarifying specific details of the expected negotiations. In an interview with the same news agency, Armenian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Ani Badalyan said that the meeting will focus on the issues of cooperation in the trilateral format of Russia, the United States, the EU. According to the spokesperson, the agenda of the discussions will include political interaction, development of the energy sector of Armenia and problems in the humanitarian sphere.

During the interview, Badalyan emphasized several times that the planned meeting was not directed against any third party, without specifying whom she was referring to. At first glance, it may seem that the RA Foreign Ministry representative was referring to Azerbaijan, as she herself had mentioned in passing that the Azerbaijani side had already expressed concern that the planned meeting in Brussels referring to the upcoming Armenia–EU–USA meeting that *“it could also induce Armenia to destabilize the situation in the region”*. However, it seems more plausible to assume that Badalyan had the Russian Federation in mind and therefore tried to convey the above-mentioned message to Moscow. In our opinion, this circumstance should be the key point for analyzing the agenda of the planned Brussels meeting.

First of all, it should be noted that the format of the announced meeting indicates an attempt of the collective West to unite the “platforms of dialogue” with Armenia into a single “umbrella” platform with the prospect of transferring the entire Armenia–Azerbaijan negotiation case to a united “mediation table” (Washington-Brussels), of course, without Moscow's participation. This may indicate that the US and the EU had worked out in detail a common position on the apparent future of Armenia and the South Caucasus subregion. Nevertheless, such a format of peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan is still relatively far away, given Aliyev's strategy of prolonging the “peace” process and maneuvering between the West and Moscow. It seems that Pashinyan was invited to Brussels for a meeting with a

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joint Western “panel” precisely in order to “reduce” the space for Baku's maneuvers. The goal is to persuade the Armenian Prime Minister, or rather – to speed up the fulfillment of promised and unpromised concessions to Aliyev, after which the Azerbaijani leader will not be able to delay of the peace deal conclusion with Yerevan, so necessary for the next step of the collective West's multi-pronged combination to squeeze Moscow out of the South Caucasus. For this reason, Pashinyan's trip to Brussels should not be seen exclusively in the context of RA–Western relations and related private issues. The planned meeting and agreements are of geostrategic importance for the collective West in order to deprive Moscow of such remnants of “legitimacy” of its military-political presence in the South Caucasus as the need to contain the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict, which destabilizes the region, and to prevent the Turkish threat. Today, against the backdrop of the predicted collapse of the Ukrainian front, the West urgently needs “peace” in the South Caucasus, which should either ensure a “voluntary” withdrawal of the Russian Federation from the zone of its strategic interests or provoke Moscow to resist these plans by force. Any variant of Russia's actions, according to the West, will not only compensate for the failure of the coalition forces in Ukraine, but will also contribute to the further weakening of the Russian Federation. The key to the achievement of “peace” in the South Caucasus, in the West's understanding, has not changed since October 2022, when the so-called “Prague Agreements” were set, and presupposes the formula: *“Yerevan has to comply with all the demands made by Baku and Ankara to achieve a certain loyalty to what remains of Armenian statehood under the West guaranties”*.

The Armenian leader has long ago predictably became a figure dependent on the West, given Pashinyan's precarious position in Armenia, the toxicity of his figure in the domestic politics and in the international structures patronized by Russia, and a series of failures of his premiership, especially in the security sphere. It is no secret that the collective West, and only the West, has supported Pashinyan, feeding him from the outside with the long exhausted resource of legitimacy within the state and society, and turning a blind eye to the not always “democratic” outcomes of his rule. Despite the narratives of Nikol Pashinyan's “Kremlin-loving” nature introduced by several pro-Western Armenian circles from the “Plan B” group, they are difficult to reconcile with the harsh anti-Russian outbursts of the government and political party he leads. Meanwhile, the interaction between Nikol Pashinyan and the West is extremely beneficial for both sides, since in one case it is about the realization of vital geopolitical plans, and in the other it is about the possibility of retaining power and prolonging guarantees of personal security. In any case, the experience of the Western centers dealing with Pashinyan testifies to his “excessive constructivism” and readiness to make unjustified compromises, something not typical for Aliyev. Therefore, it is the degree of the Armenian leader's “negotiating weakness” that will reveal the maximum limit of concessions expected by the West, after which the Azerbaijani leader will be ready to conclude a “peace treaty” and thus openly participate in the geopolitical combination to finally squeeze Russia out of the region.

The United States and the EU have no reason to disbelieve in the success of the expected agreements with Pashinyan, since he is incapable of stopping halfway, which means that he

will play the whole party offered to him up to the end. The only question is the timing for the sake of speeding up the process the Washington–Brussels negotiators are apparently ready to pay him with some promises so that he can return to Yerevan with something to present to the political elites and society as an achievement equal to (if not outweighing) the concessions.

In this context, the planned meeting in Brussels should be divided into two fundamentally important aspects. First, what will Pashinyan take to the meeting with Blinken and von der Leyen? And secondly, what will he come back with?

The first question cannot be answered exhaustively because we can only theorize about the maximum demands of Washington, Brussels and Baku that Pashinyan is obliged to implement. There are assumptions in this regard, which will be discussed below. On the other hand, the Prime Minister has a lot to present in Brussels. One of them is the introduction into the public discourse of the issue of handing over four Armenian villages in Tavush to Azerbaijan “outside the process” of demarcation and delimitation. It is almost a direct order to the special services at the meeting of the RA government on March 28 this year to prosecute members of the governmental and parliamentary structures of the Republic of Artsakh. It is the decision to abolish the agreements on the Russian border checkpoint at the “Zvartnots” international airport. It is the official recognition of the territorial integrity of Georgia at the meeting with the Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze. And finally, it is the cancellation of the operation of the Russian banking system “Mir” in Armenia.

As can be seen from the above (the list can be continued), “Pashinyan's list” is quite extensive and is designed to satisfy the demands of both the Brussels negotiators and Aliyev - the beneficiary looming behind them. However, it is worth repeating that all the above is only what is on the surface, while the more fundamental steps remain a matter of conjecture.

As for Pashinyan's “payment”, or more precisely, the promises he must present to Armenian society in exchange for concessions, the situation here is no less intriguing. Based on the official statements, as well as comparing the processes taking place in Armenia and the discourses that have been thrown into the socio-political field, we can make some assumptions. As it was already mentioned in the statement of the MFA of the RA, the issues of deepening the political interaction between the USA and the European Union on the one hand and Armenia on the other, as well as the problems of development of the energy sphere of Armenia and the humanitarian agenda are to be discussed at the Brussels meeting on April 5. As far as energy is concerned, it is likely that some proposals of Blinken and von der Leyen will be discussed in order to provide Armenia with alternative sources of energy and communications capable of covering the needs of the republic in case Russia resorts to “gas blackmail”, as well as in case the cooperation between Moscow and Yerevan on the operation of the “Metsamor NPP” is curtailed. It is no coincidence that the issue of agreements with Baku on unblocking energy routes and Yerevan's prospects of connection to the so-called “*Trans-Caspian-Black Sea Green Cable*” were mentioned again by the spokeswoman of the RA Foreign Ministry Badalyan in her interview. It is not by chance that on the eve of Pashinyan's visit Eduard Martirosyan, the director of the JSC “Armenian Nuclear Plant”,

said after the “Atomexpo” forum in Sochi that Yerevan is still studying Rosatom's proposed program for the modernization of the Metsamor NPP and is also waiting for Chinese, Korean and French proposals. Indeed, it is a statement of fact that Yerevan is delaying the process of re-equipment of the nuclear power plant while waiting for proposals from the West. It is Blinken and Ursula von der Leyen, a well-known “expert” on European energy issues, who are likely to make concrete proposals to put an end to Yerevan's protracted “nuclear changeover” by providing it with guarantees of transition from the Russian system of fuel supply, operation and technological re-equipment to alternative interaction with other nuclear energy partners. In fact, it is not the energy sector as at stake, but rather the creation of guaranteed conditions for the reorientation and decoupling of the Armenian economy from EurAsEC, since the energy sector is the main platform for interaction and the most significant factor in Yerevan's economic dependence from Moscow. It is the assurances of the involvement of the e. g. French state electricity company to the Armenian nuclear program and the promise of Azerbaijani gas supplies that could give Pashinyan *carte blanche* to agree to change the vector of the Armenian economy, thus dealing a blow to Russia's most important sphere of influence over Armenia.

As far as “humanitarian issues” are concerned it should be assumed, as Ani Badalyan said, that it could be the question of considering the return of the Karabakh people or a part of them to their homeland under Aliyev's mandate, as “*full citizens of Azerbaijan*” and e. g. under the guarantee of the USA and the EU. Announcing the start of such a process, with promises of security and preservation of civil rights of Artsakh residents in Azerbaijan, could theoretically also become a trump card for Pashinyan upon his return from Brussels. This issue will also be widely introduced into the public and political discourse in Armenia, solving complex problems, including 1. creation N. Pashinyan's image of “the father of Artsakh's return”, 2. rehabilitation and whitewashing Aliyev's genocidal and despotic image, 3. Acceleration of the Russian policy devaluation, which has become “*the main reason for the de-Armenization of Karabakh*”.

And finally, we can also assume that Pashinyan's main “bonus” at the Brussels talks will be the initiation of some declarative formulation about Armenia's promising prospects of joining the European Union, the process of which will allegedly begin in parallel with even more courageous and strong-willed efforts of the Armenian “democratic authorities” achieving peace in the region, good neighborliness and liberation from the despotic fetters of the well-known “*imperialist power*” guilty of all the troubles in the South Caucasus.

It seems to be a very credible assumption that this very point will occupy a central place in the agenda of the negotiations, and some kind of agreement on it will be Pashinyan's main “achievement”, designed to help him implement the cardinal steps started to “undock” Armenia from the Russian vector and the unconditional fulfillment of Azerbaijan's maximalist demands. Ani Badalian's and Armen Grigoryan's statements about the chance to establishes qualitatively new Armenia– Europe relations at the April 5 meeting leave no room for discrepancies in view of the narrative about Armenia's EU promising membership, which has already been introduced into the Armenian public sphere by pro-government media. It can also be assumed that this very narrative is a needed support for Pashinyan in

the realization of the main task currently set for him by the West – the change of the RA Constitution. It is this maximalist demand that was discussed above. And this, according to our assumptions, can be the central goal of the US and the EU on the Armenian track, the achievement of which will contribute to the comprehensive solution of the problems of the anti-Russian agenda in Armenia.

Changing the Constitution is, in fact, a reformatting of the national program laid down in it into an ideologically insubstantial regulation or charter of Armenia's technical life as an appendage, an amorphous territory within the planned configuration of the new World Order. Obviously, this is what Pashinyan had in mind when he declared that Armenia was supposed to be reborn into “Fourth Republic” and that for this purpose it existentially needed a change in the Basic Law. The main goals of its replacement or rewriting are, of course, the removal of the fundamental theses on the just resolution of the Artsakh issue and the problem of the Armenian Genocide.

And while until recently the public and opposition political circles in Armenia harshly criticized the idea of a constitutional referendum, and the government rightly feared losing the vote, the EU membership narrative is obviously designed to offset the negative perception of Pashinyan’s constitutional initiative among Armenian citizens. It can be assumed that it is the idea of “*alignment with the European Union*” that the Prime Minister, with the blessing and permission of the West, will put forward as the “headliner of the program”, taking its place in the new edition as a fundamental doctrine, and the mentioned “Artsakh” and “Genocide” will be carefully removed from the parent law and forgotten as manifestations of ideological and historical anachronism from the perspective of the “Fourth Republic’s” course towards a bright future.

In this way, Pashinyan and his Western partners, together with Turkey and Azerbaijan, are trying to lure Armenian society back into the tried-and-true “*peace and prosperity in exchange for national interests*” deal. This time, however, if our assumptions are correct, we are talking about extremely high stakes, the outcome of which will determine the fate of the physical existence of the RA itself.

Even if we abstract from Pashinyan's personal motives and dependencies that drive him to implement a combination that is extremely dangerous for the country, and assume that he is driven solely by the desire to save Armenia's future at the cost of painful concessions, even in this case the question of the effectiveness of such plans remains open. Experience has long shown that systematic concessions to Western partners and Azerbaijan in tangible terms have already created a lot of problems for Armenia's security, while the promises received in return are more like unredeemed political promissory notes. This is evidenced by the demands to “*lower the bar of expectations*” for Artsakh's independence to an agreement on “*security and civil rights of the population of Karabakh*”. The continued recognition of Artsakh as part of Azerbaijan comes from the same line. And the agreement to hand over all POWs to Baku without conditions. And announcing its readiness to withdraw all cases against Azerbaijan from international courts.... The list could go on. But what are the results? And where are the guarantees that the outcome of the expected regular negotiations in Brussels will not be the same pack of “outstanding promissory notes” for Armenia's national

interests? For example, after the upcoming elections to the European Parliament in June and the presidential elections in the United States in November, which can change the political landscape and send Pashinyan's main “interlocutors” to resign and their main messages, assurances and promises voiced on the sidelines to the basket.

One can imagine that after landing in “Zvartnots”, Pashinyan, like Chamberlain, will proudly wave this very “bundle of promises” over the heads of those who do not believe in the promised “*lasting peace and prosperity*”. However, the intrigue is that the British Prime Minister committed a mistake only once, for which he paid with his immediate resignation, but with Pashinyan’s declared “peace” one must constantly experience a sense of *déjà vu*.