

ARMENIA'S DEMOCRACY BACKSLIDING



Armenia: Democracy Watch

A joint initiative by CivilNet and
the Regional Center for Democracy and Security

Updated: 24 February 2026

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by [CivilNet](#) and the [Regional Center for Democracy and Security](#), a Yerevan-based think tank.

Democracy Watch recaps, highlights, and examines the pivotal challenges facing Armenia's democratic institutions. It focuses on analyzing and addressing challenges to democratic progress in Armenia. The initiative highlights issues such as the normalization of anti-democratic practices by civil society and the political polarization that threatens democratic values. It emphasizes the importance of independent media and civil society organizations in safeguarding democratic principles and ensuring public awareness amidst ongoing political tensions

This material has been funded by the UK International Development from the UK government; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

This **document** was compiled by: [“Armenian Cause” Foundation](#) (office@armeniancause.org)

The **cover image** was generated using artificial intelligence.

About the Authors

Tigran Grigoryan. Head of RCDS

Tigran Grigoryan is a political analyst who specializes in security, democratic transition, and geopolitical change. He regularly writes about and comments on regional developments for CivilNet. Previously, he worked at Armenia's Security Council. Tigran was also directly involved in grassroots democracy building in Nagorno-Karabakh. He holds a Master's degree in Conflict, Governance, and International Development from the University of East Anglia.

Karena Avedissian, Senior Analyst, RCDS

Dr. Karena Avedissian is a political scientist specializing in authoritarianism, institutional development, and civil society across Eurasia. She also advises governments, NGOs, and international institutions on political communication, disinformation, and strategic narrative-building. Karena has previously worked as a research fellow at the University of Southern California and the University of Birmingham. Her work has been published in scholarly journals and in media outlets such as The Guardian, Al Jazeera, and The Moscow Times. Karena is a

regular contributor to EVN Report and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. She obtained her PhD from the University of Birmingham in 2015.

Tatevik Ghazaryan, Operations Manager, RCDS

Tatevik Ghazaryan is a political scientist who specializes in electoral processes. She has actively participated in election observation missions in various countries and regularly undergoes training at ENEMO and EPDE. Additionally, she collaborates with local self-government bodies as an expert and conducts courses in various regions of Armenia, covering topics such as youth issues. Her academic pursuits were conducted at the Regional Politics Department of Yerevan State University. She worked at the National Assembly as an assistant to an MP. Afterward, she joined the Transparency International Anti-Corruption Center. Additionally, she contributed to research projects at the Policy Research Center. Tatevik pursued studies in Project Management at the BDG school. She successfully managed numerous projects within the NGO and IT sectors.

Aram Tadevosyan, Project Coordinator, RCDS

Aram Tadevosyan holds a master's degree in political science. He previously taught at Artsakh State University and worked within the state system, addressing issues faced by forcibly displaced persons following the second Karabakh war in 2020. In March 2024, Aram joined the RCDS team, focusing on the problems of people forcibly displaced from Artsakh in September 2023. He is also a columnist for CivilNet.

Tatev Baghdasaryan, Intern, RCDS

Originally from Berlin, Tatev holds a bachelor's degree in politics and economics from the University of Applied Sciences Berlin. Her passion for international relations and policy analysis has brought her to Armenia. During her studies, she focused on Europe and the post-Soviet region, which deepened her interest in Armenia's geopolitical landscape. "Now back in Berlin, I'm excited to continue my academic and professional journey!"

TABLE OF CONTENTS

27 March 2026 —	
Pashinyan and the Instrumentalization of Hate Speech Against Karabakh Refugees	8
23 March 2026 —	
Academic Freedom in Armenia at Risk? The Case of Edita Gzoyan.....	11
11 March 2026 —	
Foreign interference is real, but not Armenia’s only election risk.....	13
24 February 2026 —	
Rewriting the constitution for narrow aims contradicts democratic principles	16
19 February 2026 —	
The Rule of Law or Rule by Law? Armenia’s Deepening Church Crisis	19
12 February 2026 —	
Continued pressure on Iranian protesters and anti-corruption stagnation in Armenia	22
30 January 2026 —	
Labeling Independent Actors “Pro-Russian”: A New Instrument for Censoring Critics	25
22 January 2026 —	
Freedom of Assembly and Foreign Pressure: A Dangerous Precedent for Armenia	28
9 January 2026 —	
Pashinyan’s New Year address exposes erosion of institutional boundaries	31
30 December 2025 —	
2025: A Year of Democratic Backsliding in Armenia	34
22 December 2025 —	
The standoff in Etchmiadzin and the instrumentalization of law enforcement.....	37
9 December 2025 —	
State Interference and the Erosion of Religious Freedom and Autonomy in Armenia	41
28 November 2025 —	
Administrative Resources and an Uneven Playing Field Ahead of Elections	44
20 November 2025 —	
Opposition Bloggers Detained in Armenia: Implications for Free Speech and Political Discourse.....	46
12 November 2025 —	

Democracy Under Pressure: The Role of Civil Society in Armenia	49
27 October 2025 —	
Big Brother is Watching You: Surveillance, Leaks, and Democratic Backsliding.....	52
20 October 2025 —	
Criminal Justice as a Political Tool in Armenia	55
7 October 2025 —	
Archbishop Ajapahyan’s conviction and the politicization of justice in Armenia	58
29 September 2025 —	
Illicit Party Financing: How Civil Contract Circumvents the Law Without Consequences	61
15 September 2025 —	
Armenia’s ruling party’s sexism problem.....	64
3 September 2025 —	
‘I Am the Government’: Pashinyan’s One-Man Rule Threatens Democratic Consolidation ..	67
18 June 2025 —	
Countering Foreign Interference or Undermining Democratic Norms? The Case of Samvel Karapetyan.....	70
5 June 2025 —	
Assault on the Church: A Growing Danger to Rights and Democratic Values.....	73
22 April 2025 —	
State-Sponsored Hate: How Armenia’s Ruling Party and Pro-Government Media Target Karabakh Refugees	77
31 March 2025 —	
Media Under Attack: The Spread of Hostile Political Rhetoric in Armenia	82
28 March 2025 —	
Torture at Police Station and Zero Charges: The Case of Tigran Ulubabyan	84
25 March 2025 —	
Armenia’s Local Elections: When the Government Influences the Outcomes	87
24 March 2025 —	
Sexism, Stereotypes, and Insults: Armenia’s Ruling Party’s Troubling Rhetoric.....	90
17 March 2025 —	
The impact of U.S. aid cuts on Armenia’s civil society and media.....	92
10 March 2025 —	

When Accountability Fails: ANIF’s Troubling Legacy	95
28 February 2025 —	
Targeting the Free Press: The Ruling Party’s Smear Campaign Against Azatutyun	98
25 February 2025 —	
Freedom of Speech on Trial: The Case of Edgar Ghazaryan	101
18 February 2025 —	
Hybrid Threats vs. Freedom of Expression: Examining the Prosecution of Gharib Babayan	104
30 January 2025 —	
Vilifying the Vulnerable: The Rise of Anti-Refugee Narratives in Armenia.....	107
29 January 2025 —	
From Ombudspersons to Mayors: The Struggle for Impartiality and Public Trust in Armenia	110
23 January 2025 —	
Global Democratic Erosion: Implications for Armenia’s Future	113
14 January 2025 —	
Pashinyan’s one-man rule threatens Armenia’s democratic development.....	115
5 January 2025 —	
Russian-Style Propaganda in Armenia: Government Part of the Problem.....	118
20 December 2024 —	
Demonizing media: Yerevan Mayor’s populist tactic is a threat to democracy	121
13 December 2024 —	
Old Practices Back: The Curious Case of Hovik Aghazaryan	123
9 December 2024 —	
Public office, private gains: The controversial record of Yerevan’s mayor	125
3 December 2024 —	
Loyalty vs. impartiality: The government’s move undermines judicial independence	128
26 November 2024 —	
Resignations in Armenia Spark Debate over Judicial Independence and Democratic Integrity	130
18 November 2024 —	
Trump’s Return: Global Authoritarianism and Armenia’s Struggle for Democracy.....	132
31 October 2024 —	

Instrumentalized and Alienated: Nagorno-Karabakh Armenian Refugees in Armenia	136
25 October 2024 —	
Parliamentary Chaos: Heated Exchange in Armenia’s National Assembly Raises Concerns	139
18 October 2024 —	
The Thin Line Between Public Service and Politics: Taron Chakhoyan’s Case	141
15 October 2024 —	
Why Armenian Anti-Government Movements Fail: The Need for a Viable Opposition in Armenia	145
30 September 2024 —	
Armenia’s Ruling Party Resists Amending Controversial Constitutional Clause	148
29 September 2024 —	
Building Empathy Bridges: Lessons from a Bookstore Event in Washington for Armenia’s Polarized Society	150
29 September 2024 —	
The Cost of Compliance: Armenian Civil Society’s Missed Responsibilities	152
25 September 2024 —	
Hate speech against Karabakh Armenian refugees as a domestic political tool in Armenia	156
17 September 2024 —	
Targeting the opposition: A growing trend at Yerevan’s city hall	159
10 September 2024 —	
Armenia needs political competition based on policies, not personalities	161
2 September 2024 —	
A Rising Tide of Conflicts of Interest in Armenia’s Governance.....	164
28 August 2024 —	
Armenia’s democratic gains at risk: what the West should and shouldn’t do	167
24 June 2024 —	
Disproportionate Police Violence Against Protesters	170
4 June 2024 —	
Police Misconduct Against Opposition MPs	172
27 May 2024 —	
ANIF Dissolution Raises Questions on Investments and Governance.....	175

15 May 2024 —
Armenia’s ruling party frames anti-government protesters as ‘Russia-backed’ on social media 177

6 May 2024 —
Violent dispersion of protesters and media polarization..... 179

29 April 2024 —
Call for transparency, divisive rhetoric and political polarization 181

22 April 2024 —
Assault on opposition activist, attack on the media, controversial land deals and procurements by ruling party members 183

27 March 2026 —

Pashinyan and the Instrumentalization of Hate Speech Against Karabakh Refugees



By Tigran Grigoryan

In July 2025, when our think tank the Regional Center for Democracy and Security published a [report](#) on hate speech targeting refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh, we identified several important patterns related to this phenomenon. The first was that the volume of hate speech against refugees increases during periods of domestic political tension. In this regard, one of the main concerns ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections was that refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh would once again become targets of attacks and disinformation spread by political actors.

Following the effective start of the pre-election period in Armenia, these concerns have begun to materialize. On March 22, 2026, during a campaign event in the Yerevan metro, Nikol Pashinyan approached a forcibly displaced woman from Nagorno-Karabakh (Armine Mosiyan) and her child and offered them a pin featuring the map of the Republic of Armenia. The woman refused, explaining her reasons, after which Pashinyan [continued](#) to argue with her despite her request not to do so. He then raised his voice and spoke to her while pointing his finger.

Moreover, after the woman urged him not to raise his voice or gesture in that manner, he responded that he would speak that way, stating that billions earned by the citizens of Armenia

had been spent on sustaining Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, and added: Next time, you runaways, don't try to say that I gave away Karabakh." Notably, the woman had made no such claim during the entire incident.

Over the course of that day, Prime Minister Pashinyan initially denied calling the woman from Nagorno-Karabakh a "runaway," stating that such a thing was impossible. After some time, he attempted to justify and interpret his remarks, and by the end of the day, he issued an apology with certain reservations to Armine Mosiyan.

Nevertheless, even after Pashinyan's apology, several media outlets under the ruling party's control continued to target Armine Mosiyan. AraratNews and MediaNews [attributed](#) statements to Mosiyan that she had not made during the incident with Pashinyan. Specifically, these outlets claimed that she had told Pashinyan that she "does not accept Armenia, does not care about it, and that neither she nor her child need the Republic of Armenia." This falsehood was likely fabricated to rationalize and justify Pashinyan's behavior.

It is noteworthy that in the aforementioned report published by the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, we had identified a well-developed mechanism through which pro-government media disseminate hate speech by collectively amplifying posts containing such rhetoric from pro-government bloggers on Facebook. The role of these media outlets was thoroughly documented in the report.

Following the incident involving Pashinyan, a number of civil society organizations in Armenia [issued](#) a joint statement condemning the behavior of Pashinyan and pro-government media and calling for concrete steps to curb hate speech against people from Nagorno-Karabakh.

Pashinyan's conduct during this incident triggered a new wave of hate toward refugees. This was further fueled by discriminatory and refugee-targeting posts and interviews by pro-government media and various pro-government figures.

It is also noteworthy that during the incident, Pashinyan used two common narratives applied against refugees, which had also been documented in our report last year. These narratives portray people from Nagorno-Karabakh as deserters and as ungrateful. His reference to billions spent and his assertion that he had the right to speak in a raised tone to refugees reproduced the narrative of the "ungrateful Karabakhis." By calling forcibly displaced persons "runaways," he echoed the narrative of "deserter Karabakhis," which had previously been used by other high-ranking officials, particularly Alen Simonyan, the Speaker of the National Assembly.

The articulation of these discriminatory narratives by Pashinyan legitimizes them and contributes to their wider dissemination at the societal level. The same effect is produced by media outlets targeting refugees and spreading disinformation about them. For example, after

AraratNews and MediaNews published the fabricated claim attributed to Armine Mosiyan, it was widely used by numerous social media users as a justification for Pashinyan's behavior.

Hate speech against refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh and its instrumentalization by political actors is one of the main challenges undermining social cohesion in Armenia and may also pose a serious obstacle to the country's democratic development. This problem becomes particularly acute during periods of domestic political tension. Addressing this challenge requires both broad public and coordinated international pressure on all actors who exploit this issue with impunity in order to deflect responsibility for their own mistakes and pursue narrow political objectives.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/1010267/pashinyan-and-the-instrumentalization-of-hate-speech-against-karabakh-refugees/>

23 March 2026 —

Academic Freedom in Armenia at Risk? The Case of Edita Gzoyan



By Tigran Grigoryan

On March 10, Edita Gzoyan, Director of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute (AGMI), [submitted her resignation](#) and was dismissed from her position. Media reports about the possible reasons for her resignation appeared immediately and were confirmed two days later by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan himself. During a briefing on March 13, Pashinyan [confirmed](#) that Gzoyan had written her resignation at his instruction.

The reason for this decision was that, during U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance's visit to the AGMI in February of this year, Gzoyan presented him with a book related to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Following the visit, Gzoyan [told](#) Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty that, among other books, she had gifted the U.S. Vice President a volume on Armenian–Tatar clashes between 1905 and 1921.

Justifying his decision, Pashinyan described this act as contrary to the government's foreign policy and as provocative. He stated that the government's official position is that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is over and that Armenia will not continue it. By giving Vance a book related to the conflict, Gzoyan, in his view, had contradicted the government's official stance. Notably, the book gifted by Gzoyan was actually a collection of historical accounts about Armenian–Tatar clashes between 1905 and 1921, rather than a work about the contemporary phase of the Karabakh conflict.

Gzoyan's resignation under pressure from Prime Minister Pashinyan sparked strong reactions

both in Armenia and in international academic circles. More than a dozen prominent genocide scholars [issued a statement](#) condemning the pressure on Gzoyan and calling for her reinstatement as director of the museum-institute. As a result of these developments, several members of the AGMI Board of Trustees also [submitted their resignations](#) in protest, including its chairman, French-Armenian genocide scholar Raymond Kévorkian. Armenia’s most well-known civic initiative promoting science and its popularization, “Gituzh,” also [issued a statement](#), which noted in particular:

“The situation surrounding the forced resignation of Edita Gzoyan, Director of the Armenian Genocide Museum & Institute, raises serious concerns regarding the autonomy and institutional independence of scientific institutions. The head of a public research institution is not a political official and cannot be evaluated based on the criteria of current domestic or foreign political expediency. Labeling the professional actions of the head of a scientific institution as “contradictory to foreign policy” or “provocative” establishes a dangerous precedent. It suggests that the activities of scientific and, in this specific case, memory institutions can be subjected to political control.”

Gzoyan’s resignation under pressure from Prime Minister Pashinyan is problematic for several reasons. First, it represents yet another manifestation of Pashinyan’s personalist style of governance. Although the AGMI operates with state funding, it has a Board of Trustees, which is empowered to appoint and dismiss the director. In this regard, the Prime Minister’s actions are fully unlawful and violate the autonomy of the AGMI.

This is not the first time Pashinyan has exceeded his authority to secure the resignation of the heads of independent bodies. One of the most controversial such cases occurred in November 2024, when the Chairman of the Supreme Judicial Council, Karen Andreasyan, resigned following a text message from Pashinyan.

Pashinyan’s actions and statements are also problematic from the perspective of academic freedom. His claim that Gzoyan’s actions contradict Armenia’s foreign policy does not withstand criticism. In practice, decisions of this kind contribute to the formation of an environment in Armenia where taboo topics may emerge for scholars working in various fields—topics that are not only discouraged but may also lead to serious consequences if studied or even mentioned. This can undoubtedly be seen as a manifestation of censorship, potentially restricting the space for free debate in Armenia.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/1009452/academic-freedom-in-armenia-at-risk-the-case-of-edita-gzoyan/>

11 March 2026 —

Foreign interference is real, but not Armenia's only election risk



By Tigran Grigoryan

Three months remain before Armenia's parliamentary elections, and discussions in the country are increasingly dominated by the topic of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). Practically all efforts by Armenia's international partners are now focused on assisting the country in countering hybrid threats stemming from external actors, predominantly Russia. Nearly every discussion, round table, and conference today revolves around the risks of foreign interference and hybrid threats.

Some opposition parties, politicians, and media outlets have downplayed this threat, arguing that it simply does not exist. As a civil society organization that has systematically been targeted by foreign malign actors, we can refute that claim with concrete examples. Only in the past week, we at the Regional Center for Democracy and Security [were subjected](#) to two phishing attacks, in which unknown actors attempted to gain access to our data through emails sent in the name of fake accounts supposedly affiliated with the ruling party and the National Assembly. Cybersecurity experts have identified Russia-affiliated actors behind these campaigns.

A recent [Factor TV investigation](#) revealed that a newly established bilingual newspaper called Wyoming Star, filled with disinformation, is being distributed for free in Yerevan. When Factor TV contacted an individual legally connected to the outlet, he inadvertently admitted during the

phone call that he was about to travel to Moscow to bring a new batch of newspapers. Interestingly, an online news outlet with the same name had reached out to us in July 2025 requesting a comment on the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace process. The mere fact that someone from Wyoming would be interested in the technical details of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict immediately raised suspicions. After a few simple searches, it became obvious that this was a so-called “doppelganger” website created specifically to target audiences in Armenia and Moldova. Now the same operation have expanded into the offline space through the distribution of a free newspaper in Armenia.

Beyond these specific examples, there is a broader consensus among cybersecurity experts and fact-checking journalists that a Russia-affiliated information infrastructure is targeting Armenia during the pre-election period. This fact should not be contested by any serious or honest observers. At the same time, the scope and ultimate goals of these campaigns remain unclear. Artur Papyan, Armenia’s leading cybersecurity expert, noted during a panel discussion on domestic challenges at the [Third Annual Armenian Conference on Democratic Security](#) that, in his assessment, the level of Russian interference may not reach the scale observed during the 2021 snap parliamentary elections.

While acknowledging the very real threat posed by external actors to electoral integrity, it is important to remember that FIMI is only one of the challenges Armenia faces ahead of the elections. The growing preoccupation of civil society, the media landscape, international partners, and donors with this issue risks creating a vacuum in addressing other equally important problems.

Many domestic and international actors now appear more focused on potential foreign interference than on clear violations of the rule of law and democratic norms at home. Issues related to the effective organization of elections—such as illicit campaign financing and misuse of administrative resources—also require serious attention.

Another trend that has emerged among international actors less familiar with the Armenian context is the tendency to draw simplistic parallels between Armenia and Moldova. While some of the methods observed in Moldova’s recent electoral processes are also visible in Armenia, the comparison often lacks nuance. Armenia and Moldova differ significantly in their foreign policy choices, their economic and trade relations with Russia, the level of leverage Moscow possesses in each country, and the broader geopolitical and geographic environments in which they operate. These differences matter. Simplified comparisons can easily lead to inaccurate conclusions and misguided policy responses.

Finally, an excessive focus on FIMI risks sidelining another important reality: much of the disinformation and manipulation circulating during the election cycle will likely originate from domestic actors. Political forces within Armenia, including the ruling party, have long relied on misinformation and polarizing rhetoric as tools of political competition. Ignoring this dimension would leave a significant part of the problem unaddressed.

Countering foreign information manipulation is undoubtedly important, and Armenia should continue strengthening its resilience against such threats. But this effort should not overshadow other structural challenges facing the country's democratic process. Ensuring free and fair elections requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both external and internal risks. Striking the right balance between these priorities will be essential if Armenia wants to safeguard not only the integrity of its upcoming elections, but also the long-term health of its democracy.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/1007502/foreign-interference-is-real-but-not-armenias-only-election-risk/>

24 February 2026 —

Rewriting the constitution for narrow aims contradicts democratic principles



By Tigran Grigoryan

On February 12, at the congress of the newly established Strong Armenia party, it was [announced](#) that the political force’s candidate for prime minister would be Russian-Armenian businessman Samvel Karapetyan. The main issue with this decision is that, under the Constitution of Armenia, only individuals who have been solely citizens of the Republic of Armenia during the previous four years may be elected as members of parliament or appointed to the government.

Article 148 of the Constitution stipulates that a member of the government must meet the requirements set for a member of parliament. Any person may be elected to the National Assembly who is at least 25 years old, has been only an Armenian citizen for the last four years, has permanently resided in Armenia during that period, has voting rights, and is proficient in Armenian.

In addition to Armenian citizenship, Samvel Karapetyan also holds Russian and Cypriot citizenship.

The Strong Armenia party plans to overcome this constitutional obstacle after winning a parliamentary majority in the elections. During the party congress, Karapetyan’s nephew Narek Karapetyan [presented](#) a roadmap: “Twenty days after the elections, at the first session of the National Assembly, we will immediately introduce a decision on the relevant legislative

change—based on the people’s trust and our parliamentary mandate—to allow any person holding only Armenian citizenship to become prime minister. At that time, Samvel Karapetyan will be solely a citizen of the Republic of Armenia.”

This is not the first time in recent years that the leader of a major opposition force or movement has sought to assume the post of prime minister without meeting constitutional requirements. In May 2024, the leader of the Tavush for the Homeland movement, Bagrat Galstanyan, also announced his ambition to become prime minister while holding dual citizenship (Armenian and Canadian). At the time, it was argued that public pressure should be applied to members of parliament to remove the constitutional restriction requiring sole Armenian citizenship during the previous four years.

In both cases, various lawyers have argued—and continue to argue—that statements and intentions to amend or repeal this constitutional provision are not legally problematic and can be implemented, especially if a majority of voters support a political force that has publicly announced such a roadmap.

Nevertheless, this approach represents a very narrow and one-sided view of democracy and democratic governance. Democratic development and stability often depend not only on written laws and procedures but also on unwritten political norms. One of the key conditions for democratic consolidation is the existence of rules of the game accepted by all political actors, which do not change from election to election and are not shaped by narrow group preferences. These rules may be both written and unwritten. In this sense, constitutional amendments or the adoption of new constitutions for narrow political purposes have become important indicators of democratic backsliding in various parts of the world in recent decades.

The history of Armenia’s last decade also speaks to this. In the case of the 2015 constitutional changes carried out by Serzh Sargsyan, formally, no laws or procedures were violated; moreover, they were implemented through a nationwide referendum. Nevertheless, it was evident that the primary goal of those amendments was narrowly political—to create a mechanism allowing Serzh Sargsyan to remain in power, which contradicted fundamental democratic norms.

This, of course, does not mean that constitutions cannot be amended over time or that new constitutions cannot be adopted. Even in the world’s most consolidated democracies, such needs occasionally arise. It is widely known that the Constitution of the United States has been amended 27 times over more than 200 years. However, in this and similar cases, amendments generally occurred in response to broad public demand, to overcome societal conflicts, or for other substantial and objective reasons, usually following lengthy public debate.

The goal announced by Samvel Karapetyan’s political team does not meet any of the above conditions. In recent years in Armenia, aside from occasional situational statements by individual politicians, the issue of changing the citizenship-related restriction has never been seriously discussed. To date, there has been no substantial civic initiative or political agenda

on this topic. It is therefore clear that the proposed change is intended solely to remove the obstacle facing Samvel Karapetyan. This situation—where political actors seek to reshape the rules of the game based on their narrow interests—is highly dangerous for the prospects of democratic consolidation in Armenia.

The same problem exists regarding the stance of the prime minister and the ruling party on constitutional change. Statements by Nikol Pashinyan that there is a need not merely to amend the Constitution but to adopt a new one have never been properly substantiated. In this regard, the absence of an open and honest conversation with the public about the real reasons behind the intention to change the Constitution is likely to create serious problems for its legitimacy in both the short and long term.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/1004816/rewriting-the-constitution-for-narrow-aims-contradicts-democratic-principles/>

19 February 2026 —

The Rule of Law or Rule by Law? Armenia’s Deepening Church Crisis



By Tigran Grigoryan

On February 14, a criminal case was initiated against Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II. The case centers on allegations of obstructing the enforcement of a court decision to temporarily reinstate Arman (Gevorg) Saroyan as Primate of the Massyatsotn (Masis) Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

On January 10, Catholicos Karekin II [removed](#) Bishop Gevorg Saroyan from his position as diocesan head, citing abuse of authority, neglect of duties, and alleged pressure on clergy. Saroyan, who had publicly called for the Catholicos’ resignation, aligning himself with Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, challenged the dismissal in court. On January 16, the Armavir Court of First Instance issued an interim order [requiring](#) his temporary reinstatement pending a final ruling.

On January 28, the Supreme Spiritual Council [defrocked](#) Saroyan for violating his oath of obedience and committing canonical deviations, reducing him to lay status under the name Arman Saroyan. Prosecutors and investigators claim that subsequent actions by the Catholicos and members of the Supreme Spiritual Council (the Church’s highest permanent advisory body) obstructed compliance with the court’s reinstatement order, allegedly violating

Article 507 of the Criminal Code (failure to execute or obstruction of a judicial act by an official).

In late January, Armenia's Investigative Committee [launched criminal proceedings](#) and summoned defendants. Six bishops (members of the Supreme Spiritual Council) and one priest were charged and subjected to travel bans, preventing their participation in the Bishops' Assembly in Austria (February 16–19). On February 14, the Prosecutor's Office [extended the case to Catholicos Karekin II](#) on the same grounds of obstruction, imposing a travel ban on him just days before the Austria assembly.

The Catholicos refused to testify, and the Mother See condemned the actions as groundless, unlawful, and politically motivated interference in Church affairs.

This is yet another episode in the ongoing confrontation between Prime Minister Pashinyan and the leadership of the Armenian Apostolic Church. It contains the same troubling elements observed in previous stages of this conflict: interference in the Church's internal affairs and violations of religious autonomy; the use of law enforcement and the judiciary as instruments of political pressure and the advancement of narrow political agendas; and public accusations made without presenting evidence or proper legal substantiation.

In an [article](#) written a month ago for the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, Isabella Sargsyan, an expert on freedom of religion or belief, did not comment directly on the Saroyan case. Instead, she examined the broader confrontation between the ruling party and the Church leadership through the lens of international and domestic law, presenting relevant precedents from the European Court of Human Rights.

The case of *Fernández-Martínez v. Spain* is particularly relevant in this context. It concerned the non-renewal of a priest's contract and raised questions about the Catholic Church's internal governance. The Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights held that the state must respect the internal decisions of religious organizations and refrain from interfering in their governance. The ruling reaffirmed the principle that religious communities enjoy autonomy under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, particularly concerning the appointment and management of their clergy.

Sargsyan emphasized that this jurisprudence forms an integral part of Armenian law. In light of this, the court's decision to reinstate Arman Saroyan appears to contradict the case law of the European Court of Human Rights and to infringe upon the Church's religious autonomy.

Anna Melikyan, a legal expert at the NGO "Protection of Rights Without Borders," [described](#) the court's decision as unprecedented, noting that obliging a church to temporarily reinstate a cleric to his position is highly unusual. She pointed out that interim measures of this kind are almost never granted in employment disputes.

The criminal cases initiated against the bishops and the Catholicos are problematic not only because they appear to contradict the above-mentioned ECtHR ruling and interfere in the

Church's internal affairs, but also because many commentators believe that the primary objective was to impose travel bans and obstruct participation in the Bishops' Assembly in Austria.

Prime Minister Pashinyan himself appeared to allude to this when he described the assembly in Austria as an attempt to move the Catholicosate out of Armenia and [stated](#), "I will not allow the Catholicosate to be moved out of Armenia together with the treasures of Etchmiadzin. If necessary, measures will be taken." The day after this statement about "taking measures," the criminal case against the Catholicos was initiated, and a travel ban was imposed on him.

International law expert and attorney Ara Ghazaryan [noted](#) that in recent years, many judicial acts in Armenia have remained unenforced for years, whereas in this case, the initiation of criminal proceedings and the enforcement of the judicial act occurred with unprecedented speed.

Another problematic aspect of the Prime Minister's statement is that, once again, serious accusations about an intention to move the Catholicosate out of Armenia—officially denied by the Church—were voiced without presenting evidence, seemingly to justify actions that raise concerns regarding fundamental constitutional principles. Such tactics, combined with the weaponization of law enforcement and the judiciary, are incompatible with democratic governance and the rule of law.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/1003783/the-rule-of-law-or-rule-by-law-armenias-deepening-church-crisis/>

12 February 2026 —

Continued pressure on Iranian protesters and anti-corruption stagnation in Armenia



By Tigran Grigoryan

Renewed Developments in the Iranian Protest Case

In a previous [Democracy Watch report](#), we examined how protests by Iranian residents in Yerevan—and the Iranian ambassador’s criticism that Armenia was allowing “anti-Iranian forces” to mobilize—were followed by a ban on a planned march and the summoning of several protesters by Armenian law enforcement. At the time, we warned that perceived external pressure influencing domestic procedures could set a troubling precedent.

Recent developments suggest those concerns have deepened. Reyhane Majidi, a 35-year-old Iranian national residing in Armenia, [has reported](#) sustained pressure from the National Security Service (NSS) following her participation in protests outside the Iranian Embassy. According to Majidi, NSS officers arrived at her rented apartment without presenting official documentation and compelled her to accompany them for questioning. She says she was held for four hours and warned to stop criticizing the Islamic Republic of Iran—both publicly and on social media—or face deportation.

Majidi claims that officers accessed her mobile phone, required her to unlock it, reviewed personal content, and deleted social media posts critical of Iranian authorities. She was

reportedly given one week to leave Armenia voluntarily.

Despite the expiration of that deadline, [she states](#) she has received no formal written notification or legal justification for deportation. According to her associates, NSS representatives have continued to call, warning that failure to depart voluntarily could result in forced removal.

The NSS confirmed to RFE/RL's Armenian Service (Azatutyun) that Iranian nationals were summoned for questioning but did not clarify the legal grounds, describing aspects of the matter as confidential. The agency stated that any deportation decision must ultimately be made by a court.

Civil society organizations have expressed serious concern. In a public statement, the Women's Resource Center [declared](#): "The threat of deporting her to Iran is unjust and may endanger Majidi's life, given the Iranian regime's grave violations of women's rights. We also condemn such conduct by NSS officers and urge the immediate implementation of an impartial and comprehensive investigation into the incident."

Human rights defenders indicate that if genuine national security concerns exist, they must be formalized in written decisions subject to judicial review. Verbal warnings and informal pressure, they argue, fall outside the framework of due process and undermine rule-of-law guarantees.

The case raises fundamental concerns regarding freedom of expression and the resilience of Armenia's institutional safeguards when confronted with geopolitical sensitivities. The broader story is also indicative of a deeper contradiction: in recent years, Armenia's ruling party has frequently fetishized and instrumentalized the concept of sovereignty to score political points, attack critics, and justify actions that have raised constitutional concerns. Yet when there is a genuine need to protect Armenia's fragile democratic institutions from foreign pressure and interference, the government appears unwilling to resist and instead complies. As previously noted, this behavior creates a dangerous precedent and leaves the door open for other external actors to intervene in Armenia's democratic processes.

Anti-Corruption Stagnation

These developments coincide with modest backsliding in Armenia's anti-corruption performance.

[According to Transparency International's Anti-Corruption Center](#), Armenia's 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) score declined by one point to 46 (on a scale from 0 to 100). In the ranking of 182 countries, Armenia shares 65th–69th place, a slight drop from the previous year.

Armenia remains second in the region after Georgia (50 points) and continues to score above the global average, which fell to 42 in 2025. Armenia also outperforms neighboring Turkey (31), Iran (23), and Azerbaijan (30), as well as other Eurasian Economic Union members.

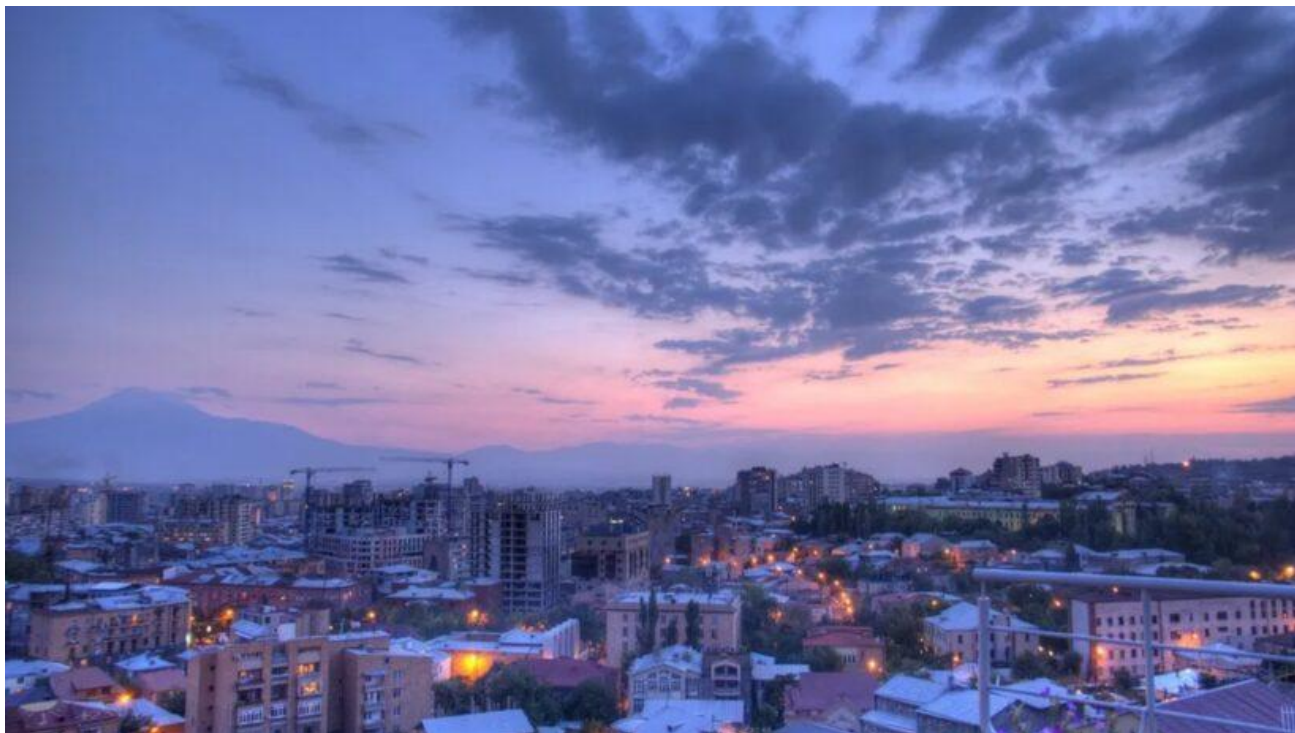
However, a score of 46 reflects a lack of progress. The slight decline suggests that anti-corruption reforms have yet to deliver the systemic transformation anticipated by business actors and experts whose perceptions inform the CPI. Even small drops may signal emerging reform fatigue.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/1002433/continued-pressure-on-iranian-protesters-and-anti-corruption-stagnation-in-armenia/>

30 January 2026 —

Labeling Independent Actors “Pro-Russian”: A New Instrument for Censoring Critics



By Tigran Grigoryan

A couple of months ago, I was invited to a working lunch with a foreign delegation, together with several other colleagues representing Armenia’s civil society and think tank community. As the discussion turned to Armenia’s domestic dynamics, I pointed out the anti-constitutional and anti-democratic nature of some of the domestic processes initiated by Armenia’s ruling party—namely, the instrumentalization of law-enforcement and the judicial system in the ruling party’s confrontation with the Church leadership and other political opponents. These actions are often justified by the broader goal of countering hybrid threats and foreign interference.

One of the Armenian participants—someone who has successfully blurred the boundaries between civil society actors, political activists, and the expert community within himself—challenged my assessment of abuse of power and asked who had defined the mentioned cases as politically motivated or as instances of abuse of power. When I replied that this was the assessment of independent human rights organizations and activists, he claimed that only pro-Russian actors held such views.

This episode was indicative of a wider trend in Armenia’s public space. Amid growing political polarization and Russia’s diminished public standing in Armenia, labeling independent actors

as pro-Russian has become a popular tactic used by various figures, some of whom occupy the civil society space. In this process, these actors have managed to convince certain segments of Armenian society that large, well-established, Western-funded media outlets and civil society organizations are serving a Russian agenda. When one tries to understand the reasoning behind such narratives, it becomes clear that the basis of this argument is precisely the upholding of journalistic and professional standards by these outlets and organizations. Being “pro-Russian,” in the view of the purveyors of these ideas, means providing space for alternative views and debate; in the case of media outlets, it means presenting both sides of the story when covering domestic politics, holding the governing accountable, and asking uncomfortable questions.

Most worryingly, this pattern of behavior is exhibited by the ruling party itself and by various members of the highest echelons of power, who actively participate in these smear campaigns—both publicly and behind closed doors—encouraging their loyalists to follow suit. This tactic implies the instrumentalization of the concept of sovereignty for domestic political purposes and the portrayal of nearly every critic or instance of criticism of the government—from political opponents to striking miners—as serving foreign agendas. As mentioned above, certain actors who occupy the civil society space willingly replicate this behavior.

Paradoxically, this line of reasoning and pattern of behavior are defining features of Putinist Russia. Decades before Armenian civil society actors and activists began rationalizing and justifying the use of anti-constitutional measures for the protection of the country’s sovereignty, one of the main ideologues of modern-day Russia, Vladislav Surkov, introduced the notion of “sovereign democracy.” Its premise was strikingly familiar: suppressing political opponents and democratic norms for the sake of “protecting Russia’s sovereignty.”

Another defining feature of Putinist Russia is the systematic disregard for the rule of law and even the most basic semblance of legality in the pursuit of domestic political objectives. In this context, one of the most dangerous ideas that my colleagues and I previously encountered in closed-door discussions has now begun to surface openly in public discourse. The logic is as follows: *we are certain that a given actor serves foreign interests, but we lack evidence; Armenia does not possess the necessary legal instruments to address this, therefore it may be acceptable to resort to extra-legal measures to neutralize such threats.*

Within this framework, there is no place for due process, the presumption of innocence, or institutional safeguards. Instead, the state is effectively granted *carte blanche* to violate the law on the basis of subjective, non-institutional judgments.

This approach is not only a key characteristic of authoritarian systems such as Putinist Russia, but also reflects a profound lack of understanding of the evolution of the modern state. Francis Fukuyama argues in *Political Order and Political Decay* that one of the pillars of building a professional and competent bureaucratic state—one of the core aspects of political development—has been the attempt by modernizing systems to neutralize personal and

subjective factors in governance by replacing them with impersonal and institutional ones. From this perspective, such thinking lags at least a couple of centuries behind the overall logic of global political development.

Finally, the perception of media and independent organizations as actors that are expected to follow the government line is also a key characteristic of Russia's contemporary political system. Russia's slide back from a fragile and imperfect democracy toward authoritarianism began with the takeover and neutralization of major independent media outlets such as NTV. Against this backdrop, the labeling and delegitimization of independent outlets by high-ranking officials—and by their supporters within the civil society space—constitutes a deeply troubling signal.

Thus, the paradox of the situation is that if the thinking and approaches described above were to become widespread, those who claim to be fighting Russian influence and its alleged agents—while smearing independent actors for refusing to conform to a polarized and politicized mindset—would in practice push Armenia toward a status quo that closely resembles Russia's current political system. Countering this logic is therefore essential to preventing such a trajectory.

Even today, however, the described behavior and smear campaigns have a very concrete impact on the health of Armenia's democratic process. The purpose of this tactic is to push various actors into self-censorship and to limit their ability to speak out against abuses and violations of democratic norms. One of the greatest advantages of democratic systems over other political systems is their capacity to guarantee free deliberation and open debate. These trends strip Armenia of that advantage, imposing non-critical and compliant thinking across society.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/999501/labeling-independent-actors-pro-russian-a-new-instrument-for-censoring-critics/>

22 January 2026 —

Freedom of Assembly and Foreign Pressure: A Dangerous Precedent for Armenia



A protest by Iranians near the Iranian Embassy in Yerevan, January 17, 2026. Screenshot from a CivilNet video.

By Tigran Grigoryan

Against the backdrop of escalating domestic tensions and widespread protests in Iran, Yerevan has also emerged as a venue for political mobilization by Iranians living in Armenia. In recent days, dozens of Iranian residents have rallied to condemn the Iranian authorities' crackdown on nationwide protests triggered by soaring inflation and the sharp devaluation of the national currency. Some demonstrators have gone further, openly calling for the overthrow of the Iranian government and the restoration of a monarchy.

After several days of protests in front of the Iranian embassy, Iran's newly appointed ambassador to Armenia, Khalil Shirgholami, held a press conference in which he [accused](#) the Armenian government of failing to prevent the rallies. He stated: "An opinion is forming in Tehran that Armenia is becoming a serious center for the actions of forces hostile to Iran."

Armenia's interior ministry [responded](#) to these allegations by stating: "As a democratic state, Armenia has an obligation not to impede the exercise of citizens' rights to freedom of movement and freedom of peaceful assembly within the framework of the Constitution of Armenia, the Law on Freedom of Assembly, and international commitments."



Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan also [publicly responded](#) to the Iranian ambassador, stating that since 2018, no rally has ever been banned anywhere in Armenia, and it is impossible to act differently in any individual case.

Nevertheless, on January 17, a march by Iranian protesters from the Iranian embassy to the Blue Mosque [was banned](#). Seven Iranian nationals were detained near the embassy and later released. [According to](#) RFE/RL’s Armenian service, several participants in the protest said that days after the ambassador’s remarks, they were summoned by the police and the National Security Service.

This situation is problematic on many levels, including legally. However, the most serious issue is the fact that a diplomat representing a foreign country appears to have influenced Armenia’s domestic procedures and democratic practices through the use of threatening language. Given that Armenia interacts with neighbors and regional actors with less open and more centralized political systems, this incident sets a dangerous precedent that could be exploited by other external actors as well.

Differences in political systems often generate expectations among Armenia’s more authoritarian interlocutors—such as Azerbaijan and Russia, and more recently Georgia—that the Armenian government should control or prevent certain processes deemed by these actors to be directed against them or their interests. This authoritarian logic frequently interprets actions or statements by independent actors within Armenia as being directed or orchestrated by the Armenian government, projecting their own political realities onto others. Thus, the Russian government often treats anti-Kremlin rallies and other political initiatives as Yerevan’s

hostile acts toward Moscow’s interests, even when they are organized by opposition actors.

Azerbaijan, in turn, has sought to influence domestic discourse in Armenia by equating statements and actions by non-governmental actors with official government policy. Even the Georgian government has reportedly attempted to pressure its Armenian counterparts to prevent Georgian NGOs affected by its “foreign agents” law from registering in Armenia—an action that would have violated Armenian legislation.

Yerevan’s primary line of defense against such expectations has consistently been the argument that Armenia is a democratic country governed by the rule of law and separation of powers, where the executive cannot arbitrarily impose decisions or restrict freedom of speech and assembly.

In this context, the decision to violate these principles following pressure from the Iranian ambassador risks undermining that defense and may embolden other external actors seeking to influence Armenia’s domestic processes.

Another factor weakening this position is Armenia’s ruling party’s own violations of democratic principles, which demonstrate that commitments to democratic norms and the rule of law can be set aside for political expediency. In this sense, the erosion of democratic norms directly undermines Armenia’s resilience and its ability to safeguard its sovereignty.

It is understandable that Iran is a strategically important partner for Armenia, as one of only two neighboring countries with open borders. However, a clear distinction must be maintained between rational geopolitical considerations and the protection of democratic institutions at home. One cannot come at the expense of the other.

Rather than complying with unacceptable demands, Armenian authorities should have clearly explained to their Iranian counterparts that there are lines that cannot be crossed, even in pursuit of geopolitical interests.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/998128/freedom-of-assembly-and-foreign-pressure-a-dangerous-precedent-for-armenia/>

9 January 2026 —

Pashinyan’s New Year address exposes erosion of institutional boundaries



By Tigran Grigoryan

As the 2026 parliamentary elections draw closer, every sphere of Armenia’s public life is gradually turning into an instrument of domestic political struggle. This politicization has extended even to traditionally unifying moments, including the festive season. Accordingly, many of the negative trends observed throughout 2025 found clear expression in Prime Minister [Nikol Pashinyan’s New Year address](#).

First, it was ensured that Pashinyan would be the sole official addressing the nation immediately before midnight on New Year’s Eve. Since Armenia’s 2015 constitutional reform, which transformed the country into a parliamentary republic, three figures traditionally addressed the nation on this occasion: the President, the Catholicos of All Armenians, and the Prime Minister. Starting in 2024, the President’s address was moved several hours earlier. The Catholicos was also offered an earlier time slot on Public Television that year, but he declined and instead broadcast his address through private television channels and other platforms. This year, the Catholicos was most likely not offered any airtime ahead of the New Year at all, due to his ongoing confrontation with Prime Minister Pashinyan.

The fact that the President’s address – the head of state’s speech – has been shifted to an earlier time slot for the second year in a row, allowing Prime Minister Pashinyan to monopolize the moment of addressing the nation at the arrival of the New Year, is particularly indicative of

the current state of Armenian politics. This development reflects both the increasingly personalist style of governance under Pashinyan and the erosion of even a nominal separation of powers, as the presidency has effectively become another institution under the *de facto* subordination of the Prime Minister.

The content of Pashinyan's address highlighted another defining feature of the current political system: the use of administrative resources for political purposes. The New Year's address itself was transformed into such a resource. A speech that is traditionally meant to unify the nation and emphasize shared values and narratives, regardless of political preferences, contained pronounced elements of pre-election campaigning. In his address, Pashinyan notably stated: "In 2021, we were saying 'there is a future'; today we say 'the future is today.'" "There is a future" was the ruling party's campaign slogan during the snap parliamentary elections of 2021, and it is rumored that "The future is today" will be the party's slogan for the 2026 elections. Pashinyan reiterated this mantra at the conclusion of his address, explicitly referring to the upcoming elections and declaring that the future – which has already arrived – will prevail.

Pashinyan ended his speech with a "hand-heart" gesture, which moments later was replicated by a drone performance in the sky above Yerevan's Republic Square. This "hand-heart" gesture is part of the Prime Minister's and the ruling party's new social media strategy, under which Pashinyan uploads short, viral videos where he listens to random songs and concludes with the same gesture. It has also been [observed](#) at ruling party gatherings. BBC Russian recently [published](#) an article analyzing the logic and objectives behind this new communication strategy.

State Pressure on the Church and Constitutional Concerns

The first days of the new year were also marked by Prime Minister Pashinyan's continued efforts to remove Catholicos Karekin II. On January 4, the Prime Minister [convened](#), at his official residence, a group of bishops who had joined his campaign against the Catholicos. During the meeting, [a statement was adopted](#) calling for reforms within the Armenian Apostolic Church, including the removal of the Catholicos. Notably, Pashinyan himself signed the statement, explicitly indicating his capacity as Prime Minister of Armenia. This marks a significant departure from his initial claims at the start of the confrontation with the Church leadership, when he insisted that he was calling for the Catholicos's resignation merely as an ordinary believer and that the state was not interfering in Church affairs. The image of Prime Minister Pashinyan standing behind the bishops as they signed the statement in his residence was highly symbolic and was widely circulated on social media.

Pashinyan's next step was a "pilgrimage procession" on Armenian Christmas Day, which culminated in a [brief speech](#) by the Prime Minister near a church in central Yerevan. This speech raised serious concerns not only about state interference in Church affairs and the autonomy of religious organizations, but also about the broader principle of the separation of

Church and state. Pashinyan’s statement, “The Church and the state are now together,” was assessed by many civil society representatives and political actors as contradicting Armenia’s Constitution. It is also noteworthy that multiple state officials, including high-ranking officers of the armed forces, participated in the event, once again raising questions about the possible use of administrative resources and administrative pressure.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/995501/pashinyans-new-year-address-exposes-erosion-of-institutional-boundaries/>

30 December 2025 —

2025: A Year of Democratic Backsliding in Armenia



Participants of the MERDZEVOV popular movement are marching through the streets of Yerevan from Freedom Square. Yerevan, Armenia.

By Tigran Grigoryan

The year 2025 proved to be deeply troubling for Armenia’s democratic development. Over the course of the year, a series of negative developments and entrenched trends cast serious doubt on the prospects for democratic consolidation in the country. Equally alarming were the growing questions about society’s capacity to resist increasingly overt anti-democratic practices.

Throughout 2025, [Democracy Watch](#) consistently sought to draw attention to these developments. Taken together, the evidence allows for a clear and sobering conclusion: 2025 was a year of democratic backsliding for Armenia.

One of the most consequential shifts of the year was the completed transformation of Armenia’s ruling party. The political force that came to power in 2018 on the wave of the Velvet Revolution, promising democratic reforms and a break with post-Soviet governance practices, has now fully evolved into a classic post-Soviet administrative resource party. The dominant feature of 2025 was the systematic use of state resources, law enforcement bodies, and the judicial system by the ruling party for domestic political purposes.

The most problematic manifestations of this trend included [illegal wiretapping](#), the use of intimate or personal material for blackmail, and the public release of such materials when blackmail failed to achieve its intended effect. Equally concerning were high-profile and politically sensitive criminal cases in which evidence was [falsified](#) by law enforcement agencies, followed by a complete absence of consequences even after such misconduct was exposed. This pattern reinforced a sense of impunity, as well as growing public indifference toward obvious abuses of power.

Another defining feature of 2025 was the initiation of [criminal cases on political grounds](#) and the selective application of justice for domestic political ends. Rather than serving as an impartial arbiter, the justice system increasingly appeared to function as a tool for managing political competition and disciplining dissent. Many independent human rights defenders now [point](#) to the existence of political prisoners in Armenia.

Institutionally, the year continued to be marked by the disproportionate strengthening of executive power at the expense of other branches of government. Parallel to this, there was a further consolidation of a [personalist style of governance](#) centered on Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, culminating in his [statement](#), “I am the government.” The growing personalization of power was accompanied by the frequent use of unacceptable, and at times [obscene](#), language by the prime minister. Over time, this rhetoric became normalized in public discourse, lowering standards of political communication and contributing to a broader degradation of democratic culture.

The targeting of vulnerable groups also became more pronounced in 2025. Nagorno-Karabakh refugees were increasingly singled out by ruling party officials and media outlets affiliated with them, often [portrayed](#) as political or security threats, alien elements, or pawns in external hands. Such rhetoric not only stigmatized an already vulnerable population but also contradicted fundamental democratic and humanitarian principles.

Independent media also faced mounting pressure. High-ranking government officials increasingly used legal and rhetorical means to attack the few independent outlets remaining in Armenia’s highly polarized media landscape. This was particularly evident in the ongoing legal proceedings concerning Yerevan Mayor [Tigran Avinyan’s lawsuit](#) against CivilNet, as well as sustained [verbal attacks](#) by multiple senior officials against Azatutyun, RFE/RL’s Armenian service. In parallel, Armenian Public Television—the country’s largest media outlet, funded by taxpayers—[continued to function](#) as a government mouthpiece and remained heavily involved in domestic political propaganda. This, too, reflects the post-Soviet governance model based on the use of administrative resources described above.

One of the most troubling trends of the year was the continued [instrumentalization](#) of concepts such as sovereignty protection and resistance to hybrid threats. While these concerns are real and legitimate in Armenia’s security environment, in 2025, they were increasingly invoked to justify anti-democratic and unconstitutional measures. This framing

blurred the line between genuine national security needs and the consolidation of unchecked power, allowing democratic erosion to be presented as a necessary trade-off for stability. Such tactics are a well-documented feature of democratic decline, whereby ruling elites justify abuses of power by appealing to higher goals.

Perhaps one of the most fundamental problems facing Armenia today is the absence of a viable democratic alternative to a ruling party that is becoming increasingly authoritarian. The parliamentary opposition has failed to distance itself from its past or to genuinely reset its political agenda. Moreover, its de facto leaders have openly threatened crackdowns on civil society and independent media in the event of a return to power.

Most troubling, however, is the absence of active societal resistance to these developments. Armenian society, still marked by political apathy and escapism, has failed to respond forcefully to the encroachment on the rule of law and democratic practices by the ruling party. Even more concerning is the growing fragmentation of civil society itself. Parts of it now either [tacitly support or openly justify](#) the government's consolidation of power, abuse of state institutions, and other anti-democratic practices in the name of higher objectives.

This is among the clearest symptoms of democratic corrosion. There is broad academic consensus that only sustained, everyday resistance by independent societal actors can prevent the executive from accumulating unchecked power and avert democratic collapse. At present, this prerequisite appears largely absent in Armenia, significantly endangering the country's prospects for democratic success.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/994719/2025-a-year-of-democratic-backsliding-in-armenia/>

22 December 2025 —

The standoff in Etchmiadzin and the instrumentalization of law enforcement



By Tigran Grigoryan

In recent days, the confrontation between Armenia’s ruling party and the Armenian Apostolic Church has reached a new level of escalation. On December 17, a group of bishops—who had earlier publicly demanded the resignation of Catholicos Karekin II and had also met with Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan—[issued a statement](#) calling on the public to gather the following day, December 18, at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin to demand the Catholicos’s resignation.

Shortly thereafter, the Aragatsotn Diocese, which has remained loyal to Catholicos Karekin II, [announced](#) that the joint prayer service scheduled for December 18 would no longer take place at St. Hovhannes Church in Byurakan. Instead, it would be held at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin at 5:00 PM. The diocese called on the faithful to attend and pray together for “imprisoned clergy, detained and captive compatriots, and for the steadfastness of the Armenian Apostolic Church.” It soon became known that Catholicos Karekin II himself would attend the service.

At the same time, major actors in Armenia’s opposition issued their own calls, urging supporters to be present at the Mother Cathedral of Etchmiadzin on December 18 at 5:00 PM.

As a result, two distinct groups gathered near the cathedral the following day. The first—and significantly larger—consisted of supporters of the Catholicos, including members and sympathizers of various opposition forces. The second group comprised those demanding the Catholicos’s resignation, including representatives of the ruling camp and their supporters.

During the prayer service, Catholicos Karekin II was present inside the Mother Cathedral. Outside, opposing chants from the two groups were heard. Attempts by some protesters opposing the Catholicos’s entry into the cathedral were blocked.

Meanwhile, the bishops calling for the Catholicos’s resignation arrived at the cathedral grounds by car, accompanied by a sizable security presence that did not wear official uniforms. As they approached the cathedral amid loud and hostile chants from the Catholicos’s supporters, they reiterated their demand for his resignation, [submitted](#) their request to the Secretariat of the Mother See, and then left the area. The confrontation ended without serious physical clashes.

It is noteworthy that the idea of holding a rally at the Mother See was first publicly articulated months earlier by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, during the initial stage of the confrontation with the Church. At the time, he had suggested participating in such a rally together with a group of believers. However, the initiative failed to materialize in the months that followed.

That the rally ultimately took place without Pashinyan’s participation likely indicates an attempt by the authorities to frame the situation as an internal church dispute and to avoid mounting accusations of direct interference in the Church’s internal affairs.

Nevertheless, both previously and in the current developments, it is difficult to view this process as genuinely internal to the Church, given the evident involvement of state institutions and government-affiliated actors.

Many members and supporters of the ruling Civil Contract party were present at the gathering in Etchmiadzin. Among them were Civil Contract mayors Garik Sargsyan of Vedi and Tavros Sapeyan of Talin, who participated in the protest against the Catholicos during working hours..

Sapeyan also drew attention for his [coarse behavior](#), including verbal abuse and profanities directed at others during the rally. This is especially notable given that Civil Contract recently adopted a code of ethics, raising questions as to whether his conduct will receive any internal evaluation or consequences.

Another clear indication of the authorities’ influence over the events was the involvement of security forces. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty [identified](#) several individuals in civilian clothing who escorted the clergy demanding the Catholicos’s resignation to the cathedral grounds and actively interfered with journalists’ work.

Those identified included members of police special forces—commonly referred to as the “red berets”—as well as personnel of the National Security Service (NSS). The participation of these agencies lacks any obvious legal rationale and can only be explained by political instruction.

The NSS and the case of Archbishop Ezras Nersisyan

A further episode involving the NSS occurred on December 19. In response to an inquiry from the ruling party-owned outlet civic.am, the NSS [released](#) a document claiming that Archbishop Ezras Nersisyan—the Catholicos’s brother and head of the Diocese of Russia and New Nakhichevan—had collaborated with the Soviet KGB between 1986 and 1988.

The civic.am report also quoted the NSS as stating that, according to available information, Archbishop Ezras Nersisyan currently maintains contacts with representatives of foreign intelligence services, which may pose a threat to Armenia’s security and national interests.

Even setting aside questions about the authenticity of the published document—concerns that are not unfounded given past cases in which law enforcement released misleading information, including [in the case of Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan](#)—notably, the published document appears to be a later reference rather than the original document concerning the alleged cooperation, particularly since it is in Armenian. Assuming both the document and its allegations are accurate, the case still raises serious concerns about the functioning of state institutions and the politicization of law enforcement.

The first issue is the selective disclosure of such information. Just a month and a half earlier, CivilNet had submitted a similar inquiry to the NSS regarding Archbishop Ezras Nersisyan. At that time, the NSS [refused](#) to provide information, citing the protection of personal and family privacy. As the current case demonstrates, when political expediency shifts, concerns about privacy and confidentiality quickly recede.

The second issue is selectivity. Either a political decision is made to pursue a comprehensive lustration process—as seen in several post-communist states—or selective exposure becomes yet another administrative tool wielded by the ruling party against its opponents.

The most troubling aspect of this situation is that the NSS, through a government-affiliated media outlet, effectively claims to possess information about specific individuals cooperating with foreign intelligence services, yet took no action on this matter for years. The information only became relevant during the acute phase of confrontation between the government and the Church.

In other words, absent a political conflict between the authorities and the Church leadership, this situation appears to have been deemed acceptable by Armenia’s security institutions. Even now, instead of legal proceedings, the response has taken the form of rallies and coordinated media campaigns.

It is difficult to imagine a functioning democratic system in which allegations of collaboration with foreign intelligence services are addressed not through judicial mechanisms, but through political mobilization and information warfare.

All of these developments suggest that what is unfolding is not an effort to counter external threats or foreign influence, as representatives of the ruling party claim, but a domestic

political struggle in which the authorities are employing all available means to force the resignation of the Catholicos.

The use of the National Security Service and other law enforcement bodies for this purpose is unconstitutional and fundamentally anti-democratic. The active involvement of security agencies in political confrontations persists, as illustrated by their role in the standoff in Etchmiadzin and the publication of information concerning Archbishop Ezras Nersisyan.

The use of security services for domestic political ends is a hallmark of authoritarian and totalitarian systems. Normalizing such practices will only accelerate Armenia's democratic backsliding and deepen the country's drift toward authoritarianism.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/993290/the-standoff-in-etchmiadzin-and-the-instrumentalization-of-law-enforcement/>

9 December 2025 —

State Interference and the Erosion of Religious Freedom and Autonomy in Armenia



By Tigran Grigoryan

Armenia's domestic political life continues to be dominated by the ruling party's confrontation with the Church leadership. In its attempt to dethrone Catholicos Garegin II, Prime Minister Pashinyan has adopted a two-fold approach in recent months. On the one hand, he has sought to create cleavages within the Church by finding loyalists willing either to speak out publicly against the Catholicos or to defy his authority by serving liturgies attended by the prime minister. The second element of this approach is the instrumentalization of law-enforcement bodies against Church figures who publicly oppose the prime minister's policies, as well as the direct intervention of security agencies in the internal procedures and functioning of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

This double-edged strategy was fully on display in the past week. For Pashinyan, one way of undermining the Catholicos's authority has been his attendance at Sunday liturgies in various monasteries and churches, accompanied by officials and loyalists from across the country. During these liturgies, priests are required not to mention Garegin II's name, despite this being mandated by Church canon. The latest such liturgy took place in Gyumri, and ahead of the Prime Minister's visit, special services were reportedly involved. Father Ruben Gasparyan [told](#) RFE/RL's Armenian Service that he had been asked to participate in the liturgy attended by Pashinyan and that various actors, including the National Security Service (NSS),

urged him not to mention the Catholicos's name—an instruction he refused to follow.

Pashinyan later [confirmed](#) the NSS's involvement, noting that he only attends liturgies where the Catholicos's name is not mentioned.

It is also noteworthy that before the liturgy at Gyumri's Seven Wounds Church—attended by Pashinyan on Sunday—law-enforcement agencies sealed the church and placed it under full control. Since all clergy of the Shirak Eparchy refused to serve the mass without mentioning the Catholicos's name, a priest from the Armavir Eparchy was invited to conduct it. This, too, was characterized as a violation of the Church's internal rules.

Further indications of state interference emerged when Pashinyan [posted](#) on Facebook that, before liturgies, Armenia's national anthem should be played and the national flag displayed in front of churches. He subsequently [published](#) a roadmap for reforming the Armenian Apostolic Church, which includes the resignation of the Catholicos, the election of an interim leader, and the adoption of a new Canon Law book, among other steps.

All of this represents a clear violation of the religious freedom and autonomy of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Even more concerning is the involvement of security services and law-enforcement agencies—practices strongly reminiscent of the Soviet era. It also directly contradicts Pashinyan's earlier claims that he was demanding the Catholicos's resignation merely as an “ordinary believer.” The events of recent months have demonstrated the opposite, and this argument is no longer invoked. The National Security Service does not attempt to change the content of a liturgy on behalf of ordinary believers.

As noted above, beyond intervening in the Church's internal procedures, law-enforcement bodies are also being used to target some of the government's most outspoken critics within the Church. This trend continued in recent days, when Archbishop Arshak Khachatryan was summoned to the National Security Service and [charged](#) with allegedly planting narcotics in the bag of a protester who demonstrated against the Catholicos in 2018, purportedly to discredit him. He has been detained for two months. He is now the fourth high-ranking clergyman of the Armenian Apostolic Church to be taken into custody.

Archbishop Khachatryan had previously been at the center of a sex scandal after intimate videos allegedly featuring him were leaked by a Telegram channel and disseminated by pro-government media. Despite this, he continued to vocally oppose Pashinyan's statements and actions regarding the Church leadership and ruled out the possibility of the Catholicos's resignation.

Opening a criminal case led by the National Security Service over an offense allegedly committed seven years ago fits squarely within the logic of the government's ongoing confrontation with the Church leadership. As noted in earlier [Democracy Watch reports](#), the ongoing instrumentalization of law-enforcement bodies and the judiciary for domestic political purposes, along with the application of selective justice, will leave a lasting mark on Armenia's

prospects for establishing a system in which the rule of law and the separation of powers are truly unalterable.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/991016/state-interference-and-the-erosion-of-religious-freedom-and-autonomy-in-armenia/>

28 November 2025 —

Administrative Resources and an Uneven Playing Field Ahead of Elections



By Tigran Grigoryan

On November 22, Yerevan hosted the first conference of Armenia’s state administration representatives, an event attended by more than 7,000 state and municipal employees. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan [delivered](#) a keynote speech packed with political and ideological messages – many of which are expected to form the backbone of the ruling party’s upcoming electoral campaign. Notably, the event was held on a non-working day (Saturday).

The participation of thousands of state employees on a weekend has raised serious concerns about the politicization of the public administration and potential misuse of administrative resources. Ruling party MP Vahagn Aleksanyan [denied](#) that employees were pressured to attend but admitted that the internal state communication system “most likely circulated” information about the event.

The episode underscores a broader issue: no other political force in Armenia has the capacity to assemble thousands of public employees for a political-leaning event. As the country effectively enters a pre-electoral period, the ruling party’s structural advantages – and its willingness to use them – are becoming more visible.

Escalating Patterns of Administrative Resource Use

In recent months, several high-profile examples have highlighted increasing use of state

resources for political purposes. The most striking is the promotion and financing of the “Learning is Trendy” (Կրթվելը նորաձև է) initiative, implemented by the “My Step” Foundation led by Anna Hakobyan, the Prime Minister’s spouse.

Pashinyan, Hakobyan, and other public figures have held numerous meetings with citizens across Yerevan and the regions under the banner of this initiative. These gatherings routinely echo key messages from the ruling party’s political discourse, effectively functioning as early campaign events.

In June, it became publicly known that this initiative is partly financed from the state budget. The head of the Prime Minister’s Office, Arayik Harutyunyan, [confirmed](#) in Parliament that the state funds those “Learning is Trendy” initiative events attended by the Prime Minister. At the same time, the Office [refused to disclose](#) how much money is being allocated, stating that the relevant expenses were included in the government’s classified procurement plan.

Use of Public Television to Amplify Political Messaging

Events linked to “Learning is Trendy,” which carry clear political undertones, are broadcast live on Public Television, [during prime time and free of charge](#). Public Television has also been playing an active role in amplifying the government’s messaging in its ongoing confrontation with the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Over recent weeks, Public TV has been extensively covering Pashinyan’s Sunday visits to religious services held by defrocked priests or clergy who are willing to defy the Catholicos’s orders – again raising concerns about the use of taxpayer-funded media to promote the ruling party’s political agenda.

This situation raises serious questions about the level playing field ahead of the elections. While both the conduct and quality of elections on voting day have improved significantly since the 2018 Velvet Revolution, the administrative advantages previously enjoyed by ruling parties remain intact under the current government. This has already been evident in recent local elections, where the ruling party has used extensive administrative resources to influence outcomes – most recently in the [Vagharshapat enlarged community elections](#).

Another key issue highlighted in this article is the risk of politicizing the state bureaucracy and civil service. There is broad academic consensus that professional, apolitical, and autonomous state institutions are essential for effective and well-functioning democracies. The erosion of these principles would deal a serious blow to both state capacity and Armenia’s democratic development.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/988941/administrative-resources-and-an-uneven-playing-field-ahead-of-elections/>

This episode, much like several developments in recent months, raises serious concerns about selective justice. The use of masked NSS officers to arrest individuals accused of hooliganism in early-morning raids was clearly disproportionate and appears intended to intimidate figures engaged in opposition activities. Such actions stand in stark contrast to the authorities' handling of incidents involving government officials. Notably, roughly two years ago, Alen Simonyan spat on a citizen who had heckled him, yet no criminal proceedings were initiated. As noted in a previous [Democracy Watch report](#), between 2020 and 2023, 95 percent of criminal cases related to speech were brought against individuals who targeted the prime minister or his supporters.

Another troubling aspect of the current case is the pressure exerted on media outlets. Law enforcement did not stop at arresting the two bloggers but also confiscated equipment belonging to [Antifake.am](#), where they work. This essentially disrupted the outlet's operations, a step that cannot be justified within a democratic framework and constitutes clear pressure on free expression.

In response, all major journalistic organizations in Armenia [issued a joint statement](#) condemning the authorities' actions. The statement emphasized that the use of disproportionate force, the performative involvement of the NSS, the detention of other AntiFake.am employees unrelated to the case, and the seizure of all editorial equipment were unacceptable and incompatible with the behavior of a state that aspires to democratic standards.

It is also important to note that this is not the first time Samsonyan and Saghatelyan have faced prosecution under the same criminal article. In March 2024, they were similarly detained with excessive and highly demonstrative force for using sexually explicit insults against Prime Minister Pashinyan. Their pre-trial detention was later replaced with administrative supervision, and in May 2025, they were [acquitted](#). This earlier case was [included](#) in Freedom House's *Freedom on the Net 2025* report.

In summary, it should be acknowledged that the use of insulting and especially sexualized language to smear and delegitimize political opponents poses a real threat to the level and quality of political discourse in countries like Armenia, where traditional cultural norms and specific societal attitudes heighten the sensitivity around such behavior. However, it remains essential to find the right balance between protecting citizens and public figures from verbal abuse and safeguarding freedom of speech. In July 2021, Armenia adopted a law criminalizing insults, but the provision was repealed in July 2022 following significant domestic and international pressure.

Relying on disproportionately punitive measures—especially when they are not applied consistently to all actors—will do little to improve the situation. A meaningful first step toward a solution would be a commitment by the ruling party to refrain from using such language themselves. As we have documented in recent months, Prime Minister Pashinyan and other

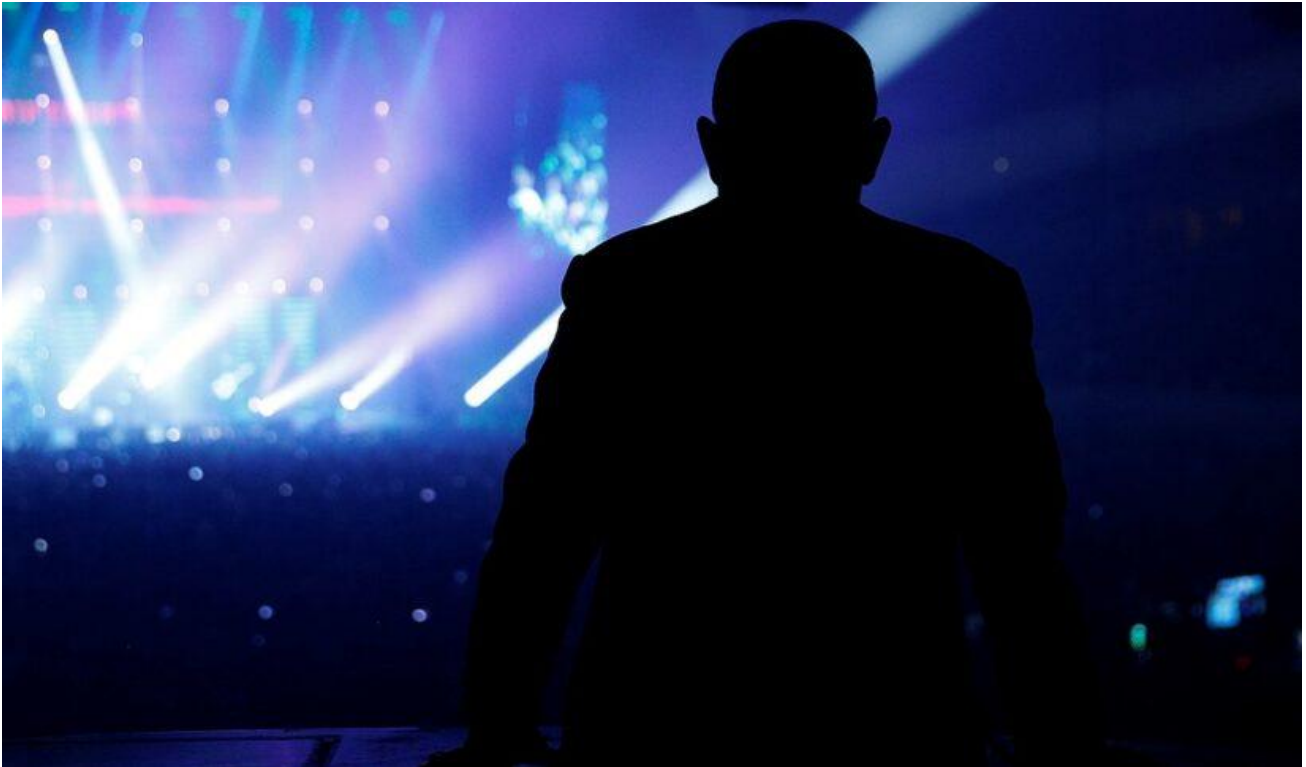
government officials have frequently used offensive and unethical language to attack their opponents. In doing so, they legitimize this behavior and create justification for others to adopt even more derogatory rhetoric.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/987597/opposition-bloggers-detained-in-armenia-implications-for-free-speech-and-political-discourse/>

12 November 2025 —

Democracy Under Pressure: The Role of Civil Society in Armenia



By Tigran Grigoryan

In recent months, developments in Armenia’s domestic political life have increasingly reflected a serious democratic backslide. The country’s law enforcement and judicial systems have been instrumentalized to serve the ruling party’s internal political interests. Selective justice, the use of disproportionate legal measures, and illegal wiretapping to persecute political opponents have become commonplace features of Armenia’s political landscape.

The authorities — Prime Minister Pashinyan and other ruling party figures — make little effort to conceal their involvement in these processes. These actions are often framed as necessary steps to counter external interference and hybrid threats, according to the government and pro-government actors.

These worrying developments have been a consistent theme in our [Democracy Watch reports](#) over the past several months. Another recurring theme is the silence — or, at times, even support — of parts of Armenia’s civil society for the ongoing normalization of anti-democratic practices in the name of “protecting democracy.”

While many civil society groups and organizations [have been vocal](#) in condemning the abuse of law enforcement, the judiciary, and the broader state apparatus by the ruling party to neutralize political opponents, others have chosen to turn a blind eye, rationalize, or downplay these actions.

One widely held view within civil society is that, following the Velvet Revolution, the relationship between civil society and the new government had to evolve to reflect the new reality. Proponents of this argument draw comparisons with civil societies in consolidated democracies, where NGOs collaborate with their respective governments to address common challenges. While it is true that avenues for cooperation between the government and civil society in Armenia have expanded, and that civil society is more involved in various processes, this comparison — and the resulting claims about the nature of the new relationship — are misleading.

Constructive engagement is necessary and welcome when it leads to practical problem-solving, but it should never come at the cost of tolerating abuses of power and democratic backsliding. Armenia remains far from a situation where democratic erosion is impossible, and the civil society and NGO sector cannot afford to abandon its watchdog role. The last decade has shown that even advanced democracies are not immune to democratic backsliding, and the presence of independent, proactive institutions and groups remains one of the key guardrails that can slow or counter this process.

A related argument made by some civil society actors is that it is acceptable to be less critical of the current government compared with the pre-revolutionary one because the current government was elected in free and fair elections and therefore enjoys democratic legitimacy. While this assumption is factually correct—the 2018 and 2021 parliamentary elections were not contested by major domestic or international actors, and no violations were recorded that could have affected the outcomes—free and fair elections are only one feature of consolidated democracies.

Elected leaders can still embark on paths of repression and undermine the rule of law. Hungary, which has become a symbol of democratic corrosion in Eastern Europe, still scores higher than Armenia in Freedom House’s Global Freedom Index in terms of political rights, civil liberties, and overall score. Yet it would have been inconceivable for Hungarian civil society to ignore Viktor Orbán’s anti-democratic measures simply because he was an elected leader.

Another common narrative among some civil society actors is the call to “see the bigger picture.” In this framing, Armenia’s nascent democracy is under hybrid attacks by hostile foreign actors such as Russia, and the government must do whatever it takes to neutralize these risks. Proponents of this narrative downplay the significance of ongoing processes—selective justice, the weaponization of law enforcement, illegal wiretaps—sometimes describing them as necessary evils, and in some cases even fully endorsing them.

As a think-tanker often invited to meetings with international delegations, I encounter this rationalization of abuse frequently. While such arguments may be understandable when voiced by government officials with apparent political self-interest, they are inappropriate coming from representatives of independent civil society organizations, whose focus should be on defending democratic norms and practices. The threat of external interference is real and

merits serious discussion, but the solution lies in strengthening institutions and reinforcing democratic norms, not undermining them.

A further problem with the “bigger picture” argument is that it provides the government with a pretext to arbitrarily attack critics and consolidate power. In virtually all historical cases of authoritarian backsliding, appeals to a “greater purpose” were used to justify such processes. If this framing becomes normalized in Armenia, civil society and independent media could soon face attacks under the same rationale — a pattern already visible in neighboring Georgia.

In fragile political systems with weak institutions, civil society plays an especially important role as a guardrail against democratic backsliding. Armenia has traditionally had a strong and vibrant civil society that constrained authoritarian power, created space for free and independent public discourse, and ultimately contributed to opening the system. Today, however, an identity crisis affecting parts of civil society is creating a space for democratic backsliding. If this crisis is not addressed, it will deal a significant blow to both the prospects of democratic consolidation in Armenia and the credibility of these actors—an impact that malign internal and external forces are likely to exploit to undermine the entire civil society sector.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/985834/democracy-under-pressure-the-role-of-civil-society-in-armenia/>

27 October 2025 —

Big Brother is Watching You: Surveillance, Leaks, and Democratic Backsliding



By Tigran Grigoryan

On May 30, at the very beginning of the current phase of confrontation between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the country’s ruling party, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan made his infamous [Facebook post](#): “Reverend, go on and keep banging your uncle’s wife – what do you want from me?”

What initially seemed like a worrying verbal attack by the prime minister – marked by elements of sexism and violation of privacy – soon evolved into a large-scale campaign against the Church through the weaponization of law enforcement and the judicial system.

Pashinyan’s vulgar Facebook post took on new significance on October 24, when a Telegram channel named “Armenian WikiLeaks” [published](#) several short videos allegedly showing Archbishop Arshak Khachatryan, Chancellor of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, in intimate situations with a woman. The videos, filmed in a bathroom and a living room, were accompanied by a claim that the woman was the archbishop’s uncle’s wife.

Following the publication, several ruling party–aligned websites and pro-government bloggers began spreading the footage. They also attempted to portray the leak as the result of internal Church rivalries – a claim that appears dubious, given that the prime minister himself had referred to this compromising material in the above-mentioned Facebook post, and that only

state security agencies have the capacity to carry out such covert surveillance operations.

The pattern of how this material was disseminated mirrors a model identified in a recent CivilNet [investigation](#) into other cases of illegal surveillance and their publication. That report examined two recent incidents in which private phone conversations – one involving clergymen and another involving individuals associated with Samvel Karapetyan’s “Our Way” movement – were made public. The investigation revealed that one recording first appeared on an anonymous Telegram channel spreading pro-government and anti-opposition content, and was quickly amplified by ruling party–controlled media outlets. In the second case, the audio was initially released on the YouTube channel of the government-affiliated outlet MediaNews, then widely circulated by other loyal media. These illegally obtained recordings later served as grounds for opening criminal cases based on the conversations’ alleged content.

According to Armenian law, surveillance and wiretapping not authorized by a court cannot be used in criminal proceedings. However, once such recordings are leaked to the media, they can serve as a pretext for launching criminal investigations. This mechanism effectively allows authorities to circumvent legal restrictions in politically motivated cases.

Notably, a recent [report](#) by the Regional Center for Democracy and Security on hate speech against Nagorno-Karabakh refugees identified the same mechanism and the same actors involved in spreading disinformation and hate speech against displaced persons.

It now appears that this very mechanism was once again employed in the case of the leaked surveillance videos of Archbishop Arshak Khachatryan. Taken together – Pashinyan’s months-old Facebook post, the capabilities required for such surveillance, and the familiar pattern of dissemination – these factors leave little doubt about who stands behind this and previous leaks of compromising materials targeting Church and opposition figures.

The publication of the video has sparked a strong public backlash. Artur Papyan, president of the Yerevan Press Club and a leading media expert, [emphasized](#) that violating someone’s privacy or publishing secret recordings can never be justified – whether for political, public, or personal reasons – as it undermines trust, weakens institutions, and degrades human dignity. He added that such actions not only breach ethical norms but also violate Armenia’s constitution, laws, and international obligations, contradicting the very foundations of democracy.

Media expert Samvel Martirosyan likewise [stressed](#) that secretly recording someone’s private life or spreading such recordings is a crime.

These and previous episodes of illegal surveillance and the use of compromising materials against government critics and opponents represent yet another alarming trend in Armenia’s ongoing democratic backsliding. The deliberate blurring of the boundary between private and public life bodes ill for the state of political freedoms and civil liberties in the country. The absence of a strong and unified response from civil society and the international community

risks normalizing these practices – and allowing them to be used against a growing range of actors in the future.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/982251/big-brother-is-watching-you-surveillance-leaks-and-democratic-backsliding/>

20 October 2025 —

Criminal Justice as a Political Tool in Armenia



By Tigran Grigoryan

On October 15, the Investigative Committee of Armenia detained ten clergymen from the Aragatsotn Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church and conducted a search at the diocesan headquarters. The following day, authorities revealed that three individuals had been formally [arrested](#), including the head of the diocese, Bishop Mkrtych Proshyan.

The charges against the clergy involve multiple provisions of the Armenian Criminal Code, including obstruction of the exercise of electoral rights using official position, coercing or obstructing participation in public assemblies through influence or material incentives, and misappropriation of large amounts of entrusted property. These actions were prompted by an [interview](#) given in September by another clergyman of the Aragatsotn Diocese, Father Aram Asatryan, in which he stated that he had participated in opposition rallies in 2021 against his will.

A related high-profile [arrest](#) occurred on October 16 when lawyer Alexander Kochubaev publicly criticized the criminal proceedings against the clergymen. In a [Facebook post](#), he described investigators, prosecutors, and judges in derogatory terms. Hours later, Kochubaev was forcibly detained and subsequently imprisoned for two months. Authorities charged him under the Criminal Code for publishing defamatory information about judges, prosecutors, and investigators in connection with their professional activities.

Both of these cases fit within the pattern of recent concerning developments in which the authorities use law enforcement and the judiciary to address domestic political issues. It is evident that the criminal cases brought against the head of the Aragatsotn Diocese and other clergy are another episode in the confrontation between the state and the Church and carry clear political overtones.

Due to limited information about these cases, it is difficult to assess the legitimacy of the charges, but it is apparent that selective justice is once again at play. As evidence of this, one can recall the most recent mayoral elections in Yerevan in September 2023, where numerous similar violations by the ruling party were documented, yet no consequences ensued.

The “Eyewitness” observer mission [noted](#) in its final report on the 2023 Yerevan elections that the ruling Civil Contract party pressured employees of educational institutions – including schools, kindergartens, and cultural centers – to attend party rallies and promotional events, often making participation compulsory. In several instances, students and parents were also mobilized, with teachers and coaches emphasizing that attendance was mandatory. Numerous reports of these violations were published in the press, yet no criminal cases were initiated. Against this backdrop, the criminal proceedings and detention of clergymen from the Araratsoth Diocese for similar alleged actions four years later are difficult to view as anything other than politically motivated.

The case against Kochubaev represents another instance of the politically expedient use of the criminal justice system, in which individuals are targeted and punished primarily for their speech. It is also worth noting that between 2020 and 2023, 95 percent of criminal cases related to speech [were brought against](#) individuals who targeted the prime minister or his supporters.

In response to this and other recent troubling developments, on October 18, representatives of Armenian civil society [issued a statement](#) condemning the growing use of the criminal justice system as a political tool to silence dissent and restrict freedom of expression. They warned that selective and disproportionate prosecutions, including arrests for social media posts and critical speech, violate fundamental rights and undermine the rule of law. The statement denounced the use of detention as punishment and urged authorities to refrain from interfering with the judiciary, to ensure fair trials, and to uphold human rights and democratic standards.

These and previous politically motivated cases have dealt a serious blow to the notion of judicial and law-enforcement independence in Armenia. One of the core promises of the 2018 Velvet Revolution was to reform these institutions and ensure a level playing field, guaranteeing equal rights for all citizens regardless of political affiliation. Yet, the developments of the past six months paint a starkly different picture: public criticism of the government or political opposition to it can once again result in serious criminal consequences.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/981014/criminal-justice-as-a-political-tool-in-armenia/>

7 October 2025 —

Archbishop Ajapahyan's conviction and the politicization of justice in Armenia



By Tigran Grigoryan and Tatev Ghazaryan

On October 3, Archbishop Mikael Ajapahyan was sentenced to two years in prison under the Criminal Code for *“making public calls aimed at seizing power, violating territorial integrity, or overthrowing the constitutional order, using publicly displayed works, mass media, or information and communication technologies.”*

The charge is based on an interview he gave more than a year ago, in which the cleric spoke about the “need for a coup.” At that time, however, the Prosecutor General’s Office had reviewed the same statements and found no grounds for criminal proceedings. In response to a request from the “Union of Informed Citizens” NGO, the Prosecutor General’s Office wrote on April 30, 2024:

“In accordance with the Criminal Procedure Code of the Republic of Armenia, it has already been recorded that the circumstances described in your report do not substantiate any act, action, or omission that could reasonably be given an initial legal qualification corresponding to any offense defined by the Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia.”

The prosecution now justifies opening the case by claiming that Ajapahyan repeated the same

statement in June 2025.

Human rights defender Zaruhi Hovhannisyan refuted this reasoning in an [interview](#) with Medialab, saying:

“From a legal standpoint, it is impossible for the same act to be considered non-criminal in one case and criminal in another. A person cannot now be sentenced to imprisonment for an action that was previously not regarded as a crime.”

Similarly, Anna Melikyan, legal expert at the Protection of Rights Without Borders NGO, in written comments to *Democracy Watch*, pointed to serious legal shortcomings in the case. She noted that although the Archbishop was charged for repeated calls made over a protracted timeline, the Prosecutor’s Office failed to demonstrate that those calls posed any real risk of violence or that any harmful actions followed them. According to Melikyan, this absence of demonstrable harm undermines the case’s legal foundation.

Both Melikyan and Hovhannisyan emphasized the disproportionate nature of the verdict. Melikyan pointed out that, under Armenian law, custodial sentences should be a last resort, applied only when less restrictive measures are insufficient. The Criminal Code provides for a range of alternative sanctions – such as fines or community service – but the court nevertheless opted for imprisonment. She also drew attention to two other similar cases in which defendants charged under the same article received non-custodial sentences – a fine and community service, respectively – and whose trials lasted 1.5 and 3 years, reflecting normal timelines in the Armenian judicial system. By contrast, Archbishop Ajapahyan’s trial concluded in less than two months, an unusually expedited process that further raises concerns about the fairness and objectivity of the proceedings.

Zaruhi Hovhannisyan also [stressed](#) that in comparable cases in the past, imprisonment has never been applied as a punishment. Therefore, she argued, Ajapahyan was subjected to a harsher, discriminatory sentence, imposed under stricter conditions, which suggests political persecution. Hovhannisyan also noted that Ajapahyan’s case meets the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) definition of a political prisoner.

Notably, even some members of Armenia’s civil society who are generally sympathetic to the government have expressed concern about the disproportionate nature of the ruling.

The politicization of justice and its consequences

In a broader context, it is clear that the criminal prosecution of Archbishop Mikael Ajapahyan coincided with a period of confrontation between the government and the Armenian Apostolic Church. This timing helps explain why the same statement – initially deemed non-criminal by the Prosecutor General – later became the basis for criminal prosecution and imprisonment.

This political context also undermines the argument that the verdict was the result of an independent judicial process. Instead, it points to a broader pattern: the use of law

enforcement and the judiciary by the authorities for domestic political purposes – a practice that is increasingly becoming normalized in Armenia.

The case exposes serious inconsistencies in the application of justice and highlights the deepening politicization of the judiciary. Such developments are among the clearest indicators of democratic backsliding in the country.

Equally concerning is the lack of international reaction to this growing politicization and instrumentalization of law enforcement and the judiciary for domestic political purposes. International cooperation and support for the Armenian government should be tied to clear democratic conditionalities to prevent the country from following the path of countries like Hungary and Georgia. The experience of the past decades has shown that when major international actors promoting democracy and institutional reform turn a blind eye to the erosion of the rule of law and other violations of democratic norms, it almost inevitably paves the way for democratic regression and a slide back into authoritarianism.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/978379/archbishop-ajapahyans-conviction-and-the-politicization-of-justice-in-armenia/>

29 September 2025 —

Illicit Party Financing: How Civil Contract Circumvents the Law Without Consequences



By Tatev Ghazaryan

The Anti-Corruption Committee [recently closed](#) a criminal investigation into alleged illegal donations to the ruling *Civil Contract* (CC) party in 2022. The case, which had been opened on the grounds of large-scale unlawful campaign contributions, was terminated without any prosecutions. This decision, coupled with clear violations in CC’s financing process, raises serious concerns about the transparency of political party funding and the impartiality of Armenia’s state institutions.

The scandal was first exposed by Infocom last year, and developed by CivilNet in collaboration with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). Investigators revealed that dozens of individuals – many of them CC candidates in local elections – had made large, identical contributions to the party. In at least ten towns, ten different candidates each transferred the exact same amount of money on the same day. Journalists spoke with more than thirty donors, about half of whom said they did not even recall donating to *Civil Contract*.

Similar concerns resurfaced in January 2024, when *Infocom.am* [scrutinized](#) the party’s

fundraising for the September 2023 Yerevan municipal elections. *Civil Contract* reported raising 506.5 million drams (about \$1.25 million) for the campaign — an unprecedented amount. *Infocom* found that much of this total came in the form of donations ranging from \$2,500 to \$5,000 each, often attributed to individuals with modest means or apparent ties to senior officials and businesspeople close to the government. Some of those listed as donors told journalists they were unaware that such large sums had been transferred to Prime Minister Pashinyan’s party in their name.

A review of the party’s 2022 and 2023 financial reports points to a systemic pattern of circumventing Armenia’s transparency laws. Some donors exceeded the maximum contribution allowed by law, while others appear to have been used as intermediaries without their knowledge – suggesting possible laundering of funds through “straw donors.”

Weak Oversight and Delayed Accountability

The seriousness of the issue was recognized by three separate state institutions, which launched investigations.

The Prosecutor General’s Office [opened](#) a case following reporting by Infocom on Yerevan’s municipal elections, but no public updates have been provided since. Based on Civil Contract’s 2022 annual report and the negative conclusion from an independent audit, the Corruption Prevention Commission submitted a report to the Prosecutor’s Office. Although the Anti-Corruption Committee initially opened a criminal case, it was later closed without any indictments. This sequence of events highlights that, while legal frameworks exist on paper, their enforcement appears selective, with cases involving the ruling party often stalled or prematurely closed.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan publicly [admitted](#) there was a “problem,” but insisted it had not crossed the threshold of criminal liability, claiming investigative bodies “found no elements of a crime.” He made these remarks before judicial bodies had published any conclusions, effectively preempting their findings and exerting public pressure on supposedly independent institutions.

Legislative Gaps and Risky Reforms

This scandal also highlights structural weaknesses in Armenia’s legal framework for party financing. Party annual reports are published with significant delays – often a year after elections – meaning that voters learn of violations long after they could have influenced electoral outcomes. Public oversight is therefore too little, too late.

Moreover, recent changes to Armenia’s Electoral Code risk further weakening transparency. In December 2024, the individual donation cap to political parties was raised from 2.5 million to 10 million AMD per year, which reduces the need to use proxy donors but does not solve the problem of tracing the origin of funds. Another concerning change allows only parties themselves – not individual citizens – to contribute to pre-election campaign funds, meaning

that all money must first flow through party accounts, further obscuring the financial trail until the following year's reports.

In practice, this means elections are held first, and only months later do investigators and the public gain access to the financial data that could reveal violations – at which point the results are already politically irreversible. The examples of the 2021 and 2023 Yerevan elections demonstrate how such delays render accountability toothless.

Conclusion

The handling of the *Civil Contract* party's financing scandal is symptomatic of a deeper problem: Armenia's political finance system is designed in a way that shields political parties from timely accountability. Investigations are slow or quietly closed, reporting is delayed until after elections, and recent legal changes risk making campaign financing even less transparent.

For Armenia to consolidate its democracy, it must urgently strengthen institutional independence and reform its party finance system. Real-time disclosure of donations, timely audits, and genuinely impartial investigations are essential to restore public trust. Otherwise, Armenia risks sliding toward a model where elections remain competitive on the surface but ruling parties enjoy structural advantages that tilt the playing field – eroding both accountability and faith in democratic governance.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/976833/illicit-party-financing-how-civil-contract-circumvents-the-law-without-consequences/>

15 September 2025 —

Armenia's ruling party's sexism problem



Arthur Hovhannisyian (Photolur)

By Tigran Grigoryan and Tatev Ghazaryan

On September 8, Armenia's political discourse sank to a new low when Artur Hovhannisyian, secretary of the ruling Civil Contract faction, launched a personal and sexist attack against opposition MP Taguhi Tovmasyan during a press briefing inside the National Assembly.

The incident followed Hovhannisyian's [interruption](#) of Tovmasyan's earlier press conference on Armenian prisoners of war held in Baku. Tovmasyan later [wrote](#) to Speaker Alen Simonyan, accusing Hovhannisyian of obstructing her parliamentary work and violating journalists' rights. She also demanded that he undergo daily drug tests before entering parliament.

Later that day, Hovhannisyian [responded](#) with remarks widely seen as defamatory and sexist, explicitly implying that Tovmasyan had acquired her property by providing sexual services:

“You're journalists – and none of you journalists have three or four apartments on Northern Avenue, right? Let her get tested for STDs every day so we understand where those four apartments came from. How does a low-paid journalist (author's note: Taguhi Tovmasyan worked as a journalist before entering politics) afford apartments on Northern Avenue and elsewhere – perhaps through other services?”

Tovmasyan denied owning four apartments and announced that she would sue Hovhannisyian for defamation.

Prominent human rights defender Zaruhi Hovhannisyan [strongly condemned](#) Artur Hovhannisyan's rhetoric:

“What is happening in the discourse of Armenia's political field is simply unacceptable. Targeted, defamatory, sexist speech against women engaged in public life has been normalized and fully reflects patriarchal thinking. Women's personal lives, sexuality, underwear, and behavior are especially targeted. These tendencies have always existed, but the most alarming thing now is that this rhetoric is being spread by male politicians sitting on the highest platforms. This is not only a gross violation of ethics but also an expression of misogyny.”

A pattern of sexist rhetoric

This is not the first time ruling party MPs have used sexist language to attack women in politics and the media. Months earlier, Andranik Kocharyan, chair of the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Defense and Security, refused to answer a female journalist's question and [told her](#) to “wipe her lips.” He had previously made other degrading remarks, such as dismissing a journalist with “Go to a hair salon” and mocking former Justice Minister Arpine Hovhannisyan by saying she should “speak with facts, like giving the names of her mother and unknown father.”

Despite widespread criticism from journalists and civil society, and calls for an ethics investigation, no parliamentary Ethics Committee was formed, Kocharyan never apologized, and he faced no consequences for his remarks. This precedent suggests that, like his party colleague Andranik Kocharyan, Artur Hovhannisyan will also most likely face no accountability for his sexist and derogatory rhetoric.

Institutional tolerance of misogyny

While Zaruhi Tovmasyan's call for Hovhannisyan to undergo daily drug tests is also regrettable and does not contribute to substantive debate in parliament, it is nowhere near the severity of Hovhannisyan's sexist attack. His remarks represent a continuation of a troubling pattern in which ruling party MPs resort to gender-based insults rather than engaging in policy-focused discussion. By sexualizing Tovmasyan's character, Hovhannisyan sought to humiliate her publicly and discredit her as a legislator.

The fact that previous incidents – such as Kocharyan's remarks – resulted in no apology, no Ethics Committee investigation, and no consequences indicates an institutional tolerance for this type of behavior. This failure to enforce standards of conduct normalizes harassment and misogyny in Armenian politics, making it significantly harder for female politicians – and for women who might otherwise enter public life – to participate in politics. Without accountability, such attacks will continue to erode public trust in parliament and discourage women's political engagement.

This troubling pattern also underscores a broader lack of democratic values, inclusivity, and tolerance within Armenia's political elite – and the ruling party in particular. The silence of

Hovhannisyan's party colleagues further demonstrates that sexism in politics is not an isolated incident but a systemic problem tacitly tolerated by the ruling majority. Party loyalty and internal discipline appear to be prioritized over principled positions on critical issues. This is not only a serious obstacle to achieving real pluralism and gender equality but also a significant barrier to Armenia's democratic consolidation.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/974224/armenias-ruling-partys-sexism-problem/>

3 September 2025 —

‘I Am the Government’: Pashinyan’s One-Man Rule Threatens Democratic Consolidation



By Tigran Grigoryan

Armenia’s Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, has [dismissed](#) Liparit Drmeyan, the head of the Office of the Representative for International Legal Affairs. This move follows a public statement by the Prime Minister that Armenia will not comply with an emergency ruling from the Stockholm Arbitration Tribunal. The ruling had ordered Armenia to halt any actions to seize “Electric Networks of Armenia.”

The controversy centers on the Electricity Networks of Armenia (ENA), the country’s sole power distributor owned by Russian-Armenian billionaire Samvel Karapetyan. In June 2025, shortly after Karapetyan publicly backed the Armenian Apostolic Church, he was jailed on charges of calling for the government’s overthrow. Parliament then rushed through a law enabling ENA’s takeover, allowing regulators to strip its license and appoint state administrators without court approval. Critics see the move as retaliation, warning it could trigger costly arbitration and further erode Armenia’s investment climate.

In a press conference, Pashinyan [stated](#) that any government official who disagrees with his stance on the matter should resign. “I am the government ... no one can have a position that

contradicts my position,” he said. “If there are people in the government who have a stance that contradicts my own, they should write their resignation and leave the buildings immediately, and if not, I will remove them myself.”

The Office of the Representative for International Legal Affairs, which operates under the authority of the Prime Minister, had previously [concluded](#) that the international arbitration decision was legally binding.

A Contradiction with Democratic Governance

Pashinyan’s words are not only politically reckless but also legally unfounded. Armenia’s constitution envisions a parliamentary system in which authority is dispersed between institutions, and where the government is collectively responsible before parliament and the public. No single individual – not even the prime minister – can unilaterally embody “the government.” By reducing government to his own person, Pashinyan undermines the very foundations of institutional governance and places himself above the system he is supposed to serve.

Such rhetoric is not merely symbolic. When leaders equate themselves with the state, they erode the distinction between personal will and institutional decision-making. This is a hallmark of personalistic governance, where checks and balances are weakened, dissent is penalized, and policymaking becomes dependent on the moods and preferences of a single figure rather than the broader national interest.

In one of the previous [articles](#) published within the Democracy Watch initiative, we delved into different aspects of Pashinyan’s personalistic style of governance. This statement, as well as the dismissal of Liparit Drmeyan, is yet another manifestation of that defining feature of the Armenian government, which exemplifies the lack of institutionalization in the decision-making process.

Shrinking Space for Deliberation

The dismissal of Drmeyan also highlights a broader and more persistent trend in Armenia’s political life: the shrinking space for internal debate and deliberation within the ruling elite. Since the 2020 Second Karabakh War, loyalty to Pashinyan has increasingly become the overriding criterion for remaining in government. Expertise and professional judgment are secondary to demonstrating unquestioned obedience to the Prime Minister’s line.

The fact that the Office of the Representative for International Legal Affairs – a professional body tasked with defending Armenia’s positions in international legal forums – acknowledged the binding nature of the tribunal’s decision should have been an opportunity for constructive discussion within the government. Instead, it served as grounds for dismissal, sending a clear message: independent professional assessments that contradict the Prime Minister’s political stance will not be tolerated.

Why This Matters for Democracy

In consolidated democracies, the presence of alternative voices within the system is not only tolerated but valued. Institutions are designed to encourage scrutiny of executive decisions, allowing potential mistakes to be flagged and debated before they become irreversible. This pluralism protects against rash or dubious choices and ultimately strengthens policy outcomes.

Armenia's trajectory, however, suggests the opposite: the system is being remolded into one where dissent is penalized and where the prime minister's authority is presented as absolute. This dynamic increases the risk of serious policy errors.

Moreover, Pashinyan's statement comes at a time when Armenia's democracy is already under significant stress. The aftermath of the 2020 war, the forced displacement of Nagorno-Karabakh's population in 2023, and the country's complicated geopolitical balancing act have all placed extraordinary pressure on the state. At precisely such moments, democracies need strong institutions, rule of law, and open debate to guide them through crisis. Instead, Armenia is consolidating a model where one individual dominates decision-making unchecked.

For Armenia to safeguard its democratic gains, it must resist this slide toward personalistic governance. Rule of law and democratic accountability cannot be sacrificed to political expediency. Institutions must be allowed to function independently, even – and especially – when their conclusions contradict the Prime Minister's personal preferences. Otherwise, Armenia risks trading the promise of institutional democracy for the perils of one-man rule.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/972790/i-am-the-government-pashinyans-one-man-rule-threatens-democratic-consolidation/>

18 June 2025 —

Countering Foreign Interference or Undermining Democratic Norms? The Case of Samvel Karapetyan



By Tigran Grigoryan and Aram Tadevosyan

On June 17, Russian-Armenian billionaire Samvel Karapetyan, number 928 on the Forbes list, [criticized](#) the Armenian government’s campaign against the church and stated: “Since I have always stood by the Armenian Church and the Armenian people, I will be directly involved. If the politicians fail, then we will participate in all of this in our own way.” His comments were immediately followed by a harsh response from Prime Minister Pashinyan, who [wrote](#) on Facebook:

“Why have the licentious ‘clergymen’ and their licentious ‘philanthropists’ become so active? No worries—we’ll neutralize them again. This time, permanently.”

Hours after this post, Armenia’s National Security Service (NSS) surrounded Karapetyan’s Yerevan mansion and conducted a search that lasted into the late hours of the night. The next day, it became clear that Karapetyan had been [arrested](#) and was facing criminal charges. The basis for prosecution was a public call allegedly made during a media interview to seize power and usurp the constitutional powers of the Armenian government through unauthorized means.

At the same time, Pashinyan [announced](#) his intention to nationalize the Electric Networks of Armenia (ENA), a company owned by Karapetyan's Tashir Group. ENA holds a monopoly over electricity distribution in Armenia and ranks among the top ten taxpayers in the country. Karapetyan acquired the company in 2017.

Pashinyan justified the decision to “return one of Armenia's largest companies to the people” by [claiming](#) that ENA was being mismanaged—allegedly deliberately—to manufacture an artificial energy crisis and generate public discontent.

It was also revealed that the Public Services Regulatory Commission [fined](#) ENA 10 million AMD (\$25,000) for “technical and commercial violations.” Meanwhile, the Food Safety Inspection Body [launched investigations](#) into 36 restaurant outlets of another Karapetyan-owned business, “Tashir Pizza” LLC.

Government loyalists justify these actions as part of efforts to counter Russian hybrid influence and to strengthen Armenia's sovereignty. Given that Karapetyan is a prominent Russian businessman, it's possible he is under the influence of the Russian authorities. Figures like Karapetyan can also be instrumentalized in domestic political struggles, especially with just a year remaining until parliamentary elections in Armenia.

Notably, Maria Zakharova, the official spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry, and Vladimir Solovyov, one of the Kremlin's top propagandists, immediately reacted to the developments against Karapetyan and attacked the Armenian government.

Nevertheless, even if the assumption that Karapetyan is serving Russia's agenda in Armenia proves accurate, the methods employed by Pashinyan not only fail to counter potential hybrid influence on Armenia's democratic development—they in fact actively serve its objectives.

The core aim of Russia's recent foreign influence campaigns has been to sow widespread distrust in democratic institutions, principles, and norms within targeted societies. In Western Europe and the United States, Russian propaganda attempts to show that true democracies do not exist, that there is no meaningful difference between democratic and authoritarian regimes, and that Western actors promote democracy only to advance their geopolitical interests.

Nothing could more effectively reinforce these narratives in Armenia than Prime Minister Pashinyan's recent actions and behavior. There is no doubt that the criminal case against Karapetyan and the campaign against his companies are being carried out under direct orders from the prime minister. Through his Facebook posts, he not only fails to conceal this fact but openly confirms it.

In other words, we are witnessing the instrumentalization of the justice system and the state apparatus for narrow, factional objectives. The ruling party, through tactics that closely resemble the rules of the game in Putin's Russia, may succeed in temporarily mobilizing its core electorate. However, in the long run, such actions will deepen public mistrust and

skepticism toward democratic norms and procedures—greatly weakening the country’s resilience to external influence and manipulation.

The authorities’ contemptuous attitude toward democratic procedures, the selective application of justice for political goals, and the silent complicity of various actors in these processes also pose a threat to internal dynamics. Pashinyan’s total control over law enforcement bodies and other state agencies—and their arbitrary use—could easily be turned against other critics of the government, who might then be branded as foreign agents to justify persecution.

Foreign influence—particularly Russian hybrid operations—is indeed a serious challenge for all countries bordering Russia. In Armenia’s case, one can confidently say that the intensity of such influence will increase in this pre-election year.

However, the fight against foreign interference cannot be conducted through unconstitutional and anti-democratic means, as this will only aid the realization of external objectives. Exaggerating the threat of foreign influence and using it to securitize all domestic issues will in turn undermine the country’s capacity to address genuine risks.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/957759/countering-foreign-interference-or-undermining-democratic-norms-the-case-of-samvel-karapetyan/>

5 June 2025 —

Assault on the Church: A Growing Danger to Rights and Democratic Values



By Aram Tadevosyan

On May 29, during a government session, Prime Minister [Nikol Pashinyan](#), speaking about the condition of historical and cultural monuments, remarked that our churches are “turned into storage rooms”. “A person enters a church to have a spiritual experience, but instead sees someone’s old shoes, clothes, someone has brought their old bed and left it there. How long can we be this fake? How long can we speak of holiness and be this unholy...” Pashinyan said.

These words were followed by responses from several high-ranking members of the clergy, which in turn triggered a campaign by the Prime Minister and other representatives of the ruling party targeting church officials. The campaign has been accompanied by offensive language, which has become commonplace among the ruling elite, as well as moral and religious accusations.

Insults Directed at the Clergy

Pashinyan’s Facebook page has, for several days, featured a stream of biblical quotations interspersed with posts referencing the private lives of clergy. One of the most shocking posts

came on May 30, when he [wrote](#), without naming anyone: *“Holy one, go on and keep banging your uncle’s wife—what do you want from me?”* Even by Armenian standards, where targeted, offensive, and discriminatory political discourse is widespread, the Prime Minister’s language caused shock and disbelief. This post marked the beginning of a full-scale campaign against the senior clergy of the Armenian Apostolic Church, joined by various ruling party representatives and pro-government figures. State-aligned media outlets have been actively amplifying the narratives pushed by these actors.

Even harsher language has been used by the Prime Minister’s wife, Anna Hakobyan, who, without naming names, attributed severe crimes—such as pedophilia and links to criminal activity—to certain clergy. She [wrote](#): *“The country’s leading pedophiles have lost their minds over the word ‘closet’...”* In the same post, clearly referring to Catholicos Karekin II, she called him *“the country’s leading spiritual mafioso.”* It should be emphasized that no clergyman in Armenia has been charged with pedophilia or any other criminal offense.

Invasion of Privacy and Threats

In their campaign, authorities have used church canons as tools to target clergy who have allegedly violated those rules. Pashinyan has posted multiple times on Facebook about alleged breaches of the vow of celibacy by high-ranking clergy and the supposed consequences. He has implied that he possesses information showing that certain bishops—and the Catholicos himself—have had sexual relations while holding ecclesiastical office, which is forbidden by the Armenian Apostolic Church’s rules. *“Some people were upset that I wasn’t officially married. Half of our spiritual elite is in the same situation, and no one seems to care,”* the Prime Minister [wrote](#).

Justifying his position by arguing that the Armenian people—most of whom belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church—have the right to clergy who abide by Christian values and canons, the Prime Minister believes that church officials who have broken their vow of celibacy must step down. In his view, having morally compromised individuals in high ecclesiastical office—such as a Catholicos with children—is a [national security issue](#).

Turning the subject of celibacy into one of national importance has been followed by a thinly veiled threat of state action. *“What is morally more honest? To voluntarily resign, or to fall into the trap of endless worry—will there be an investigation? Will the truth come out?”* Pashinyan [wrote](#).

Throughout the campaign against senior clergy, the authorities have openly violated individuals’ personal space, which constitutes a breach of fundamental rights. As a secular country, the Republic of Armenia’s Constitution and laws take precedence over any religious organization’s internal statutes, including those of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Alleged violations of ecclesiastical rules cannot justify the public exposure of someone’s intimate life.

Interference in Church Autonomy

Matters that fall under the church’s internal regulations—and which should never be made public—have been turned into public discourse by the Prime Minister, who is now seeking to interfere in the Church’s governance, a power he does not possess.

According to the Constitution of Armenia, religious organizations are separate from the state and possess internal autonomy. The head of the executive branch has no right to influence the appointment of bishops or the Catholicos based on alleged violations of ecclesiastical or moral norms, nor to interfere in the internal affairs of the church in any other way.

Pashinyan’s [statement](#) that the Republic of Armenia should have a decisive voice in the election of the Catholicos and that candidates should undergo a “morality screening” is a direct infringement on the church’s autonomy.

This point was also raised by the Armenian Apostolic Church itself. In a [statement](#) by its Supreme Spiritual Council, it was emphasized that *“church matters are resolved in accordance with ecclesiastical order and canon law and are beyond the authority of state and political figures.”*

So far, the government has limited itself to words and media attacks, but there is growing concern that this could escalate into legislative interference—a move that would be a profoundly undemocratic step and a serious blow to religious freedom in Armenia.

Manipulation and Distraction

The Prime Minister and his allies have been criticized not only by the opposition and the Church but also by many public figures and civil society organizations for their language and abuse of power. For example, 17 civil society organizations issued a joint [statement](#) titled *“Stop Exploiting Women in Political Conflicts”*, in which they strongly condemned *“Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s social media post targeting the alleged female partner of a clergyman by disclosing identifiable information and turning her into a passive sexual object in order to discredit the cleric.”* The organizations demanded that Pashinyan remove the post and issue a public apology.

Isabella Sargsyan, a member of the OSCE/ODIHR Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief, also criticized the Prime Minister’s statements, saying:

“If the state begins interfering in the social dogmas of religious organizations by labeling them moral or immoral, it will soon face unsolvable dilemmas and regret ever opening the issue. Can a Muslim woman not cover her hair? Can a Jew work on the Sabbath? Can a Catholic woman have an abortion? Can a Yezidi marry outside the community? Can a believer be gay? Can a woman enter the altar? Can a Sikh cut his hair?”

It is evident that the root of the current conflict between the Armenian government and the Church is political. The ruling authorities and the leadership of the Armenian Apostolic Church have deep disagreements on a number of key national issues. One of the most prominent opposition figures today is Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The government perceives the Catholicos and other high-ranking clergy not merely as religious figures but as political adversaries, and is using the full range of available tools to undermine them.

Most concerning, however, is that the ruling party and the prime minister himself are fueling this deterioration, using aggressive tactics that threaten both democratic norms and religious freedom. Rather than acting as a stabilizing force, they have often escalated tensions through divisive rhetoric and personal attacks, setting a troubling example for political discourse. This behavior undermines efforts to build consensus on key national issues and risks entrenching deep societal divisions at a critical juncture for Armenia's democratic development.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/954927/assault-on-the-church-a-growing-danger-to-rights-and-democratic-values/>

22 April 2025 —

State-Sponsored Hate: How Armenia’s Ruling Party and Pro-Government Media Target Karabakh Refugees



By Tigran Grigoryan and Aram Tadevosyan

Following the March 29 rally organized by displaced Artsakh Armenians in Yerevan’s Freedom Square, the Armenian authorities and their affiliated media have continued a sustained campaign of hate speech and defamation against the participants. The primary cause of the demonstration was the government’s [decision](#) to scale back a social assistance program that covered housing expenses. During the rally, speakers also addressed the right of return and other related issues.

The scale of the hate campaign targeting Artsakh refugees by Armenian officials and pro-government media outlets has grown to such an extent that it underscores the urgent need to document the most egregious cases of incitement and hate speech. These instances can generally be divided into two categories: hate speech disseminated by public officials, and that spread by media outlets either owned by or affiliated with the ruling party.

Ruling Party Officials Against Refugees

On March 29, Taron Chakhoyan, Deputy Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister of Armenia, made a Facebook [post](#) in which he referred to the rally participants as “cannon fodder” and claimed that they were being used by the opposition for regime change. He added: “Even more noteworthy is that the majority of those demanding regime change are not even Armenian

citizens, and many of them declare they will never become citizens.”

Chakhoyan’s post not only clearly contains hate speech, but also disinformation, since no domestic political demands were voiced during the rally, and it is important to emphasize here that there is nothing condemnable in making political demands either; all people residing in Armenia have that right. Moreover, portraying refugees as a “resource” or “tool” has become a dominant narrative in Armenia’s public discourse since the 2023 forced displacement. It is also notable that Chakhoyan does not respond in any way to the numerous comments under his post that spread hatred and hostility toward Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians.

Another problematic aspect of Chakhoyan’s post is that, as a civil servant, he is obligated to maintain political neutrality in his public conduct. We previously addressed this official’s problematic behavior in a [separate piece](#) within the Democracy Watch initiative.

Another official who began spreading harmful stereotypes about refugees immediately after the rally was Arsen Torosyan, an MP from the ruling Civil Contract party. In a Facebook [post](#), Torosyan wrote that the Artsakh issue had always served as a means for seizing and retaining power. He added: “And now the same political strategy is being pursued in Armenia by the followers of those same people, after all the sacrifices of the Armenian people, forgetting even how the Armenian people welcomed their brothers and sisters after the displacement.”

By blurring the distinction between refugees and the Karabakh elite, and without clarifying the terminology he uses, Torosyan fuels hatred, also implying that the rally participants are ungrateful. By making such insinuations in a post about a rally that was primarily focused on social issues, Torosyan contributes to the spread of the propaganda narrative about “ungrateful Karabakhis.”

The most egregious case of hate speech by ruling party officials in recent days came from Khachatur Sukiasyan, a ruling party MP and businessman, in his comments about NK refugees. Responding to a 24News.am journalist’s question, he [stated](#): “There were no casualties in Karabakh in 2023. Ten people died... if you are talking about the gasoline storage explosion, that’s another thing. There were no casualties, it was just that one initial fight where a few people died.”

Sukiasyan’s statement is entirely false. According to the [Artsakh Information Center](#), 265 soldiers and 21 civilians were killed, and 14 civilians went missing during the September 2023 military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Sukiasyan later acknowledged this, and his representative made a [post](#) “apologizing” - but not for targeting refugees, only for giving the wrong number. Moreover, the next day, during a press briefing, Sukiasyan [made](#) misleading claims about the participation of NK residents in the Second Karabakh War. He said: “During the 44-day war, most didn’t fight, some even engaged in sabotage, some gave intel... everybody knows this.”

These statements, aside from being blatant disinformation- 763 servicemen and 72 civilians

from Nagorno-Karabakh were killed during the 44-day war- also legitimize and amplify the propaganda narrative of “deserter Karabakhis,” contributing to growing hatred toward refugees.

It’s important to note that this is not the first time senior government officials have used such narratives to target refugees. Months ago, Speaker of the National Assembly Alen Simonyan [stated](#) in a press conference that Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians should have “stayed and fought” in September 2023.

The anti-Karabakh campaign in pro-government media

Pro-government media actively exploit all anti-Karabakh narratives and often directly disseminate blatant hate speech. Medianews.site, a media outlet [associated](#) with Taron Chakhoyan, Deputy Chief of the Prime Minister’s Staff, reveals its attitude toward Karabakh Armenians by reprinting various Facebook posts that contain hate speech and disinformation. One such [article](#) titled “Do we have ‘hambal’ written on our foreheads? Go work and live”- with “hambal” being Armenian slang for someone easily taken advantage of- was taken from Hayk Toroyan’s Facebook page. Another post by Toroyan, titled “In just 1.5 years, the government allocated nearly \$292 million to the people of Artsakh, and they’re still complaining?” was also [published](#).

Facebook user Natali Aleksanyan’s posts have also appeared in [Medianews](#), with headlines like “You lost. Take responsibility. Stop demanding. It’s time to stop playing the victim and accept that Armenia cannot keep paying the price for your mistakes” and “Enough with [wrapping](#) Karabakh around the necks of our children while you enjoy your lives.” Another example is a post by Vahagn Khachatryan, who [wrote](#): “Dear Artsakh people, you want your homes back, and we want our lost loved ones, lost forever. Tell us, who should we demand it from?”

Beyond Facebook posts, Medianews also publishes its own editorial content targeting Karabakh Armenians. One [article](#) titled “Why are Artsakh Armenians avoiding Armenian citizenship? Only 8,437 have applied so far” states: “Sources close to the Artsakh community say that most avoid applying for Armenian citizenship mainly to avoid mandatory military service.” In addition, the outlet disseminates other anti-Karabakh content published by other pro-government media.

One of the main figures featured in recent days by the ruling party-owned *Haykakan Zhamanak*, civic.am, and the same Medianews is political commentator Harutyun Mkrtychyan. His main thoughts regarding the Artsakh people’s rally are that it is directed against the Republic of Armenia and that the people of Artsakh “are no better than the Armenians” and should not be in a privileged position. A targeted approach to their issues should not be allowed. His Facebook [post](#) on the Karabakh Armenians’ rally was published in *Haykakan Zhamanak*, titled “Very clearly to those organizing the rally: We will not allow social ‘lawlessness’ in Armenia.” In an interview with civic.am, he [said](#), “Making housing for Artsakh Armenians a top priority will lead to social inequality,” adding: “And who said the citizens of Armenia must sweat and

generate taxes while non-citizens receive privileges and financial support from the state budget?”

Similar comments were made by Mkrtychyan in an interview with [Haykakan Zhamanak](#), where he claimed: “They are not accepting citizenship en masse... The goal is to destabilize Armenia’s domestic political situation as much as possible and await signals from outside. For example, some Azerbaijani provocation at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border.”

After making these divisive statements, Mkrtychyan was invited to appear on Armenian Public Television, where he reiterated his views on the country’s most popular news platform. In his interview with Petros Ghazaryan, he once again [targeted](#) Karabakh Armenians. Referring to the social support provided to them, he said: “There is still the disaster zone (in Gyumri [authors’ note]) today. Haven’t those people lost their homes too? Let me go further: at the very least, they haven’t handed over state-purchased weapons to Azerbaijan with ribbons tied around them.” This statement can be characterized not only as misleading but also as inciting hatred between different social groups living in Armenia.

Besides publishing Facebook posts and commentary, Civic.am also has its own editorial pieces summarizing the anti-Karabakh campaign. One [article](#) titled “The Karabakh clan has moved to Plan B for the destruction of Armenian statehood” states: “Karabakh Armenians must clearly understand that they must stop being freeloaders, get to work. Citizens of Armenia are not obligated to work day and night to feed capable-bodied Karabakh Armenians. The large campaign against accepting Armenian citizenship sadly proves that many Karabakh Armenians place zero value on Armenian statehood.”

It is also noteworthy that several pro-government bloggers and public figures known for their anti-Karabakh rhetoric have been received at the highest levels. For example, a short video [posted](#) months ago on the Prime Minister’s wife’s Facebook page shows Anna Hakobyan meeting with several of the main figures spreading hate against Karabakh Armenians, dubbed as “public opinion makers,” to discuss education issues. Participants in that meeting included the aforementioned Harutyun Mkrtychyan, Hayk Toroyan, former ruling party nominee for the Supreme Judicial Council [Alexander Sirunyan](#), and Roman Baghdasaryan. The latter is one of the front-runners of the anti-Karabakh hate campaign. In a recent Facebook [post](#), for instance, he wrote: “Aid has gone to honest people who haven’t committed crimes. That accounts for only about 12–14% of those forcibly displaced from Artsakh.”

All these examples clearly show that there is a serious campaign of disinformation and hate targeting refugees which has intensified in recent weeks. It is also evident that the Armenian authorities are not only failing to take steps to prevent this campaign but are among its most active participants. Targeting forcibly displaced people from Nagorno-Karabakh for domestic political purposes deepens existing divisions in Armenia, makes the displaced population more vulnerable, and undermines social cohesion.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/946381/state-sponsored-hate-how-armenias-ruling-party-and-pro-government-media-target-karabakh-refugees/>

31 March 2025 —

Media Under Attack: The Spread of Hostile Political Rhetoric in Armenia



By Tigran Grigoryan

On March 26, Armenia’s National Assembly became the stage for two troubling incidents that highlight the country’s deepening political polarization and growing concerns about democratic backsliding. In one case, journalists were forcibly removed from the parliamentary press balcony while protesting against an MP’s derogatory remarks. In another, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan delivered a combative speech, leveling threats and insults at Armenia’s former presidents, further inflaming political tensions.

Crackdown on press freedom

Officers of the State Protection Service (SPS) [forcibly removed](#) journalists from the National Assembly’s press balcony as they conducted a peaceful protest. The journalists held signs demanding an apology from Civil Contract MP Andranik Kocharyan, who had recently [made disrespectful remarks](#) to journalist Hripsime Jebejyan. Their signs read: “Say Sorry!” and “Andranik Kocharyan, Clean Your Lips!” SPS officers confiscated the protest materials and forcibly removed the journalists from the area.

This latest action adds to growing concerns about the Armenian government’s attitude toward press freedom. The forceful removal of journalists from a space designated for media professionals raises serious questions about the authorities’ commitment to upholding freedom of expression and ensuring that journalists can operate without intimidation.

Following this incident, many journalists recalled that in 2013, Sargis Khandanyan—now a Civil Contract MP but then a journalist with CivilNet—participated in a similar protest inside the National Assembly chamber itself. At the time, no one obstructed the demonstration.

Prime Minister’s confrontational rhetoric

Later that day, in a heated parliamentary session, Prime Minister Pashinyan escalated political tensions by [directing threats and insults](#) at Armenia’s three former presidents—Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Robert Kocharyan, and Serzh Sargsyan. He accused them of avoiding a direct debate with him on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh’s loss and warned them to either engage in a public discussion or remain silent.

“If you are ready to debate, let’s talk. If not, sit down and shut up,” Pashinyan declared. His remarks became even more combative as he threatened to “throw them against the wall” and “trample them underfoot.”

This is not the first time Pashinyan has used offensive language to attack his opponents. It appears that the prime minister and the ruling party are already in an electoral mode, with the 2026 parliamentary elections not too far away. As the election approaches, this kind of rhetoric is likely to become even more commonplace.

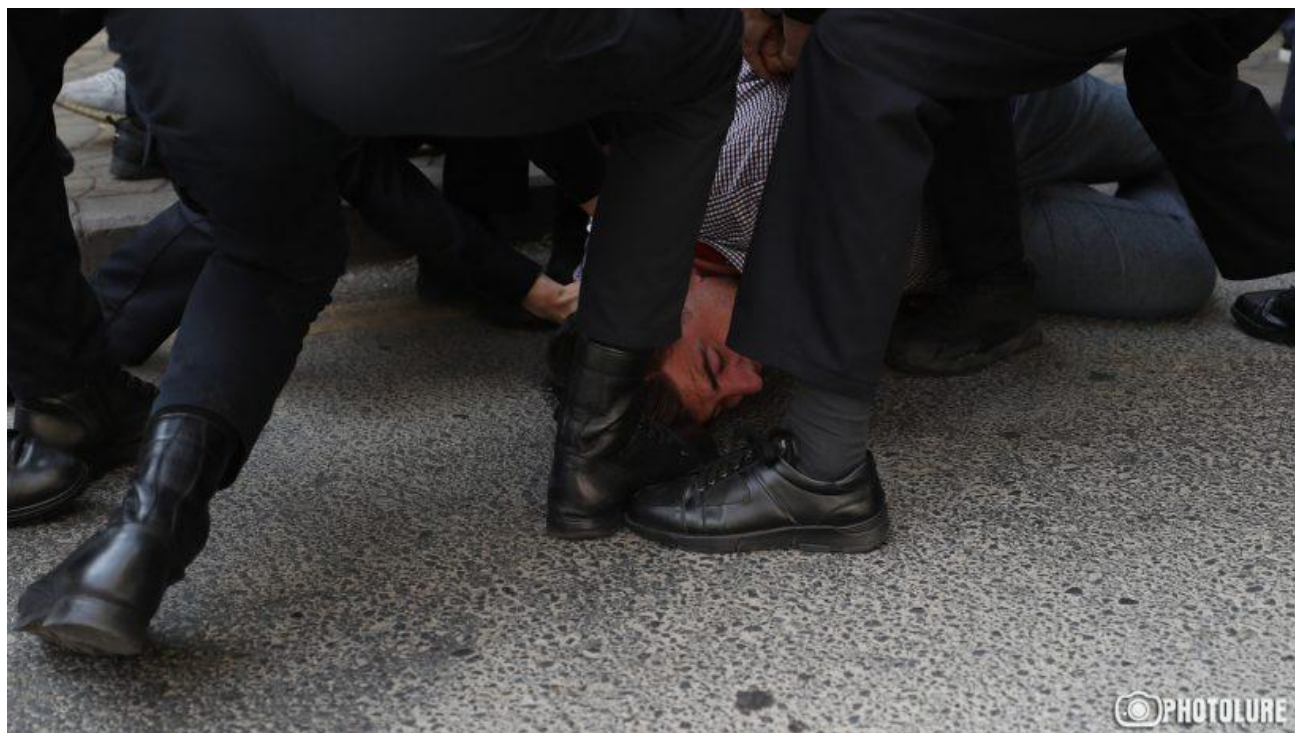
The ruling party is not taking any steps to curb political polarization or offensive rhetoric. On the contrary, it continues to instrumentalize such tactics for its domestic political purposes. This further erodes the space for meaningful debate and policy discussions, both of which are central to a properly functioning democracy.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/825628/media-under-attack-the-spread-of-hostile-political-rhetoric-in-armenia/>

28 March 2025 —

Torture at Police Station and Zero Charges: The Case of Tigran Ulubabyan



The police arrest the protesters of the 'Resistance' movement who block the streets of Yerevan, protesting against the current government

By Aram Tadevosyan

On March 17, lawyer Roman Yeritsyan [posted](#) on Facebook about Tigran Ulubabyan being tortured by officers at the Lori Regional Police Department and being subjected to insults. Thanks to several media outlets, the incident received widespread public attention. The story of an individual's rights violation quickly shifted to a broader discourse, from police impunity and extracting confessions through violence to obstructing legal counsel and discriminatory treatment toward people from Artsakh. Let's try to understand how this case, not unique for Armenia, became a topic that disrupted social solidarity.

Concealment of Crimes and Impunity

Radio Liberty, which has been following all developments in Tigran Ulubabyan's case, [reports](#) that this year there have been two more alerts about Lori Regional Police officers extracting confessions through violence or threats, but no officer has yet been charged. Hetq [provides](#) more comprehensive statistics nationwide: "In Armenia, an average of 180 reports are submitted annually regarding violence against citizens by law enforcement representatives. Between 2018 and the first six months of 2024, 1,167 such reports were submitted. Based on these, 1,112 criminal proceedings were initiated. However, over the past

6.5 years, only 20 cases have been sent to court with indictments.” In this regard, the media outlet expresses legitimate concern that the internal investigation initiated in Tigran Ulubabyan’s case, which was later suspended and replaced with criminal proceedings, might also be merely formal. The victim’s lawyer shares the same concern and called for a protest demanding the suspension and arrest of the police officers suspected of torturing Tigran Ulubabyan.

The lawyer, as well as several figures who joined the protest, [characterized](#) the [position](#) of Interior Minister Arpine Sargsyan on the case as biased. The minister noted that the forensic examination did not confirm the bodily injuries reported at the medical facility. “I emphasize again, I’m not making an assessment, I’m stating that there is a citizen’s report claiming intense beatings every ten minutes, various injuries, eight people involved, and yet no injuries were sustained from these alleged intense beatings every ten minutes, and this wasn’t confirmed by an independent expert conclusion—this simply must become a subject of objective investigation,” she declared. The minister also questioned whether the same person could display proper police behavior days earlier—upholding the law and ensuring the safety of others—only to transform into an officer grossly violating human rights days later. Arpine Sargsyan assured that if the police officers’ guilt is not proven, the appropriate individuals will be held accountable for false accusations.

Legal Process Against the Lawyer

A new turn in Tigran Ulubabyan’s case occurred on March 22, when the system “struck back.” That day, his lawyer Roman Yeritsyan [reported](#) that law enforcement had launched a campaign against him. The same day, it became clear that criminal proceedings had been initiated against the lawyer based on a citizen’s complaint, on suspicion of extorting money through fraud. Yeritsyan denies any connection to the criminal act and insists that law enforcement deliberately misled the citizen who submitted the complaint.

Discrimination and Divisive Speech

Tigran Ulubabyan’s case quickly began to be viewed as discriminatory treatment and deliberate targeting of people from Artsakh. In a [Facebook live stream](#) addressing the legal pursuit against him, the lawyer declared he was convinced the campaign was being conducted because of his Artsakh origin. Former Artsakh State Minister Artak Beglaryan [echoed](#) this sentiment, considering the entire process as a new wave of a campaign launched by the authorities against people from Artsakh. Some opposition figures also began characterizing the case as an action directed against Artsakh Armenians.

At this stage, it is difficult to definitively claim that Tigran Ulubabyan’s case was a manifestation of discrimination against people from Artsakh, considering previous reports of torture at the same police station. It is, most likely, a consequence of a more systemic problem of police violence.

Conclusion

Currently, no police officer suspected in Tigran Ulubabyan's case has been charged. Experience shows that the vast majority of cases of violence in police stations remain unpunished. Armenia's law enforcement structures continue to be a closed system where crimes can be investigated by circumventing the law. The publicity that the victim's lawyer and the media have managed to secure is significant, and once again police violence has come to public attention. This is more of an exception because the public doesn't learn about many similar cases, but even in this instance, there is no guarantee that Tigran Ulubabyan's case will receive an objective investigation.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/825103/torture-at-police-station-and-zero-charges-the-case-of-tigran-ulubabyan/>

25 March 2025 —

Armenia's Local Elections: When the Government Influences the Outcomes



By Tatev Ghazaryan

Since the political shifts of 2018, Armenia has seen a surge in local democratic transformations. As in Yerevan, regions and communities needed to align with the new political reality by electing new local authorities. Concurrently, since 2016, communities have undergone a process of consolidation, merging into larger administrative districts. This restructuring introduced a new governance model and expanded the use of proportional representation in local elections. The most significant wave of municipal elections occurred on December 5, 2021. Unlike the national parliamentary elections, however, the ruling authorities struggled to secure an absolute majority.

One key reason was the ruling party's lack of established political teams at the local level. They were up against entrenched political figures and networks built over the past 30 years. Their early victories were largely fueled by post-revolutionary enthusiasm and public distrust of former political forces. Nevertheless, the new authorities adopted a strategy of integrating locally influential figures, including long-serving village mayors, into their electoral lists to increase their chances.

This approach was part of a broader political bargaining system. Candidates with strong local followings were included in ruling party lists in exchange for administrative positions, which, in turn, helped mobilize voter support. However, this was not the only tactic employed.

Crisis in Uncooperative Communities

In communities where the ruling party failed to establish a majority, governance crises ensued. If council members refused to take their seats due to a lack of majority, opposition factions also struggled to form coalitions, leading to repeated elections as mandated by the government and the Central Electoral Commission. Each municipal election costs an average of 33–34 million drams from the state budget. In subsequent election rounds, authorities increasingly leveraged administrative resources to gain control, as seen in the cases of Vedi, Ani, Sisian, and Talin.

In some communities, the government attempted to persuade opposition council members to switch allegiance, thereby securing a majority—examples include Alaverdi, Akhuryan, Amasia, and the latest Yerevan elections. In others, the ruling party resorted to legal and political pressure, targeting opposition figures with criminal investigations and court cases, as observed in Goris, Vanadzor, and Gyumri.

Following the 2021 parliamentary elections, Arsen Torosyan, head of the Prime Minister’s Office, wrote a telling Facebook [post](#):

“The results of today’s snap parliamentary elections should serve as a signal for certain community leaders, who have aligned with different political forces, to reconsider whether they should continue in their positions.”

This statement served as an early warning of forthcoming political and legal pressure against opposition figures at the municipal level.

The Case of Gyumri: A Political Power Struggle

A particularly illustrative case is the upcoming March 30, 2025, snap elections in Gyumri. To understand how this came about, one must look at the political developments following the city’s 2021 elections.

In the October 17, 2021, elections, the Balasanyan Alliance won 14 seats in the city council, the ruling Civil Contract party secured 11, the Development and Civic Orientation Party (DCO) gained 4, while the Country to Live party and the Republican Party of Armenia each took 2 seats, with the Prosperous Democratic Party holding 1 seat. No single force secured an outright majority. The Balasanyan Alliance, just three seats short of a majority, signed a memorandum with Civil Contract, allowing the ruling party to participate in city governance by appointing two deputy mayors.

This arrangement lasted nearly three years before Civil Contract unilaterally terminated the agreement, citing concerns over “shadow governance” in the city. The ruling party then positioned itself in opposition, and shortly thereafter, legal action began against former mayor

Samvel Balasanyan and his close associates.

His son, Misak Balasanyan, was recalled from his diplomatic post in Iraq, while another son, businessman Khachatur Balasanyan, was arrested along with a relative in connection with a corruption case. Finally, Samvel Balasanyan himself was detained.

As pressure mounted, members of the city council aligned with Balasanyan's successor, Mayor Vardges Samsonyan, began resigning from their positions without public explanations. This led to a governance crisis, allowing the Prime Minister to appoint a temporary acting mayor. Notably, this move contradicted existing local government laws, but Civil Contract used its parliamentary majority to pass legal amendments granting the Prime Minister this authority.

Effectively, this maneuver neutralized the existing city leadership before the upcoming elections, giving Civil Contract a significant administrative advantage.

A Pattern of Election Management

The events in Gyumri reflect a broader pattern in Armenia's local governance: when the ruling party fails to secure control through elections, it often resorts to political maneuvering, legal action, and administrative pressure to shift the balance in its favor. This trend raises critical questions about the state of local democracy and the true competitiveness of municipal elections in Armenia.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/824235/armenias-local-elections-when-the-government-influences-the-outcomes/>

24 March 2025 —

Sexism, Stereotypes, and Insults: Armenia’s Ruling Party’s Troubling Rhetoric



By Tigran Grigoryan

In recent weeks, the rhetoric of Armenian politicians, particularly within the ruling party, has raised significant concerns about the use of offensive and politically incorrect language in public discourse. These incidents underscore the need for greater accountability and the protection of democratic values, particularly in the face of growing political polarization.

Andranik Kocharyan’s sexist attacks on female journalists

Armenian MP Andranik Kocharyan, chairman of the National Assembly’s Standing Committee on Defense and Security, has a history of making sexist and degrading remarks toward female journalists. Most recently, he [targeted](#) journalist Hripsime Jebejyan by refusing to answer her questions and telling her to “wipe her lips.” When asked to apologize, Kocharyan refused, arguing that his comments did not constitute an insult.

This is not the first time Kocharyan has used discriminatory language against women in the media. Years ago, he insulted former Justice Minister Arpine Hovhannisyan in an interview by saying she should “speak with facts, like giving the names of her mother and unknown father.” He also dismissed journalist Ani Gevorgyan’s question with the remark, “Go to a hair salon.”

Kocharyan’s comments have sparked widespread criticism from the journalistic community, with calls for media outlets to boycott him and refuse to interview him. This rhetoric reflects a

broader issue in Armenian political culture, where sexism is normalized and largely ignored by political elites. Despite calls for accountability, including demands for an Ethics Committee investigation, no official consequences have followed.

The case of mayor Tigran Avinyan's offensive language

Further concerns about the tone of political discourse in Armenia emerged during a recent session of the Yerevan City Council, in which Mayor Tigran Avinyan used an offensive stereotype while addressing his political opponents. Avinyan [stated](#) that no matter how much the opposition tries to distance itself from previous authorities, it is impossible. "Excuse me, but people are not 'Kurds with a papakha' (traditional hat, forming an idiom with a similar meaning to sticking out like a sore thumb)."

This remark was not only offensive but also dangerously divisive, invoking ethnic and cultural stereotypes that can contribute to heightened political tensions. While Avinyan's comment may have been intended to criticize the opposition, it highlights a broader pattern in which political leaders resort to derogatory language to undermine their critics, creating an atmosphere of hostility rather than constructive debate.

Gevorg Papoyan's controversial statement

In yet another recent episode, a statement by Armenia's Minister of Economy Gevorg Papoyan sparked controversy, raising serious concerns about the government's attitude toward criticism and democratic discourse. In a Facebook post, Papoyan [likened](#) government critics to "barking dogs," using the phrase "The dog barks, but the caravan moves on" while celebrating an investment in the controversial Amulsar mining project. Following widespread backlash from civil society representatives, he later deleted the post but did not apologize.

These incidents highlight a troubling trend in Armenian political discourse, where offensive, sexist, and divisive language is used by officials without significant repercussions. Such rhetoric not only undermines democratic values but also deepens political polarization, discourages constructive debate, and alienates marginalized communities. If Armenia is to strengthen its nascent democracy, political leaders must be held accountable for their words and foster a culture of respect in public discourse. Addressing these issues requires both institutional reforms and a societal shift toward demanding higher standards from those in power.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/823860/sexism-stereotypes-and-insults-armenias-ruling-partys-troubling-rhetoric/>

17 March 2025 —

The impact of U.S. aid cuts on Armenia’s civil society and media



By Tigran Grigoryan

As anticipated, the new Trump presidency is creating serious challenges for civil society and independent press around the world. The recent decisions by the administration to freeze foreign aid and curtail the activities of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have had a crippling effect on Armenia’s civil society and independent media. Apart from USAID, organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy, which has been a major supporter of Armenia’s civil society and media, have also faced difficulties accessing their allocated funds, forcing them to at least temporarily halt most of their operations. This has significantly impacted Armenian CSOs.

The funding halt has already led to the closure of multiple grassroots initiatives, with many organizations unable to meet their contractual obligations or even cover basic operational costs such as office rent. Larger civil society organizations, while able to survive, have been forced to significantly scale back their operations and narrow the scope of their activities. This has weakened Armenia’s democratic landscape at a time when external support for independent institutions is crucial.

The latest and most significant blow to Armenia’s independent media sector is the Trump administration’s decision to halt funding for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). The Armenian service of RFE/RL, commonly known as Azatutyun, is the largest media outlet in the country providing balanced and non-partisan news coverage. As noted in a

previous [Democracy Watch report](#), Azatutyun has been a frequent target of both government and opposition attacks precisely because of its independent editorial stance. The loss of U.S. funding for RFE/RL threatens to further undermine Armenia’s media landscape, leaving a vacuum that could be filled by partisan or foreign-influenced outlets.

This presents a daunting challenge for Armenia at a critical crossroads, where the country’s democratic trajectory may take an unpredictable turn. A strong civil society and independent media serve as the guardrails against democratic backsliding.

The broader implications of these developments are deeply concerning. With civil society organizations struggling to stay afloat and independent media facing financial ruin, the space for democratic discourse in Armenia might shrink. At a time when democratic backsliding is a global concern, these funding cuts risk undoing years of progress in governance, accountability, and press freedom.

CSOs and media outlets have long been criticized by various actors for relying on foreign funding. The current crisis underscores the risks of excessive dependence on external financial support. However, at this stage, independent organizations and media have few viable alternatives. Domestic funding, while an option, often comes with significant political strings attached. Many potential local funders have vested interests and political affiliations that could compromise the independence of these organizations.

While the European Union and other international partners should—and likely will—attempt to fill the funding gap, the process will take time due to bureaucratic hurdles. Even if new funding sources emerge, they may not fully compensate for the loss of U.S. financial support. Without sustainable alternatives, Armenia’s civil society and media sector risk becoming increasingly vulnerable to political pressures and external influence.

Ideally, the Armenian government should step in to provide immediate relief—whether through tax breaks or legislative incentives to encourage private donations to nonprofit organizations. While there has been some dialogue between civil society groups and the government, progress has been minimal. The government’s reluctance to intervene is likely influenced by the upcoming parliamentary elections and the growing authoritarian tendencies within the ruling party.

Although civil society and media have been heavily stigmatized by anti-democratic actors, and despite the challenges often highlighted in our Democracy Watch reports, it is undeniable that a strong and vibrant civil society and media are essential for the country’s progress and resilience. Without them, Armenia’s democratic future would remain uncertain. For this reason, it is crucial that everyone who is invested in the country’s democratic future, both within Armenia and abroad, step in to play an active role in safeguarding these fundamental pillars of democracy.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/822632/the-impact-of-u-s-aid-cuts-on-armenias-civil-society-and-media/>

10 March 2025 —

When Accountability Fails: ANIF’s Troubling Legacy



By Tigran Grigoryan

Hetq’s recent [investigation](#) revealed that on May 4, 2023, the Armenian government invested AMD 1.5 billion (around US\$3.8 million) in a newly established company, CFW CJSC, led by an individual with close ties to Yerevan Mayor Tigran Avinyan’s wife. What makes this deal even more alarming is that the company received the funds just eight days after its creation.

The investment came through the Entrepreneur + State Anti-Crisis Investments Fund, which was established by the Armenian National Interests Fund (ANIF) in May 2020. ANIF is a government-backed foreign investment body, and CFW CJSC is registered in Delaware, USA—an offshore tax haven.

ANIF was set up in 2019 and was dissolved in 2024, with Avinyan serving as its chair until 2022, when he was appointed deputy mayor of Yerevan. Despite his new position, Avinyan continued to hold the chairmanship of ANIF until the organization’s dissolution in 2024, raising concerns about a potential conflict of interest. These concerns, however, went largely unaddressed, and investigations into ANIF were halted after its merger with the State Property Management Committee.

Between 2020 and 2023, the Entrepreneur + State Fund invested in ten companies and the EU-Armenia SME Fund, totaling AMD 6.65 billion (almost \$17 million USD). In return, the state acquired up to 49% stakes in various companies, including CFW CJSC. The government’s official reasoning for investing in CFW CJSC was to strengthen Armenia’s cybersecurity and

train specialists for both local and international markets. But serious doubts about the company's operations and financial transparency soon surfaced.

CFW CJSC's director, Andreasyan, holds a 33% stake in Lav Products LLC, while Mariam Pahlavuni, Avinyan's wife, owns 34%. The link between Avinyan's family and the company, combined with the rapid investment, raised suspicions of cronyism. Under Avinyan's leadership at ANIF, the Entrepreneur + State Fund invested over AMD 1.5 billion (\$3.8 million USD) in CFW CJSC—less than two weeks after its formation.

The investigation by *Hetq* also revealed that 48% of CFW CJSC's shares are owned by Ararat Technologies LLC and 3% by Hayk Holding LLC—both Delaware-based companies under the leadership of Robert Levin. These offshore entities enjoy tax exemptions, further raising red flags about the financial transparency of the deal.

A key concern has been the lack of financial oversight. While the Entrepreneur + State Fund required that companies receiving funds submit financial reports and undergo independent audits, *Hetq* found that these companies failed to do so. When *Hetq* requested access to the audit results, the State Property Management Committee denied the request, citing confidentiality.

This secrecy is troubling, especially in light of the ongoing corruption scandals involving ANIF. *Hetq* also attempted to contact CFW CJSC's director by visiting its listed office address, only to find it empty. A formal request for information was sent, but there was no response.

Further investigation revealed that as of April 2023, CFW CJSC employed 15 people. However, by August 2024, only two employees remained, with just the director on staff by September 2024. Despite receiving more than a billion drams (2.5 million USD) in public funds, the company has yet to fulfill its promise to enhance Armenia's cybersecurity.

CFW CJSC was supposed to pay 49% of its profits to the Armenian government as dividends. However, when *Hetq* inquired with the Ministry of Finance, officials claimed they were unaware of the company's existence and confirmed that no dividends had been paid.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan recently [described](#) ANIF's operations as a "failure and disgrace," criticizing the fund's activities as an "unacceptable breach of trust." Though reports of financial mismanagement at ANIF had circulated since 2021, it wasn't until late 2023 that these issues came to light publicly. When questioned about the slow pace of investigations, Pashinyan emphasized the need to follow legal procedures, but also expressed strong disapproval of the situation.

Given these ongoing scandals, the case of CFW CJSC raises urgent questions about the effectiveness and transparency of public investments. 1.5 billion AMD in taxpayer funds was channeled into a company with offshore connections and little to show for it. The Armenian public deserves full accountability for how their money is spent, yet institutions meant to oversee these funds continue to shield questionable financial practices from scrutiny.

This isn't the first scandal involving Mayor Tigran Avinyan. We previously dedicated an entire [Democracy Watch report](#) to his various controversies. The fact that an official, implicated in several corruption scandals, continues to face no consequences highlights the deep democratic stagnation and lack of accountability in Armenia.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/821374/when-accountability-fails-anifs-troubling-legacy/>

28 February 2025 —

Targeting the Free Press: The Ruling Party’s Smear Campaign Against Azatutyun



By Tigran Grigoryan

The ruling Civil Contract party has launched a public smear campaign against Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Armenian Service (Azatutyun). Two high-ranking government officials—Arayik Harutyunyan, the head of the Prime Minister’s Administration, and Ruben Rubinyan, the Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly—have led verbal attacks against Azatutyun.

Harutyunyan [accused](#) Azatutyun of spreading “fake” news and likened the outlet’s reporting style to that of the pro-opposition Fifth Channel. His frustration stemmed from a recent Azatutyun report that he claimed misrepresented his social media activity. Specifically, he defended a positive post he had made about snowfall in Armenia, arguing that at the time of his post, there were no reports of road closures or hazardous conditions. He accused Azatutyun of amplifying opposition narratives and engaging in a smear campaign against him.

His post took a particularly aggressive tone, addressing Azatutyun’s director, Haghine Buniatyan, directly and urging the media outlet to continue “disgracing itself to the very end.”

Rubinyan [echoed](#) these sentiments a few days later, criticizing Azatutyun for featuring opposition figure Levon Zurabyan in two separate reports. He accused the outlet of deliberately pushing a narrative that blames Armenia for the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh’s Armenian population. According to Rubinyan, Azatutyun’s repeated interviews with Zurabyan

demonstrate an agenda-driven approach.

In a mocking tone, Rubinyan proposed that Azatutyun create a dedicated program titled “*100 Reasons Why Armenia Is to Blame*,” featuring Zurabyan alongside figures such as Armenia’s second president, Robert Kocharyan, and Russian propagandists like Margarita Simonyan and Vladimir Solovyov.

This campaign was further amplified by various supporters of the ruling party, resulting in insults and threats against the media outlet and its journalists.

Several Armenian media watchdog organizations have already [condemned](#) these attacks on Azatutyun by government officials. They highlighted a growing trend of targeting the media outlet through social media accusations, particularly by high-ranking officials who have questioned its professionalism and accused it of bias. Their statement denounces these actions as unacceptable interference in editorial independence. The organizations call on the authorities to end media smear campaigns, urge journalists to resist political pressure, and encourage the public to demand adherence to democratic values, including respect for press freedom.

The Armenian government’s hostility toward Azatutyun is not new. Over the past several years, high-ranking Armenian officials have privately complained about the media outlet in closed-door meetings with Western actors, spreading false narratives about its editorial policy and leadership. I know this firsthand, as several international interlocutors have asked me about the validity of these claims, indicating that their sources are various high-ranking Armenian officials. These narratives have also been promoted by multiple pro-government actors within the country.

The main reason behind this ongoing campaign is both trivial and ironic: Azatutyun is the largest media outlet in Armenia that provides balanced and non-partisan news coverage. The very attacks by government officials serve as proof of this. The fact that opposition figures are given a platform to voice their criticism of government policies is perceived as partisanship. Criticism of the government’s actions is deemed unacceptable. In other words, the upholding of basic journalistic principles has been weaponized and turned into an accusation of bias.

It is also worth noting that just weeks before these attacks, Azatutyun faced backlash from the opposition after publishing a report on the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace talks, which challenged the former ruling elites’ narratives on the issue.

The ruling party’s attacks against Azatutyun and other independent media outlets align with the growing global trend of demonizing the press. Having found a conducive international environment, the ruling party has now escalated these attacks into the public domain. The language and tone used by high-ranking officials indicate a clear intent to smear journalists and media organizations. This, in turn, reflects the values of these officials—values that are clearly not democratic.

In an environment of political and media polarization, Azatutyun and other independent outlets play a crucial role in informing the public and holding the government accountable. In this sense, attacks against independent media should be seen as direct assaults on Armenia's prospects for democratic consolidation and treated accordingly.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/820009/targeting-the-free-press-the-ruling-partys-smear-campaign-against-azatutyun/>

25 February 2025 —

Freedom of Speech on Trial: The Case of Edgar Ghazaryan



By Tigran Grigoryan

The Armenian government’s treatment of opposition figures continues to raise concerns about freedom of expression and political repression. The latest case involves Edgar Ghazaryan, a former high-ranking official, ex-ambassador to Poland, and now a vocal government critic through his YouTube platform. Ghazaryan faces criminal charges over statements deemed defamatory, with potential consequences that may even include imprisonment.

Ghazaryan has been [accused](#) of spreading defamatory information about Constitutional Court judges. Investigators allege that his statements contained “offensive language” and damaging claims, leading to formal charges. As part of the legal proceedings, the court has already partially [restricted](#) his right to public speech, including the right to express opinions about judges, investigators, prosecutors, or bailiffs until the case is concluded.

The core of the case revolves around Ghazaryan’s criticisms of a Constitutional Court ruling that assessed the role and significance of Armenia’s Declaration of Independence in the country’s legal framework. According to Ghazaryan, the ruling favored Azerbaijan and Turkey’s narratives—a claim that led to his strong public condemnation of the decision and the officials involved.

Silencing a Government Critic?

Ghazaryan has long been an outspoken critic of the Armenian government, frequently

denouncing its policies and actions on social media and in public statements. He is also known for his harsh and controversial statements, sometimes bordering on conspiracy theories. His political activity has sparked debate within civil society about the role of activists in speaking out against prosecutions of controversial figures.

However, several human rights defenders have unequivocally condemned the criminal case, calling it another attack on freedom of speech. Zaruhi Hovhannisyan [noted](#) in a Facebook post that the space for free expression in Armenia is shrinking day by day. She added:

“This is yet another attempt to silence people, and such court decisions continue to follow one after another. Just 20 days ago, on February 2, a similar restriction on freedom of speech was imposed on Gharib Babayan, prohibiting him from making public statements. In this information age, how many more people do you plan to silence with such decisions?”

The honorary president of the Yerevan Press Club, Boris Navasardyan, [stated](#) that the court’s decision against Edgar Ghazaryan once again proves that both Armenia’s legislation and its interpretation by the courts contain numerous contradictions and uncertainties regarding guarantees of freedom of speech.

Double Standards in Free Speech?

Other critics have highlighted double standards in the state institutions’ approach to free speech. While Ghazaryan faces potential imprisonment for his remarks, various pro-government figures make similar statements without facing legal consequences.

According to human rights advocates, this double standard undermines the credibility of the government’s claims that it does not interfere in criminal cases. They argue that the selective enforcement of speech-related laws is a clear sign of political bias.

As Armenia continues its post-revolutionary democratic trajectory, cases like Ghazaryan’s serve as a litmus test for the government’s commitment to fundamental freedoms. The selective prosecution of opposition figures raises serious concerns about political pluralism, freedom of expression, and rule of law in the country.

This case also highlights a persistent dilemma for civil society and pro-democracy actors: should they be equally vocal in defending democratic principles when individuals known for divisive rhetoric and, at times, disinformation face state persecution? The answer is clear— independent and pro-democracy actors must speak out, even if they strongly disagree with the targeted individuals. Failing to do so risks compromising their integrity. Moreover, turning a blind eye to the weaponization and abuse of the legal system in one case only paves the way for its expansion against other groups and individuals.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/819209/freedom-of-speech-on-trial-the-case-of-edgar-ghazaryan/>

18 February 2025 —

Hybrid Threats vs. Freedom of Expression: Examining the Prosecution of Gharib Babayan



By Tigran Grigoryan

On February 1, the Armenian media landscape was shaken by the news that a 70-year-old professor from Nagorno-Karabakh, Gharib Babayan, who had recently posted a video on his Facebook page showing a group of ethnic Azerbaijanis from Iran singing a song titled “Karabakh”, was under investigation. In his post, Babayan expressed outrage over the inaction of law enforcement agencies. Babayan wrote:

“Disgrace. A group of Azerbaijanis in the central square of Yerevan singing the Karabakh song in Azerbaijani. Where is our brave police? Or can they only beat the mothers of our fallen soldiers in Yerablur?”

Can you imagine what would happen in Baku if the same number of young Armenians sang in Armenian, even a non-patriotic song? What is happening in Armenia, people? What have these corrupt criminals in power turned our country into, that Azerbaijanis behave so audaciously and impudently in the center of Yerevan?

Why are Turks and Azerbaijanis freely visiting Armenia and behaving so insolently—one day showing the Grey Wolves symbol in Tsitsernakaberd, and the next day singing the Karabakh song in their language in the center of Yerevan?

Armenians in Armenia, what is happening to you, why are you silent, why are you tolerating all

the disgraceful actions of these treacherous and sold-out authorities against you? Until when will you tolerate and stay silent? Disgrace.”

After that post, a criminal case [was opened](#) against Gharib Babayan under Article 329, Part 2, Point 3 of the Criminal Code (public speech aimed at inciting hatred, discrimination, intolerance, or hostility, as well as distributing materials or objects for this purpose).

Notably, in its [official statement](#) on the case, the Investigative Committee accused Babayan of *“spreading materials and making public speeches aimed at inciting and promoting hatred, intolerance, and hostility toward the authorities of the Republic of Armenia and the officers of the Armenian police based on political and other views, as well as personal and social circumstances.”*

The same day, a request was made for Babayan’s arrest, but the judge ultimately [decided](#) to impose administrative oversight instead, limiting Babayan’s right to freely express his views in public.

The case was met with unanimous criticism from Armenia’s human rights community. Human rights advocate Araks Melkonyan [condemned](#) the prosecution as a disgrace and an act of lawlessness, while human rights defender Zaruhi Hovhannisyan [described](#) it as an obvious suppression of free speech.

It is evident that while Babayan’s rhetoric was controversial, the criminal case against him is a dangerous overreach. The Armenian government’s response raises troubling concerns about the suppression of speech and the weaponization of vaguely defined legal provisions to silence dissent.

This criminal case also reflects the Armenian government’s broader perceptions about the need to combat hybrid threats—an interpretation confirmed by Prime Minister Pashinyan himself in a recent [press conference](#). Pashinyan claimed that the publication of the video featuring the performance of the Azerbaijani song was part of a hybrid operation intended to damage Armenia’s relations with Iran.

A recent [report](#) by Armenia’s newly established Foreign Intelligence Service identified information and hybrid threats as major risks to the country’s security in 2025. However, the fight against such threats raises serious concerns about potential conflicts with fundamental rights, particularly freedom of expression. Suppressing speech or prosecuting individuals under vague or overly broad legal provisions can set a dangerous precedent, stifling dissent and eroding democratic principles.

Moreover, if the government abuses or misapplies the law in the name of countering hybrid threats, it risks amplifying the very dangers it seeks to combat. Excessive legal actions can fuel distrust, deepen societal divisions, and even play into the hands of external actors seeking to destabilize Armenia from within. The danger is that any government critic, journalist, or activist

could be prosecuted under the pretext of fighting hybrid threats, turning national security concerns into a tool for silencing opposition.

A measured and rights-respecting approach is crucial to ensuring that efforts to counter hybrid threats do not come at the expense of democratic freedoms. Otherwise, the very institutions meant to protect the country from external manipulation may end up undermining its democracy from within.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/817957/hybrid-threats-vs-freedom-of-expression-examining-the-prosecution-of-gharib-babayan/>

30 January 2025 —

Vilifying the Vulnerable: The Rise of Anti-Refugee Narratives in Armenia



Protester of 'Resistance' movement hold a number of protest actions in the streets of Yerevan demanding the resignation of the RA Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan

By Karena Avedissian

For a recent project on disinformation and hate speech targeting vulnerable groups in Armenia, the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, where I work as Senior Analyst, conducted a focus group with Nagorno-Karabakh refugees. Our goal was to identify the most common stereotypes they face in Armenian society, based on their own experiences. These insights formed the foundation of our report. Below are some of our key findings.

Armenia stands at a crossroads, navigating difficult geopolitical challenges following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and the 2023 fall of Nagorno-Karabakh. In the wake of these shifts, understanding societal narratives becomes essential for revealing the aims and strategies of various political forces.

A key challenge Armenia faces in consolidating its resilience in the face of challenges is the prevalence of disinformation and hate speech, often weaponized by political figures to exploit societal fears and deepen divisions and influence public perceptions of the country's security. These narratives often target vulnerable communities, eroding social cohesion.

Before the 2018 democratic revolution, disinformation campaigns largely focused on marginalized groups, particularly women's rights advocates and the LGBTIQ community. After the revolution, these campaigns shifted toward security issues. Since the fall of Nagorno-

Karabakh in 2023 and the resulting flow of refugees into the country, these refugees have become a primary target of false narratives, portraying them as political threats and outsiders. This stereotyping, although not new, has found fresh ground to flourish due to their increased numbers. Rooted in past political grievances, these narratives depict Karabakh Armenians as deserters or disloyal elements, further marginalizing an already vulnerable population.

The Armenian government and affiliated media outlets have played a significant role in amplifying these stereotypes, using them as political tools to discredit opposition voices. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan himself has made comments that frame Karabakh Armenians as ungrateful and politically destabilizing, further entrenching their marginalization.

For example, in a [press conference on July 25, 2023](#), Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan made divisive comments equating criticism of his leadership by Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians to ingratitude toward Armenia and its people. In stating “by blaming Armenia’s elected leader, who is the person from Artsakh person actually blaming?”, Pashinyan implied that Karabakh Armenians were ungrateful for the support they had received from Armenia over the last three decades. These comments not only delegitimize valid critiques of Pashinyan’s policies but also framed Karabakh Armenians as scapegoats for the broader political and societal challenges facing Armenia.

Ruling party lawmaker Gagik Melkonyan made controversial statements about Karabakh Armenian refugees, [claiming](#) they abandoned their homes and should behave as “guests” in Armenia. While his statements contradict the Armenian government’s official position on integrating Karabakh Armenians as an integral part of society, and despite causing public outrage for this rhetoric, the ruling party has not condemned or distanced itself from Melkonyan’s divisive rhetoric.

Government-affiliated media reports have reinforced these narratives. For instance, on September 18, 2024, [Armtimes published a report](#) highlighting an alleged plot uncovered by Armenia’s National Security Service (NSS) involving individuals accused of planning to seize power in the country. The report repeated the law enforcement agency’s own emphasis that the suspects had ties to Nagorno-Karabakh, stating, “...several Armenian citizens—former Nagorno-Karabakh residents were recruited with the aim of seizing power in Armenia...”

By linking the alleged coup attempt directly to their ties with Nagorno-Karabakh, the narrative provides fuel for public suspicion and fear toward this already vulnerable group. Such framing perpetuates harmful stereotypes of Karabakh Armenians as disloyal and destabilizing elements within Armenian society.

The consequences of these disinformation campaigns are severe. They not only deepen divisions within Armenian society but also hinder democratic resilience, foster exclusion, and make marginalized groups more vulnerable to discrimination and violence. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, involving civil society, independent media, and international actors.

Armenian civil society has already taken steps to counter disinformation and hate speech, with initiatives such as Mediaethics.am promoting ethical journalism and responsible reporting on sensitive issues like refugee integration. However, much more needs to be done to combat the state-sponsored narratives that perpetuate division. Independent media organizations must be empowered to provide accurate, unbiased reporting, while civil society groups should receive greater support to advocate for the rights of marginalized communities.

Given the Armenian government's own role in disseminating disinformation, direct engagement with officials on this matter may yield limited results. However, Armenia's aspiration to strengthen ties with the European Union presents an opportunity for international actors to encourage better governance practices. The EU and other international partners should condition their support on Armenia's commitment to upholding democratic principles, combating hate speech, and fostering social cohesion. Encouraging greater media literacy among the public can also help build resilience against manipulative narratives and reduce the influence of disinformation.

Armenia's path forward is fraught with challenges, but addressing the toxic narratives that fuel division is essential for building a more inclusive and stable society. By supporting independent media, strengthening civil society, and leveraging international partnerships, Armenia can take meaningful steps toward overcoming these obstacles.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/814604/vilifying-the-vulnerable-the-rise-of-anti-refugee-narratives-in-armenia/>

29 January 2025 —

From Ombudspersons to Mayors: The Struggle for Impartiality and Public Trust in Armenia



Garik Sargsyan, the mayor of Vedi, who awarded himself a bonus

By Tigran Grigoryan

The recent confrontation between Armenia’s Human Rights Defender, Anahit Manasyan, and opposition MP Garnik Danielyan has ignited debate over freedom of speech and the independence of the ombudsperson institution. The controversy began with a [Facebook post](#) by Danielyan, in which he criticized Armenia’s penitentiary system and accused the ombudsperson’s office of inaction. Manasyan [responded](#) with a stern warning, suggesting that Danielyan’s actions could be a criminal offense under Armenia’s Criminal Code.

Human rights advocate Zaruhi Hovhannisyan [called](#) the ombudsperson’s response “extremely dangerous and unacceptable.” She argued that invoking the Criminal Code against public criticism undermines freedom of speech and creates a climate of fear. “This restricts freedom of expression and discourages raising legitimate concerns,” Hovhannisyan said.

Hovhannisyan, a member of a public monitoring group overseeing penitentiaries, also highlighted that many of Danielyan’s concerns were valid and unresolved. “The ombudsperson could have addressed these issues without referencing the Criminal Code. Danielyan’s post was not offensive,” she added.

Hovhannisyan criticized the ombudsperson’s statement for lacking neutrality, likening it to a

political actor defending specific interests rather than a neutral institution protecting citizens' rights. "It casts doubt on the ombudsperson's impartiality and its role in safeguarding human rights," she said.

This incident raises concerns about the impartiality of the Human Rights Defender's institution. Manasyan, a former member of Prime Minister Pashinyan's cabinet, has not stood out for harshly criticizing the ruling party, even during instances of blatant violations.

In this case, the potential use of criminal liability in response to criticism threatens public trust in independent institutions and stifles open dialogue. As Armenia continues its democratic journey, it is vital for public institutions to uphold constructive dialogue and mutual respect. The ombudsperson's role must remain impartial, focused on safeguarding citizens' rights rather than engaging in political disputes.

Garik Sargsyan's Self-Rewarding Behavior and the Erosion of Public Trust

In another episode of controversy, troubling [reports have emerged](#) surrounding Garik Sargsyan, the mayor of Vedi and a member of the ruling "Civil Contract" party. During a Vedi municipal council meeting, Sargsyan awarded himself a bonus equivalent to one month's salary for the "proper performance of his duties." Displaying political unity, Sargsyan and other ruling party members voted to approve the bonus scheme, which totaled 1.2 million dram. This included two months' worth of salaries for Sargsyan and similar bonuses for his colleagues.

Hakob Turikyan, a representative of the opposition faction "My Strong Community," condemned the practice, labeling it a recurring tradition in which Sargsyan rewards himself with a double salary at the end of the year. Critics argue that such actions abuse political power for personal enrichment, particularly at a time when many citizens feel alienated from their local government.

Sargsyan's track record as the former governor of Ararat raises further concerns. In his previous role, he awarded himself bonuses that exceeded legal limits, including a 104.5% bonus for himself and his subordinates, despite a legally mandated 100% cap. These actions have sparked public outrage, underscoring broader issues of political elites exploiting their positions for personal gain.

Such behavior erodes public trust in Armenia's institutions. When officials prioritize personal rewards over addressing citizens' needs, they deepen public cynicism. The absence of transparency and accountability exacerbates the divide between the ruling elite and ordinary Armenians.

In defense of Sargsyan, ruling party members like Aramais Grigoryan argued that officials should value their work and be rewarded accordingly. However, this defense highlights the disconnect between the ruling party and the public. For many Armenians, the issue is not whether officials value their contributions but whether such rewards are justifiable in a context where citizens feel their concerns are consistently ignored.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/814283/from-ombudspersons-to-mayors-the-struggle-for-impartiality-and-public-trust-in-armenia/>

23 January 2025 —

Global Democratic Erosion: Implications for Armenia's Future



By Tigran Grigoryan

On October 15, the Investigative Committee of Armenia detained ten clergymen from the Aragatsotn Diocese

Since launching *Democracy Watch* with CivilNet last spring, we have mainly focused on Armenia's domestic challenges and alarming trends. Yet, as academic literature on democratic transitions and consolidation makes clear, a conducive international environment is another critical factor shaping these processes.

During the third wave of democratization, the prospect of integration with the European Economic Community—and later the European Union—provided a powerful incentive for countries undergoing political transitions. Following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, democracy briefly emerged as the only game in town, with no viable political or ideological alternatives.

However, the optimism of the so-called “End of History” was short-lived. The weakening of Western influence and the rise of authoritarian and hybrid regimes have ushered in a new era. Last year, Freedom House reported a decline in democracy for the 20th consecutive year in its *Nations in Transit* report. Furthermore, with the Trump presidency and the rise of right-wing

populism across Europe, we are witnessing a profound shift: the foundational principles of liberal democracy are now under attack in the West itself.

This erosion is not merely reflected in global indices or rankings but also concrete actions and pervasive rhetoric. Advocating for democratic norms in Armenia—such as building strong institutions, combating corruption, separating politics from business, and fostering tolerance for political opponents—becomes increasingly difficult when:

- Unelected tech billionaires wield outsized influence in U.S. policymaking;
- An outgoing president pardons his son while the incumbent president runs the country like a family enterprise; and
- Offensive, divisive rhetoric has become mainstream in political discourse.

These global anti-democratic trends have also penetrated our region. Georgia, once regarded as a beacon of reform and democratization, is undergoing a troubling authoritarian turn. Opposition leaders are attacked on the streets, and independent journalists face prosecution. This reflects a broader phenomenon of authoritarian diffusion and learning that is shaping the political landscape.

In such an environment, safeguarding Armenia's democratic trajectory becomes an increasingly challenging task. With the foundations of democracy weakening in the West and democratic governance deteriorating in the region, Armenia's ruling elites may be tempted to adopt their own selective interpretation of democracy. The persistent belief in some Armenian circles that the ruling party and its leadership, though perhaps incompetent, are fundamentally pro-democracy, is debatable. The troubling trends since the end of the Second Karabakh War—such as overturning multiple local election results through abuse of administrative power and law enforcement or consolidating control over nearly all independent institutions—clearly contradict democratic principles.

The risks are real, and Armenia's democratic success must not be taken for granted. To prevent a backslide, supporting genuinely independent civil society actors and media organizations is vital. These sectors face mounting pressures that demand scrutiny and robust advocacy in the months ahead.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/813568/global-democratic-erosion-implications-for-armenias-future/>

14 January 2025 —

Pashinyan's one-man rule threatens Armenia's democratic development



The 6th Congress of the Civil Contract Party took place at the Sports and Concerts Complex named after K. Demirchyan in Yerevan, Armenia

By Aram Tadevosyan

Armenia entered a phase of democratic transition in 2018, marking some initial achievements – particularly two nationwide elections that were notably free and competitive. However, the country's democratic consolidation faces significant challenges, primarily stemming from Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's increasingly personalistic style of governance.

Democratic theorists, including Samuel Huntington, consider the peaceful transfer of power between different political forces through free and transparent elections at least twice a key indicator of democratic consolidation. Armenia has yet to achieve even a single peaceful transfer of power through elections. Moreover, in the Armenian context, it's difficult to envision a scenario where parties or alliances regularly alternate power through elections. This would require, at minimum, that parties survive losing power without collapse – a common occurrence in Armenia's political landscape.

The current political system in Armenia lacks strong political institutions. For those in power, losing it means not only losing access to resources but also potentially facing political and legal persecution. This threat of criminal prosecution is a significant factor that will likely drive

the ruling party to maintain power at any cost – a particular concern for Pashinyan and his Civil Contract party leadership.

Despite the ruling Civil Contract party's growing influence in the country, it's experiencing inflation rather than strengthening – similar to what happened with the previous Republican Party. Pashinyan's party has failed to overcome the challenge of becoming more than a one-man show, with decision-making concentrated in the hands of a single individual, much like previous ruling parties.

The concentration of power is further reinforced by the Constitution, which grants the Prime Minister extensive authority. While Pashinyan previously criticized this system and promised to dismantle it after taking office, no such reforms have materialized. Instead, he has fully embraced these inherited powers.

The ruling party faces a paradox: while promoting democracy as Armenia's "brand" in a region marked by authoritarianism or democratic backsliding, it creates obstacles for crucial democratic institutions. Key checks and balances – including the judiciary, the presidency, and the Human Rights Defender's office – have come under the ruling party's control in recent years.

This trend intensified following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and subsequent political instability. Rather than strengthening institutions, the government opted for complete control over independent institutions and establishment of a personalistic mode of governance.

Pashinyan's system operates on classic personalistic regime principles:

1. Unpredictability: Frequent government reshuffles and sudden dismissals of high-ranking officials, who may face smear campaigns or criminal prosecution. Policy decisions can be equally unpredictable, with cabinet members forced to adapt to sudden announcements or decisions.

2. Populism: Direct "connection" between the leader and the people, where issues are resolved only through personal intervention. Successes are attributed to the leader while failures are blamed on others. Pashinyan positions himself as a defender of people's interests against "corrupt elites."

3. Absence of influential figures within the ruling party: Zero tolerance for independent-minded individuals, even within the team. The ruling team is staffed with individuals unlikely to develop into political alternatives to the leader.

This personalistic governance style and lack of institutionalized decision-making pose serious challenges for Armenia's democratic development. International practice shows that personalizing democracy and identifying it with specific individuals corrodes democratic institutions. Additionally, these factors are already creating significant problems in security and foreign policy domains, introducing external threats to democratic consolidation.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/812299/pashinyans-one-man-rule-threatens-armenias-democratic-development/>

5 January 2025 —

Russian-Style Propaganda in Armenia: Government Part of the Problem



By Tigran Grigoryan

When I was invited to testify at the U.S. Helsinki Commission’s [congressional hearing](#) on Armenia last September, I drew the attention of the Russian propaganda machine. Posts about the hearing began appearing immediately after the event was announced. One of the largest Russian propaganda Telegram channels, Rybar, shared a [post](#) about the hearing.

After the hearing, pro-Russian Telegram channels in Armenia suddenly became avid followers of my CivilNet podcast on Armenia-Azerbaijan relations and regional developments in the South Caucasus. They somehow drew a connection between my congressional testimony and the topics I discuss weekly on the podcast. For instance, in one [post](#), commonly known facts about the peace process were misrepresented as exclusive information I allegedly obtained during my trip to Washington, D.C. Some of my podcast commentary was blatantly distorted in this and other posts to fit their narrative.

However, pro-Russian Telegram channels are not the only tools to spread disinformation in Armenia. Recently, there has been a surge in anonymous websites that provide no information about their ownership or affiliations. These platforms propagate narratives and fake news targeting various civil society organizations, think tanks, and political figures in Armenia. To amplify their reach, all new posts on these sites are sponsored, enabling them to attract larger audiences.

Notably, the individuals behind these websites exploit democratic buzzwords to attack

democratic actors and processes. For instance, the most visible website of this kind is called fact-check.am. The intent is clear—to lend a veneer of credibility to their malicious campaigns. Fact-checking journalism has been flourishing in Armenia in recent years, making it convenient for these propagandists to associate their outlet with this trusted area of journalistic work, thereby misleading the public and undermining genuine fact-checking efforts.

This particular website published an extensive article about the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, portraying our think tank as a powerful organization with vast resources, allegedly acting on orders from the West. The article was riddled with manipulations and outright falsehoods, much like all the other content on this newly created anonymous website. These pieces are further amplified through paid promotion on its associated social media accounts.

The resurgence of these types of propaganda outlets is a troubling trend for Armenia. Over the past decade, Russia and other authoritarian actors have extensively employed such hybrid tactics to interfere in political processes across various countries. With Armenia's upcoming election season, it is crucial to take proactive measures to counter these malicious campaigns and uncover the individuals or entities behind them. Failing to address this issue could allow disinformation to undermine democratic processes and public trust.

Ideally, the government should take the lead in addressing this issue by developing a robust legal and institutional framework to make the weaponization of such hybrid tactics significantly more difficult. A proactive approach in this area would help safeguard democratic processes and protect society from the harmful effects of disinformation and propaganda.

However, in reality, the government and the ruling party are part of the problem rather than the solution. In 2021, an [investigation](#) by Infocom revealed that Taron Chakhoyan, the deputy head of the prime minister's office, owned several anonymous websites engaged in Russian-style propaganda. The investigation also uncovered that content from these anonymous websites was frequently re-published by media outlets openly owned by members of the ruling party or their family members. This troubling connection highlights the government's complicity in perpetuating disinformation rather than combating it.

Another similarity between the ruling party's approach to propaganda and Russian-style propaganda is how Armenia's Public TV, the country's most popular media outlet, operates. While it is undeniably more open and less vitriolic than Russian TV channels, and it provides some space for genuinely dissenting voices, its reporting style and the format of political talk shows bear a striking resemblance to Russian propaganda outlets. This includes the framing of discussions, selective presentation of facts, and a tendency to amplify narratives that align with the government's agenda.

In conclusion, the growing prevalence of disinformation and propaganda in Armenia, fueled by both external actors and domestic institutions, poses a significant threat to the country's democratic development. The convergence of Russian-style hybrid tactics, with government

complicity and the misuse of public platforms, creates an environment where truth is distorted and trust in democratic processes is eroded. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that includes fostering media literacy, ensuring accountability, and promoting genuine democratic practices. Only through transparency, resilience, and collective effort can Armenia safeguard its democratic future and counter the dangerous influence of propaganda.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/811191/russian-style-propaganda-in-armenia-government-part-of-the-problem/>

20 December 2024 —

Demonizing media: Yerevan Mayor's populist tactic is a threat to democracy



Campaign posters ahead of the Mayoral elections in Yerevan, Armenia

By Tigran Grigoryan and Tatev Baghdasaryan

On December 18, Factor TV hosted a [live debate](#) between Yerevan Mayor Tigran Avinyan and his predecessor, Hayk Marutyan. During the debate, Marutyan criticized Avinyan's conduct in office, particularly highlighting investigative [findings](#) from the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). These findings, authored by CivilNet journalists Mkrtych Karapetyan and Ani Grigoryan, examined the dealings of a company owned by Avinyan's family, which benefited from public funds through direct payments after Avinyan assumed public office following the Velvet Revolution in 2018. For a detailed overview of the controversies surrounding Tigran Avinyan, refer to one of our recent *Democracy Watch* [reports](#).

In response, Avinyan adopted a defensive stance, announcing that he had filed a lawsuit against CivilNet over the investigative report. He further exacerbated the controversy by referring to CivilNet and Armenian media outlets collectively as “a large garbage dump.”

This inflammatory remark triggered widespread condemnation from Armenia's civil society and media organizations. Shushan Doydoyan, President of the Freedom of Information Center, took to Facebook to [criticize](#) Avinyan, denouncing his inability to accept criticism. Doydoyan argued that, as a public official, the mayor should prioritize accountability and offer transparent

explanations for his actions rather than resorting to threats against journalists for carrying out their professional responsibilities.

Arthur Papyan, president of the Yerevan Press Club, has [criticized](#) Tigran Avinyan's statement, deeming it unacceptable. He pointed out that referring to a media outlet in such a derogatory manner is already problematic and believes the issue, along with CivilNet's publication, should be addressed by the leadership of the ruling Civil Contract party. According to Papyan, Civil Contract needs to clarify its position on Avinyan's comments and actions.

Papyan also urged Avinyan to settle the matter without resorting to the courts, suggesting alternative channels such as the Information Disputes Council and the Media Ethics Observatory. He added that, in some cases, courts seek advisory opinions from the Information Disputes Council.

This is not the first time a high-ranking official in Armenia has attempted to discredit the media. In 2021, Alen Simonyan, the Speaker of the Parliament, notoriously [referred to Hetq](#), Armenia's leading investigative journalism outlet, as "yellow press" when questioned about his lavish expenses during a family vacation on the Greek islands.

The weaponization of legal proceedings to suppress free media and political opponents is a well-documented strategy employed by hybrid and authoritarian regimes. Governments in countries like the Philippines, Singapore, and Hungary have perfected this toolkit to silence critics in the press. For example, Maria Ressa, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and editor-in-chief of *Rappler*, has faced charges of cyber libel brought by Philippine authorities, severely hindering her journalistic efforts. Similar tactics are employed by regimes worldwide to stifle dissent and undermine press freedom.

Another common tactic employed by populist leaders and politicians worldwide is launching verbal attacks against journalists and respected media outlets. These attacks aim to delegitimize the media, framing journalists as dishonest actors and casting the press as a "public enemy" within the populist "us versus them" narrative. By demonizing the media, populists seek to erode public trust in independent journalism and divert attention from their own failings or controversies.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/810227/demonizing-media-yerevan-mayors-populist-tactic-is-a-threat-to-democracy/>

13 December 2024 —

Old Practices Back: The Curious Case of Hovik Aghazaryan



The first session of the RA National Assembly's 8th convocation continues in the hall of the RA NA building

By Tatev Baghdasaryan and Tigran Grigoryan

In the ongoing controversy surrounding Hovik Aghazaryan, a former member of Armenia's ruling Civil Contract party, allegations of blackmail and political pressure have emerged. During a recent [interview](#), Aghazaryan claimed that “influential figures” threatened to reveal intimate details of his private life unless he resigns from his parliamentary position. Among the alleged details is inappropriate correspondence via a messaging app with an unidentified woman, which Aghazaryan indirectly acknowledged.

Aghazaryan's sensitive information was compromised after he voluntarily submitted his phone to the Special Investigative Committee in the aftermath of his infamous [public confrontation](#) in parliament with Argishti Kyaramyan.

Private information of an intimate nature from Aghazaryan's phone, along with other details, was soon accessed by Prime Minister Pashinyan and members of the ruling Civil Contract party's board. Pashinyan justified this by asserting that the information posed national security risks, so it had to be sent to him. Other members of the Civil Contract party later [stated](#) that Aghazaryan had been sharing details from the faction's closed-door meetings with third

parties.

However, despite these developments, Aghazaryan has refused to step down, a decision that ultimately led to his [expulsion](#) from the Civil Contract party. He maintains that these actions are a coercive tactic aimed at forcing his resignation but has remained steadfast in retaining his seat in parliament.

Aghazaryan's case is particularly notable, as he was the only one among the Civil Contract party members and six high-ranking officials who were [pressured](#) by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to resign last month to refuse to comply with the demand.

The revelation of intimate information about Aghazaryan has captured public and media attention, but it has also raised critical questions about the independence of law enforcement bodies and the integrity of the ruling party. It is clear that neither the prime minister nor other members of the ruling party had the right to access the private information on Aghazaryan's phone. Even if the phone contained compromising details suggesting or proving unlawful actions by Aghazaryan, it is solely the prerogative of law enforcement institutions to handle such information.

It is also clear that the compromising content on Aghazaryan's phone would not have surfaced if he had complied with the prime minister's "request" to resign. The weaponization of sensitive information and incriminating material for domestic political purposes was emblematic of the political system that existed prior to the Velvet Revolution of 2018. This very public use of damaging information by the ruling party against its former affiliate is another troubling sign that old practices are resurfacing.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/809603/old-practices-back-the-curious-case-of-hovik-aghazaryan/>

9 December 2024 —

Public office, private gains: The controversial record of Yerevan's mayor



City Council session took place at the Municipality of Yerevan

By Tatev Baghdasaryan

A week ago, it was [reported](#) that last month, Yerevan Mayor Tigran Avinyan took off on a week-long official visit to Los Angeles, USA, accompanied by a delegation of nine people. To organize the trip, the Yerevan Municipality signed a direct, non-competitive procurement contract worth around USD 31,800 with *Luxury Voyage* LLC. The expenses included eight economy-class tickets totaling roughly USD 12,300, while Avinyan's single business-class ticket cost an eye-watering USD 19,560. The Municipality has a [history](#) of engaging with *Luxury Voyage* LLC; records indicate at least seven transactions with that company during 2023-2024. These repeated dealings have raised serious questions about the potential misuse of public funds and suspicions of favoritism and corruption within the Municipality's procurement practices.

This finding has emerged amid the Yerevan Municipality's decision to [raise the transport fee](#) in the city. Municipal officials justified this decision by citing the lack of resources and the need for efficiency in the public transportation system. The mayor's actions starkly contrast the municipality's rhetoric and reasoning.

This is not the first time that the former Deputy Prime Minister of Armenia and current Mayor of Yerevan, Tigran Avinyan, has faced public scrutiny for his actions. He seems to have drawn more attention for his controversies than his policies. From allegations of corruption and questionable family business dealings to breaches of the code of conduct, his political career

has been rife with contention. Numerous investigative journalists have delved into the controversies surrounding Avinyan. Here is a comprehensive overview of everything you need to know about Yerevan's Mayor.

Business ties and family involvement

One of the most notable controversies stems from Avinyan's connection to *Irrigate LLC*, a company he founded in 2010. Specializing in irrigation systems and landscape design, the company [benefited](#) significantly from government programs during Avinyan's political tenure. In 2018, while serving as Deputy Prime Minister, *Irrigate LLC* received a grant of approximately USD 35,000 from the Agricultural Development Fund to develop dried fruit production. This grant came at a time when Avinyan was both a public official and the company's director.

Further scrutiny revealed that nine beneficiaries of a state agricultural program subcontracted work to *Irrigate LLC*. Five beneficiaries received roughly \$620,000 in [direct payments](#) to establish intensively cultivated orchards. This raised concerns about the potential misuse of state resources for personal or familial gain.

Ethical breaches and investigations

Avinyan's dual role as Deputy Mayor of Yerevan and board chairman for the *Armenian National Interests Fund (ANIF)* also raised red flags. The Corruption Prevention Commission (CPC) initiated [proceedings](#), questioning the legality of holding both positions simultaneously. This prompted a criminal investigation into potential violations of public service laws. Under his leadership, ANIF faced allegations of mismanagement and misuse of funds. In April 2023, criminal proceedings were launched to investigate potential abuses of office and large-scale misappropriation within the fund. As of November 2024, these investigations remain ongoing, with [no charges filed](#).

In June 2024, Avinyan faced [proceedings](#) from the CPC over aggressive remarks and insults he made during a Yerevan City Council session, which were deemed to violate the code of conduct for public officials.

A sobering reality

Avinyan's controversies reflect broader challenges for Armenia's governance under Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's administration. Pashinyan came to power promising to root out corruption and establish transparency, yet allegations against his high-ranking officials like Avinyan threaten to undermine public trust. Actions that suggest misuse of power and influence weaken citizens' faith in their elected leaders and democratic institutions, posing significant risks to the country's political stability. As investigations continue and public scrutiny grows, the question remains: how can Armenia protect its democracy from being eroded by those entrusted to uphold it?

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/808693/public-office-private-gains-the-controversial-record-of-yerevans-mayor/>

3 December 2024 —

Loyalty vs. impartiality: The government’s move undermines judicial independence



By Tatev Baghdasaryan

Alexander Sirunyan, the ruling party’s nominee for a non-judge position on the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), has recently become one of the most controversial figures in Armenian public life. His nomination has sparked widespread criticism and raised serious concerns about the potential impact on the independence and integrity of the judiciary.

The SJC is constitutionally tasked with ensuring the independence of courts and judges. However, Sirunyan’s nomination has caused alarm due to his membership in the ruling “[Civil Contract](#)” party and his vocal support for Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. There are serious concerns that his appointment would further erode the separation of powers and further politicize the judiciary, which should function as an impartial arbiter in a democratic society. As highlighted in last week’s [Democracy Watch](#) article, the resignation of Karen Andreasyan, the previous Chairman of the SJC, under pressure from the Prime Minister, already cast doubt on the political independence of the council. Now, Sirunyan’s nomination intensifies these concerns, raising the specter of judicial bias and political infiltration at the highest levels.

To understand the controversy surrounding Sirunyan’s candidacy, one only needs to examine his past public behavior. Although he recently deleted content from his Facebook account—likely in preparation for his nomination—archived screenshots reveal a troubling record of offensive and divisive statements.

Sirunyan has repeatedly [used profanity and vulgar language on social media](#), often targeting his political opponents. This earned him a [disciplinary case](#) from Armenia's Chamber of Advocates in 2019. Beyond mere incivility, his statements reflect a deeper issue: open hostility toward vulnerable groups, including Armenians displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh. In several posts, Sirunyan made derogatory remarks about Karabakh Armenians, exhibiting a troubling form of xenophobia. This rhetoric not only perpetuates harmful stereotypes but also deepens societal divisions at a time when unity is critically needed.

In one widely circulated screenshot, Sirunyan targets a Karabakh Armenian protester for participating in an opposition rally, using profane language and perpetuating harmful stereotypes. His remarks include highly offensive language aimed at demeaning both the protester and his wife, alongside accusations of exploiting state resources—a harmful narrative implicitly extended to Karabakh Armenians as a whole. These statements reveal not only a troubling lack of empathy but also a disturbing willingness to vilify a vulnerable group.

In another instance, Sirunyan uses aggressive language to defend the Prime Minister's family, even issuing threats and launching vulgar attacks on those who targeted the Prime Minister's son. This behavior not only exposes his combative and coarse demeanor but also reveals an unwavering loyalty to the Prime Minister and his family. Such actions raise significant concerns about his ability to maintain impartiality in a judicial position.

You can view the troubling screenshots through this [link](#). Please be advised that they contain offensive and profane content.

A group of independent civil society organizations [issued a statement](#) urging the ruling party to withdraw Sirunyan's nomination. The statement emphasizes that this nomination represents a concerning trend of prioritizing political expediency in judicial appointments. It warns that such practices undermine the judiciary's core principle of depoliticization, jeopardize the High Judicial Council's reputation, erode public trust, and diminish operational efficiency, ultimately threatening the independence of the entire judicial system.

Sirunyan's nomination highlights a dual concern in Armenia's democratic trajectory: the systemic appointment of ruling party loyalists to independent institutions and the inconsistency with the government's stated goal of integrating Karabakh Armenian refugees. Selecting an individual with a history of spreading hatred and stereotypes against this vulnerable community risks normalizing such behavior, undermining both social cohesion and trust in democratic institutions.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/807872/loyalty-vs-impartiality-the-governments-move-undermines-judicial-independence/>

26 November 2024 —

Resignations in Armenia Spark Debate over Judicial Independence and Democratic Integrity



By Tigran Grigoryan and Tatev Baghdasaryan

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government has faced a wave of resignations over the past two weeks, with several ministers and officials stepping down and some positions already filled. However, the circumstances surrounding these resignations have ignited controversy and raised serious constitutional concerns.

In an interview with Public Television on Friday, November 22, Pashinyan admitted that all the resignations occurred at [his request](#). The officials who stepped down include two ministers and four chairpersons of state institutions.

The most contentious resignation was that of [Karen Andriasyan](#), Chairman of the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC). Legal experts argue that this action constitutes a violation of multiple constitutional provisions.

Armenia's Constitution establishes the separation of powers—legislative, executive, and judicial—to ensure a system of checks and balances. The judiciary is an independent branch, safeguarded against interference from the executive. [Experts](#) view Pashinyan's direct request for Andriasyan's resignation as a breach of constitutional principles, including Article 4, which outlines the principle of separation of powers and Article 441. This article stipulates that public officials are prohibited from taking actions beyond their authority that cause significant harm

to the lawful interests of society and the state.

Pashinyan expressed dissatisfaction with certain court decisions, [citing a desire for greater judicial independence](#) as the justification for Andreasyan's dismissal. However, his actions starkly contradict this stated rationale. By requesting Andreasyan's resignation, Pashinyan exceeded his authority as Prime Minister, undermining the very independence he purported to advocate. This interference underscores the fragility of Armenia's judicial system and its susceptibility to external pressures.

Karen Andreasyan's appointment to this position was also met with significant controversy, given his prior role as a minister in Pashinyan's cabinet and his affiliation with the ruling party. This not only raised concerns but also represented a breach of the principles of separation of powers and judicial independence.

Apart from Andreasyan's case, the resignation of Sasun Khachatryan, head of the Anti-Corruption Committee (formerly Special Investigative Committee), has also raised concerns about the legality of Prime Minister Pashinyan's actions. As with the previous resignation, Pashinyan sent a text message "requesting" Khachatryan's resignation. The Special Investigative Committee is responsible for investigating crimes committed by state officials, including high-ranking ones. Given the circumstances surrounding Khachatryan's resignation, serious doubts have emerged about the committee's ability to effectively fulfill its core mandate, particularly when it involves members of Armenia's ruling political circle.

These developments once again highlight a troubling aspect of Armenia's democratic trajectory: weak institutions and a lack of political will for meaningful institutionalization. The ruling party's absolute control over independent institutions, coupled with the prime minister's dominant influence, poses significant threats to the country's prospects for democratic consolidation. This personalized style of governance creates fertile ground for further democratic backsliding and an even greater concentration of power in the hands of the ruling party.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/806912/resignations-in-armenia-spark-debate-over-judicial-independence-and-democratic-integrity/>

18 November 2024 —

Trump's Return: Global Authoritarianism and Armenia's Struggle for Democracy



By Karena Avedissian

When Donald Trump won the presidential election in 2016, I was devastated—I didn't get out of bed for two days, so unfathomable was the idea that an autocratic-minded serial sexual assaulter would be leading the U.S. After this election, however, despite the specter of harsher right-wing policies, accelerated dismantling of democratic institutions, and long-term harm to vulnerable communities, I got up and went to work as usual.

For a long time, but particularly since 2016, America's democracy has been showing signs of deep dysfunction and fundamental flaws. The social safety net has eroded, destabilizing lives as housing and food costs rise, wages stagnate, and job security weakens. Meanwhile, the U.S. funds violent conflicts abroad, including Israel's ongoing genocide against Palestinians, sustained by American military aid. Women's and LGBTQ+ rights are under threat, while police budgets grow at the expense of social programs.

The establishment Democratic Party, which purports to offer an alternative to this reality—has failed to grasp changing global and domestic dynamics, articulate a vision that addresses these shifts, or meet the needs of a wide range of Americans. And it's their failure to see the deep cultural divide – those of social liberals and social conservatives – and how these values become support for authoritarian-populists all over the world has brought us to this moment.

America is not an outlier. Disillusioned electorates and democratic backsliding are on the rise worldwide. In 2022, Italy elected far-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, from a party with [neo-fascist roots](#). That same year, Marine Le Pen secured around [40% of the vote](#) in France, improving on her 2017 performance, while in Sweden, a [far-right party became the second-largest](#) in parliament.

Countries like Armenia, with fledgling democracies heavily reliant on Western support for democratic development, are particularly vulnerable to the ripple effects of democratic decline in the West. Domestically, Armenia is already showing some of the same troubling warning signs seen there. For decades, the West has funneled hundreds of millions of dollars into strengthening political parties, supporting grassroots NGOs, and empowering women to run for office in developing democracies—an approach that has been crucial in contexts with limited local funding.

However, the growing instability and volatility of Western democracies make it increasingly clear that countries like Armenia cannot depend on external support alone to build resilient democratic institutions.

Apathy's Toll: How “Lesser Evil” Politics Erode Democracy

Trump may have won the election, but it's perhaps more accurate to view this as a loss for Kamala Harris and the Democratic Party, whose leadership has struggled to address the material challenges that impact Americans daily, and relying on identity-focused messaging (“we’re not the cartoonishly evil party!”) instead of advocating for substantial change. This “lesser evil” approach, without a compelling platform, has failed to energize voters, resulting in apathy and [lower turnout in 2024 compared to 2020](#).

This situation bears a resemblance to Pashinyan’s approach in Armenia. Being marginally more acceptable than Armenia’s former, corrupt regimes is insufficient to inspire voters for long. Political apathy in Armenia is at record highs; [a recent IRI survey](#) showed that nearly two-thirds of Armenian residents distrust all politicians. What’s more, the risk of entrenched political apathy in Armenia is being seriously underestimated. If Pashinyan’s government relies solely on being “better than the past” without delivering tangible reforms or addressing widespread grievances, his government risks alienating the public and eroding trust in democratic governance as a whole. When citizens feel their leaders are only marginally better from corrupt predecessors, they may lose faith in the democratic process itself, viewing elections as ineffectual and governance as unresponsive.

This apathy creates fertile ground for authoritarianism or populism, as disillusioned voters may turn to leaders who promise radical change, even at the expense of democratic principles. High distrust in politicians also makes it harder to build robust, representative institutions, weakens civil society’s influence, and leaves Armenia more vulnerable to external pressures, especially from authoritarian regimes in the region that oppose democratization.

In Armenia, political apathy and a lack of institutionalized politics that provide people with a genuine sense of agency and choice have given rise to figures like video blogger Vardan Ghukasyan, known as “Dog.” A former policeman, Ghukasyan leverages his network of informants and uses his platform to build an audience, often engaging in sensationalism, extortion, and blackmail. His popularity has surged to rival that of opposition parties, but he is merely filling the gap left by a public disengaged from formal politics and a disliked political establishment.

These trends risk further destabilizing Armenia’s democracy. As more people feel unheard by mainstream politics, they become increasingly susceptible to those promising transgressive politics—even if that transgression means eroding democratic norms that these people feel never benefited them anyway.

The Global Threat of Trump’s Return

Trump’s return to office poses a heightened risk of spreading authoritarianism globally, especially for fledgling democracies like Armenia, which are vulnerable without Euro-Atlantic support. His tenure will almost certainly reduce U.S.’s commitment to democracy and human rights—despite the country’s already inconsistent stance on these issues—and embolden autocratic regimes like Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Russia. It may also decrease funding for democracy programs and technical assistance aimed at strengthening democratic institutions and civil society.

Armenia, as the only country in the South Caucasus actively working to democratize and strengthen ties with the West, stands as a counterpoint to regional autocracies like Russia and Azerbaijan. However, Armenia’s democratic aspirations are becoming increasingly isolated. Georgia, once a fellow aspirant, has experienced significant democratic backsliding for years, culminating in their [recent elections](#). The country’s ruling party, Georgian Dream, has expanded control over state institutions, interfered with civil society work and independent media, and committed election fraud.

A potential Trump presidency could reinforce the narrative among the electorates of these fledgling democracies that populist, authoritarian ideologies are viable alternatives to democracy. This erosion of global democratic norms—which, notably, also occurred under Democratic administrations with similar foreign policies and disregard for human rights abroad—may undermine Armenia’s democratic momentum.

Reimagining Armenia’s Political Future: Beyond the Failed Status Quo

Since Armenia’s 2018 Velvet Revolution, the country has made modest but meaningful democratic progress. However, following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, there are worrying signs of democratic backsliding, leading my colleague Tigran Grigoryan and me to launch *Democracy Watch*. Given the current fragility within Western democracies, it is naïve to expect steadfast support for Armenia’s democratic journey from abroad.

For decades, Armenia has stood out in the post-Soviet space for its independent grassroots social movements and robust civic activism. Yet, since the defeat in 2020 and amid ongoing threats from Azerbaijan, Armenia's once-active civic landscape has dwindled in the face of heightened political polarization. This decline in civic engagement signals a critical moment for Armenia's democratic resilience.

Ultimately, sustainable democracy must be cultivated from within, rooted in local grassroots efforts. Lasting democratic resilience depends on internal legitimacy, community ownership, and alignment with the nation's unique context. While support from the West provides valuable resources and advocacy, over-reliance on external actors risks undermining the organic growth essential to a stable democracy.

Armenia needs its people to ensure space for good-faith debate and mechanisms to hold its government accountable. The spirit of mutual aid, seen in Western communities striving for grassroots democracy, already exists naturally in Armenian society, where people look after one another and engage face-to-face. In such close-knit communities, it becomes far more challenging to dehumanize others when daily interactions bring people together across differences. This civic engagement offers a form of agency beyond voting, where people's actions have immediate and meaningful impacts on their communities.

Armenia's leadership, much like the American Democratic Party, continues to operate as though the old status quo is still intact. But that era is over. In the West, Trump's victories are not just the result of material grievances but also of deeply entrenched culture wars. Across the globe, socially conservative voters feel increasingly alienated, turning to populist leaders who claim to speak for them while the political establishment remains out of touch.

Armenia's way forward in this new reality is fraught and requires careful navigation. The challenges are significant: addressing political apathy, rebuilding trust in institutions, and fostering a political culture that encourages genuine representation and accountability. Without meaningful reform, Armenia risks deepening public disillusionment, leaving space for opportunistic figures or external pressures to exploit the vacuum.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/806072/trumps-return-global-authoritarianism-and-armenias-struggle-for-democracy/>

31 October 2024 —

Instrumentalized and Alienated: Nagorno-Karabakh Armenian Refugees in Armenia



By Karena Avedissian

The discourse around Armenian refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh in Armenia following the region’s ethnic cleansing by Azerbaijan in September 2023 highlights the troubling tendency for vulnerable refugee populations to be politicized. The plight of these refugees—marginalized by virtue of their displacement—has been overshadowed by how various actors in Armenia, from government officials to civil society figures and even foreign diplomatic missions, have used them as a political tool.

This instrumentalization isn’t unique to Armenia, but its local manifestations reveal unsettling patterns, from targeted rhetoric to symbolic photo-ops. In a time of national trauma, one might hope for compassion and genuine support, yet the response has too often been marred by blame-shifting, stereotyping, and divisive narratives.

Officials’ Participation

Within Armenia since 2020, political figures have begun framing Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians as “the other”—a population somehow separate from and even burdensome to the rest of Armenian society. This dynamic was illustrated in [comments](#) made by Gagik Melkonyan, a Member of Parliament from the ruling party, who suggested that Karabakh Armenian refugees “gave up their land” and should “act like guests” in Armenia.

Such statements do more than offend; they signal an official endorsement of distrust and

resentment towards an already traumatized group, casting Karabakh Armenians as outsiders somehow unprepared or ill-fit for full social integration. The influence of these narratives is amplified when government-aligned media outlets like Civic.am further propagate the idea that Karabakh Armenians are particularly sympathetic to Russia—a nation that, amid recent events, has become deeply unpopular among the Armenian public. This kind of selective stereotyping stokes division, indirectly validating xenophobic sentiments under the guise of nationalism or state loyalty.

A former ruling party member, Tatul Asilyan, posted a social media [poll](#) asking if Artsakh refugees should leave Armenia, transforming the trauma of displacement into a public debate. Yet despite the clear inflammatory nature of these statements, there has been no legal or institutional action to counter the hate speech directed at Karabakh Armenians. The absence of consequences suggests a worrying tolerance for discriminatory rhetoric that risks normalizing prejudice against refugees.

Negative Stereotypes Not New

The negative framing of NK Armenians has deep-seated historical roots, partly shaped by Armenia’s political past. The country’s unpopular second and third presidents, both originally from Nagorno-Karabakh, left a legacy of resentment that has fueled stereotypes about NK Armenians as politically insular or beholden to foreign powers.

However, as my colleague Tigran Grigoryan has [asserted](#), these stereotypes were previously limited to societal discourse and were not legitimized by officials or civil society figures. Today, these narratives have disturbingly moved from the fringes to the mainstream, bringing with them the weight of state endorsement.

Foreign Diplomatic Missions: Token Support and Photo-Ops

Foreign embassies in Armenia have also engaged in more subtle, but no less problematic, forms of instrumentalizing Karabakh Armenians. Despite having done little to prevent the displacement of these refugees or to alleviate their suffering, some diplomatic missions appear keen to publicize token gestures of support.

A recent example involved a foreign delegation on a working visit to Armenia, which met with numerous experts and traveled to various Armenian regions. Notably, in their public communications, the only photographs released highlighted their meeting with Karabakh Armenian representatives—a symbolic nod to the refugees without evidence of substantial action.

This selective visibility suggests a performative approach: an eagerness to show the world they’re “engaging” with Karabakh Armenians, but without a tangible policy backing it up. These diplomatic gestures, however well-intentioned they might appear, should go beyond symbolic visits and focus on providing direct assistance and advocating for policies that ensure the refugees’ long-term security and well-being.

Armenian Civil Society: Complicity and Scapegoating

Some Armenian civil society members, who could have defended Karabakh Armenians' interests in the country, have been disappointingly complicit in its marginalization. In meetings with foreign delegations, some prominent civil society figures have echoed damaging stereotypes, labeling Karabakh Armenians as potential threats to Armenia's democratic development. This aligns with the government's attempts to deflect criticism by using the community as scapegoats, painting them as barriers to democratic progress rather than victims in need of protection.

Such rhetoric from civil society is doubly damaging. Not only does it reinforce negative stereotypes, but it also undermines the very principles of inclusivity and empathy that should be guiding civil society organizations.

The Moral and Ethical Imperative to Defend Karabakh Armenians

Instrumentalizing any vulnerable population is corrosive to democracy, but to target refugees—a group already stripped of stability and agency—is morally indefensible. For Karabakh Armenians, this instrumentalization adds insult to injury, reducing them to political tools, scapegoats, and photo-ops for a range of actors. Far from helping Karabakh Armenians integrate and find security in Armenia, this dynamic leaves them alienated and distrusted.

A more compassionate and just approach would involve rejecting divisive narratives, fostering genuine integration, and providing Karabakh Armenians with both the material support and social acceptance they need to rebuild their lives.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/803708/instrumentalized-and-alienated-nagorno-karabakh-armenian-refugees-in-armenia/>

25 October 2024 —

Parliamentary Chaos: Heated Exchange in Armenia’s National Assembly Raises Concerns



By Tigran Grigoryan and Karena Avedissian

Last week, an incident in Armenia’s National Assembly overshadowed proceedings when a [heated exchange erupted](#) between Argishti Kyaramyan, head of the Investigative Committee, and Hovik Aghazaryan, a ruling party MP. The altercation began during Kyaramyan’s speech when an individual sitting at the ruling party’s benches heckled him. Kyaramyan responded directly to the heckler, asking, “Did you say something, deputy in black clothing?” His choice of words and tone drew criticism from fellow MPs.

In particular, Aghazaryan criticized Kyaramyan’s language and inquired about the status of the criminal case initiated by the Investigative Committee against his son. When Aghazaryan sat down next to Kyaramyan, the two engaged in a heated argument. Kyaramyan, responding to criticism of his earlier remarks, doubled down: “There is nobody on Earth who can heckle me. If there were, it means my reaction was too mild—there will be further reactions in the future.”

He then rhetorically asked Aghazaryan why at least two individuals had approached him seeking favors related to the criminal case against his son. This exchange nearly escalated into a physical confrontation, with Kyaramyan and Aghazaryan trading insults.

Although the ruling Civil Contract party has announced an investigation into the actions of Kyaramyan and Aghazaryan, this incident raises significant concerns that extend far beyond

mere intra-party disciplinary issues and deep into the foundations of Armenia's democratic institutions and principles of good governance.

First, Kyaramyan's behavior in Parliament reflects a clear and troubling disrespect for one of the Republic's most important political institutions. The National Assembly, as the primary legislative body, should be a forum for respectful debate and thoughtful policymaking. When a high-ranking official like Kyaramyan, who heads the Investigative Committee, engages in such confrontational and unprofessional conduct, it undermines the dignity and effectiveness of the parliamentary process.

Additionally, this incident signifies a concerning disregard for the fundamental principle of civilian oversight of key law-enforcement institutions. In a healthy democracy, law enforcement and investigative bodies must remain accountable to elected representatives and, by extension, to the public. Kyaramyan's aggressive stance towards elected MPs suggests a reluctance to accept this crucial checks and balances system.

Moreover, Kyaramyan's claim regarding unidentified individuals attempting to influence the criminal case against Aghazaryan's son has not elicited any response from other law enforcement agencies.

This silence is deeply troubling and raises several critical questions. If Kyaramyan's allegations are true, it points to potential corruption within the political system that demands immediate investigation. Conversely, if these claims are unfounded, it suggests a willingness by a high-ranking official to make serious accusations without evidence, which is equally concerning.

This incident is not Kyaramyan's first brush with scandal. In June 2023, Tigran Arakelyan, a former member of the Armenian National Congress party, [accused](#) officials of the Investigative Committee—including its head, Argishti Kyaramyan—of torture. Arakelyan alleged mistreatment during interrogation, citing threats against his family and physical abuse involving electric shocks. The Investigative Committee promptly denied these claims. However, following a complaint from the Human Rights Defender, criminal proceedings were initiated to investigate the alleged torture.

In a related development, shortly after the altercation in the National Assembly, [reports emerged](#) that Armenia's anti-corruption committee had closed the proceedings involving Kyaramyan.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/802716/parliamentary-chaos-heated-exchange-in-armenias-national-assembly-raises-concerns/>

18 October 2024 —

The Thin Line Between Public Service and Politics: Taron Chakhoyan's Case



By Tatev Baghdasaryan and Karena Avedissian

Recent concerns surrounding Taron Chakhoyan, Deputy Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, have sparked debate over his compliance with the [Armenian Code of Public Service](#). The issues primarily relate to his social media activity and alleged ties to media outlets affiliated to the ruling party.

The position of Deputy Chief of Staff is a high-ranking government role that demands strict political neutrality for public servants. Maintaining this neutrality is crucial for preserving public trust and ensuring that public servants act impartially, without aligning themselves with any political faction. Although the Deputy Chief of Staff is tasked with supporting the administration's policies, adherence to political neutrality (Article 27 Law of the Republic of Armenia on Public Service), is important to prevent perceptions of favoritism or bias. When public officials engage in politically charged commentary or promote partisan content, it risks eroding public confidence in the government's fairness.

While Armenia's public service law does not explicitly regulate social media use, the broader principles of political neutrality still extend to online behavior. Even on personal platforms, public servants' statements can be perceived as representing their office, blurring the lines between private and professional conduct. [Taron Chakhoyan's Facebook posts](#), which frequently target opposition figures while openly supporting the current administration,

illustrate this dynamic. With a verified account followed by 44,000 people, Chakhoyan's profile lists the Armenian Government as his workplace, and he posts almost daily, both during and after official work hours.

Here are some examples:

1. **“Five people are singing six songs, seven people are demanding a change of government. The massive rally as of 18:35.”** *(Posted on October 6th, 2024 at 18:45 o'clock)*

This sarcastic post mocks opposition protests, discrediting their efforts. By ridiculing the opposition, Chakhoyan casts doubt on his political neutrality.

2. **“Displaying a map of Armenia without Syunik is unacceptable, even if it's done for satire and mockery. [...] Despite being given all opportunities, some still failed to transition from ‘Super Mama’ to becoming a politician.”** *(Posted on October 11th, 2024 at 12:49 o'clock)*

In this post, Chakhoyan targets former Yerevan mayor Hayk Marutyan over a comedy show, invoking concerns about Armenia's territorial integrity. The reference to “Super Mama,” a film in which Marutyan played the lead role, adds a personal element to the attack. This blending of personal and political commentary further calls into question his adherence to the standards of political neutrality required by public service.

3. **“The lying priest cannot rid himself of the former leaders, because it is the former leaders who gave birth to, nurtured, and raised him.”** *(Posted on October 4th, 2024 at 13:23 o'clock)*

Chakhoyan frequently targets Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, whom he consistently refers to as the “lying priest.” In this post, he accuses Galstanyan of being a “puppet” of former Presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan. This post mirrors the government's broader narrative, painting opposition figures and their allies as remnants of the old regime. By engaging in such public attacks, Chakhoyan positions himself as an active participant in political discourse, further blurring the line between his role as a public servant and a ruling party advocate.

4. **“The opposition's behavior resembles rats fleeing a sinking ship; [...] The responsibility for the failed anti-state movement lies with all of you—those engaged in politics, the clergy, the Dashnaks, the ATM robbers, the thieves who plundered Artsakh, Serzh, Rob, and their satellites...”** *(Posted on September 27th, 2024 at 10:33 o'clock)*

In this post, Chakhoyan uses dehumanizing language by comparing opposition members to “rats” and assigning collective blame for what he describes as a “failed anti-state movement.” Such rhetoric not only discredits the opposition but also deepens political polarization, raising concerns about his compliance with the law's requirement for neutrality. By engaging in inflammatory language, Chakhoyan further undermines the principle of impartiality expected from a senior public servant.

5. **“The result of freezing the lying priest was this—he ended up in the hospital. P.S. Has the one hour promised on May 9 still not passed?”** (Posted on August 21th, 2024 at 15:15 o'clock)

This post mocks Archbishop Galstanyan’s health condition and takes a sarcastic jab at the opposition movement’s previous failed promise to remove Prime Minister Pashinyan from office within an hour on May 9. Chakhoyan’s tone here is dismissive and belittling. This rhetoric is particularly problematic given his role in shaping public perceptions and contributing to divisive political discourse.

In his October 14 [interview with Petros Ghazaryan](#) of Public TV, Chakhoyan reiterated these claims, while also attacking politicians Hayk Marutyan and Artur Vanetsyan. He argued that both figures rose to prominence due to their association with Prime Minister Pashinyan, and now that they have joined the opposition, they have lost their relevance. When questioned about the government’s declining popularity and its policies on Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, Chakhoyan defended the administration, stating that it is focused on normalizing relations with Armenia’s neighbors. He denied any government responsibility for the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh or the ethnic cleansing of Armenians in the region, instead accusing the opposition, including figures like Marutyan, of adopting Azerbaijani narratives when addressing these issues.

Chakhoyan’s breach of neutrality extends beyond his social media activity, with an investigation by [Infocom](#) allegedly linking him to politically biased websites like [armenianews.net](#) and [medianews.site](#). These platforms frequently publish content favorable to the government while criticizing opposition figures. Domain checks revealed that both websites are operated by a single individual, suggesting a coordinated effort to spread pro-government propaganda.

[Infocom](#)’s investigation also revealed that [FreeNews](#), another pro-government site, is managed by Mariam Margaryan, the wife of Alen Simonyan, Speaker of the National Assembly. These sites often operate in tandem, republishing each other’s content—a pattern indicative of a concerted propaganda campaign targeting government opponents.

Mariam Margaryan remains registered as the owner of [FreeNews](#). Although Chakhoyan’s connections to [armenianews.net](#) and [medianews.site](#) appear to have been scrubbed, with management of the sites reportedly transferred to individuals in Moscow and Crowley Vale, Australia, the investigation underscores the existence of a coordinated network disseminating pro-government narratives.

The law is clear: public servants are required to maintain political neutrality to uphold the integrity of their office and preserve public trust. Chakhoyan’s social media activities and his alleged connections to politically biased media outlets, appear to contradict these principles. Even if these actions occur outside of his formal duties, they cast doubt about his ability to remain impartial as Deputy Chief of Staff.

Moreover, Chakhoyan's active participation in political discourse may violate Article 33 of Armenia's public service law, creating a conflict of interest. By endorsing media that support the government's agenda and openly criticizing opposition figures, he is violating the boundary between his professional responsibilities and personal political views.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/801766/the-thin-line-between-public-service-and-politics-taron-chakhoyans-case/>

15 October 2024 —

Why Armenian Anti-Government Movements Fail: The Need for a Viable Opposition in Armenia



By Tigran Grigoryan

This month, Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan attempted to reinvigorate his Tavush for Homeland movement with a rally in Yerevan's Republic Square. Galstanyan had launched the movement in April, initially to protest the government's approach to delimitation with Azerbaijan, and later to demand Prime Minister Pashinyan's resignation.

However, the rally signaled the movement's decline. [It attracted only around 2,000 people](#)—a stark contrast to the movement's first rally on May 9, which drew over 30,000 participants, making it the largest anti-government gathering since the end of the Second Karabakh War.

The movement's prospects further diminished after Archbishop Galstanyan's disastrous interview with Public TV's Petros Ghazaryan. Following the October 2 rally, the Archbishop led his supporters to Public TV, demanding airtime to address the nation. After some negotiating with the channel's leadership, he was granted the opportunity, on the condition that Ghazaryan would interview him after his address. However, after his 12-minute address, [Galstanyan struggled to answer Ghazaryan's questions](#), raising serious doubts about his political competence.

Archbishop Galstanyan's movement failed for several reasons, but a fundamental one stands out: the inability of most opposition elites to grasp the factors behind the 2018 Velvet Revolution's success. The prevailing narrative in these circles is that the 2018 revolution was the result of political technologies and manipulation, rather than genuine public discontent. This misconception has underpinned all opposition movements since the 2020 war, rendering their success unlikely.

This flawed assumption has led leaders of all post-2020 movements to mimic Nikol Pashinyan's 2018 tactics—road blockades, attempts to enter government buildings, adoption of official movement songs, and even use of similar rhetoric. However, merely copying these political strategies has neither secured public support nor achieved any of their goals.

A significant consequence of misunderstanding the Velvet Revolution is protest leaders' reluctance to distance themselves from Armenia's former ruling elites. Recently, Archbishop Galstanyan met with both former presidents, Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, publicly refusing to disassociate from them in the name of national unity. However, most Armenians view these former elites as part of the problem, not the solution. Galstanyan's and other protest leaders' failure to recognize this sentiment alienates many potential supporters.

The third reason Galstanyan and others fail to mobilize large segments of society and successfully challenge the government is their inability to present realistic alternatives to the ruling party's policies. Instead, they resort to populist rhetoric, such as promising to return to Artsakh through Voskepar. Faced with two competing brands of populism, the Armenian public remains politically apathetic.

One of the biggest hurdles to Armenia's democratic progress is the lack of a viable, pro-democracy opposition. Since 2020, opposition movements have struggled to distance themselves from unpopular former elites or present a realistic, actionable agenda that reflects current realities and that addresses the Armenian public's concerns.

The ruling party remains secure in its position. Without facing a credible challenge from a strong, competent opposition, they have consolidated power and taken control of independent state institutions. They have capitalized on the absence of a capable opposition to present themselves as Armenia's only hope for democracy, while actively discrediting any potential democratic alternatives.

This situation poses significant long-term risks to Armenia's democratic development. A thriving democracy requires more than just free and fair elections—it needs a competitive political landscape with meaningful alternatives. Without a strong opposition, Armenia's political system could gradually shift toward an unhealthy concentration of power, undermining democratic principles. A vibrant and credible opposition is crucial for maintaining checks and balances, ensuring accountability, and safeguarding democratic governance.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/801137/why-armenian-anti-government-movements-fail-the-need-for-a-viable-opposition-in-armenia/>

30 September 2024 —

Armenia’s Ruling Party Resists Amending Controversial Constitutional Clause



By Tigran Grigoryan and Karena Avedissian

On September 19, the Constitutional Reform Council debated and ultimately rejected a [proposal by the Union of Informed Citizens](#) (UIC) to remove the constitutional provision that guarantees a stable majority in parliament before the 2026 elections. This provision, a central issue in discussions on electoral reforms, ensures a parliamentary majority even if a party’s initial voter support is low.

Under Armenia’s 2015 Constitution, if no party wins over 50% of the seats in the National Assembly and the qualifying parties cannot form a coalition, a second round of elections is triggered. In this runoff, the two leading parties from the first round compete, with the winner receiving extra mandates to secure a majority in parliament, regardless of their initial vote share.

This system enables a party that initially garnered only 25-30% of the vote to potentially gain a majority and govern independently. Critics argue that this arrangement disproportionately

boosts the influence of a party with relatively limited public backing, raising concerns about fair representation.

Stable majority parliamentary systems face several criticisms, as outlined in the Union of Informed Citizens' (UIC) proposal:

- It contradicts the essence of parliamentarism, as the party receiving bonus seats is represented in parliament greater than its share of voter support.
- It creates a parliament that does not proportionally reflect the views of different segments of society, instead operating on a “winner takes all” principle.
- Political forces are not incentivized to negotiate and engage in dialogue.
- When parliament no longer proportionally represents society, public discontent often spills into the streets as parliament ceases to be a proportionally representative body of society.

The stable majority clause is widely regarded as one of the most problematic elements of Armenia's constitution, believed to have been designed for former President Serzh Sargsyan. This provision was intended to enable the ruling party, which lacked broad public legitimacy, to retain power despite limited voter support.

Current Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and his party were vocal critics of the constitution, pledging to amend it both during and after the revolution. However, six years have passed since the revolution, and this promise has yet to be fulfilled. Facing a substantial decline in popularity, Nikol Pashinyan and his team are hesitant to eliminate this principle ahead of the 2026 parliamentary elections, prioritizing the party's interests over necessary—and promised—constitutional reforms.

A key concern is that mechanisms intended to incorporate civil society input on major policies—particularly regarding political representation—do not function as intended. The government often rejects proposals that are perceived as threats to their power. As a result, while these mechanisms create the appearance of a deliberative, democratic process, they ultimately fail to lead to meaningful change.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/799013/armenias-ruling-party-resists-amending-controversial-constitutional-clause/>

29 September 2024 —

Building Empathy Bridges: Lessons from a Bookstore Event in Washington for Armenia’s Polarized Society



By Tigran Grigoryan

On a recent work trip to Washington D.C.—my first visit to the United States—I found myself in my hotel room browsing online for interesting places to explore. I discovered Politics and Prose, a well-known bookstore, and decided to check it out. While looking through the shelves, I noticed the staff setting up for an event. A quick Google search revealed it was a book launch by the acclaimed sociologist Arlie Hochschild. Pretending I had come for the event, I took a seat to listen in.

For the past 7-8 years Hochschild has studied Donald Trump’s core electorate, seeking to understand their motivations. Her previous book on the subject, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, became a New York Times bestseller. Her latest book, *Stolen Pride: Loss, Shame, and the Rise of the Right*, is the culmination of seven years of research, including extensive interviews in Pike County, Kentucky’s poorest congressional district, which historically voted Democratic but shifted to supporting Trump over the past decade.

It was fascinating to stumble upon an event in the heart of America where a room full of liberals sincerely tried to understand the perspectives and grievances of millions with whom they

disagreed—without questioning their integrity or resorting to labels. Since Trump’s first presidency, numerous scholars have pursued this same goal of bridging divides.

In past [Democracy Watch](#) reports, we identified growing political polarization as a major obstacle to democratic consolidation in Armenia. The mutual efforts of the ruling party and the parliamentary opposition to delegitimize each other have created fertile ground for anti-democratic and unconstitutional actions.

The targeting and name-calling of political opponents extends beyond political elites to their supporters as well. Since the 2018 Velvet Revolution, opposition propagandists have introduced the term “filth” (ժելիս) into Armenian public discourse to describe Nikol Pashinyan’s core electorate, implying they are uneducated and lack values. Meanwhile, government propagandists frame opposition supporters or rally participants as corrupt and “anti-sovereignty”.

Amid this toxic political climate, there is a noticeable lack of genuine effort within civil society and the expert community to understand the motivations behind the political preferences of these groups. Black-and-white thinking is pervasive, fueled partly by the appalling quality of social science education in modern-day Armenia and partly by the increasing politicization and polarization within these sectors.

The unwillingness to understand the grievances and motivations of those with differing political views only deepens societal divisions and increases the risk of political violence. Scholars like Arlie Hochschild and Robert Wuthnow, author of *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America*, have sought to initiate conversations in the United States on the importance of addressing these issues.

Hochschild, in particular, emphasizes the need to be culturally bilingual and to build “empathy bridges” between groups with polarized political views. A central message of her latest book is that Democrats and Republicans share far more common ground than they realize. This is certainly true for Armenian society as well. Although the simplistic, dichotomous narrative of good versus evil benefits the main political actors, the priority of civil society and all those invested in the success of Armenia’s democratic experiment should be to foster dialogue and understanding across these polarized political fault lines.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/798812/building-empathy-bridges-lessons-from-a-bookstore-event-in-washington-for-armenias-polarized-society/>

29 September 2024 —

The Cost of Compliance: Armenian Civil Society’s Missed Responsibilities



By Karena Avedissian

For the last few years, many Armenians have felt alone — left to contend with increasingly belligerent threats and the consequences of ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh. But, paradoxically, the country is receiving more interest from Western capitals than it has in its entire history, with hundreds of millions of dollars being spent on joint programs, institution building and bolstering civil society.

As a senior analyst at the Regional Center for Democracy and Security (RCDS), I’ve been part of dozens of meetings between Armenian civil society organizations and our Western partners who support these projects. Typically, we analysts take turns briefing the partners on significant developments in the country, helping them understand the context. But Armenia’s civil society seems often to misunderstand why they’re there in the first place.

Armenia is currently undergoing a rapid political shift away from Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) towards the West. Unlike Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, which have been on this path for longer, many Western partners remain relatively unfamiliar with Armenia’s context and often harbor misguided assumptions about it. While they meet with government officials to get an official perspective, they also rely on independent civil society members and experts to gain a fuller understanding of the situation. This system is structured

to provide these Western partners with unbiased, in-depth analysis of Armenia’s primary challenges and needs, offering crucial context that goes beyond what they hear from state representatives.

All too often, well-meaning NGOs will uncritically portray Armenia’s democratic progress: everything is framed as going well, and the deeper issues are glossed over. Another issue is the portrayal of the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians — which we will explore in a later edition of Democracy Watch.

At these meetings, I’ve found a conspicuous downplaying of certain worrying trends in Armenia’s democratic landscape. These include growing cases of [political repression](#), [police misconduct](#), [lack of transparency on policies](#) that impact citizens, lack of transparency on [officials’ expenditures](#), and [harassment](#) of journalists.

Undoubtedly, Armenia is making objective democratic progress in many ways, and there is much to praise. But, these issues aren’t isolated incidents—they represent a growing trend towards problematic norms. At these meetings, Armenian civil society members tend to downplay these developments, treating them as minor disruptions in an otherwise positive narrative. While I wouldn’t categorize the current government as undemocratic, there are concerning trends that, if left unchecked, could lead to significant problems.

At a meeting at a foreign diplomatic mission in Armenia, a colleague—one of the few critical voices in civil society—highlighted problems with police reform. The foreign diplomatic representative was visibly surprised, having received a far rosier depiction of Armenia’s progress. Her reaction revealed that Western partners are being given incomplete or overly optimistic assessments by my colleagues.

During a recent trip to Germany, I noticed some colleagues again presenting an overly optimistic picture to Western partners, omitting important challenges that needed addressing. When the German colleagues asked for feedback on their own role, I pointed out specific instances where the EU had fallen short. My colleagues’ reaction was almost as if I had committed a *faux pas* or been impolite. While they weren’t defending the ruling party in this case, it still reflected a mindset reminiscent of Soviet-era approaches—where meetings were more about networking and superficial goodwill than about meaningful, substantive discussions. This reaction underscores a fundamental misunderstanding of our role. Being critical isn’t rude; it’s a core part of our job.

Several factors contribute to the tendency to put a positive spin on the ruling party’s actions. Following Armenia’s 2018 democratic revolution, the threat of the old regime’s return was real. Many engaged in self-censorship, fearing that the revolution’s gains were fragile and reversible. At the time, maintaining a united front seemed necessary to keep the old guard at bay.

However, that was over four years ago. Much has changed since then. The loss of the 2020 war, the 2022 attacks, and the fall of Artsakh have left the government insecure, rather than fragile.

While the ruling party's hold on power might have seemed entrenched enough to begin to invite criticism, this insecurity now manifests in ways inconsistent with democratic norms.

Now, many still refrain from criticizing the government, but it's not for fear that the old guard might come back, but for fear of being associated with it – something these civil society members use to malign their more critical colleagues behind closed doors. So many Armenians find the main opposition factions distasteful and odious that they prefer to remain silent about the ruling party's worrying actions. This silence, unfortunately, only hinders the growth of a more popular and representative opposition.

Another factor contributing to experts' uncritical stance is the migration of many civil society members into government positions following the 2018 revolution. Those remaining in civil society often hesitate to criticize their former colleagues and friends now in government. Personal relationships and social networks continue to exert significant influence.

Perhaps the least forgivable reason is that some nominally independent civil society members align themselves with government narratives to secure privileged positions. By offering favorable portrayals, or repeating government narratives, they are rewarded with air time on Public TV, exclusive access to insider information, and invited to closed-door government meetings. In short, they are compensated for their lack of criticism. This arrangement creates a symbiotic relationship where the expert gains prestige and access, while the government benefits from seemingly independent validation of its actions and policies.

There was a time when Georgia was widely seen as a democratic success story. However, as the country gradually backslid, many European partners, who had invested heavily in its democratic development, largely overlooked the warning signs—after all, “their (democratic) man” was in power. By the time they realized the extent of the decline, it was too late. Armenia now faces a similar risk.

The dangers of this uncritical approach are significant. When civil society fails to provide rigorous, objective analysis, it contributes to misguided policy decisions. Western partners are currently investing substantial resources in Armenia, but without candid feedback from independent voices, they risk overlooking key facts on the ground. This could leave them unprepared for future challenges, such as declines in social cohesion, economic growth, or human rights protections.

Armenia's democratic development faces real challenges, and by being yes-men-at-all-costs, Armenian civil society is effectively ignoring these issues, revealing a fundamental misunderstanding about their role. Armenia – and yes, this government – has made strides in democratic development. But without facing up to reality, that progress could soon stop.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/798803/the-cost-of-compliance-armenian-civil-societys-missed-responsibilities/>

25 September 2024 —

Hate speech against Karabakh Armenian refugees as a domestic political tool in Armenia



On the day of the proclamation of the Republic of Artsakh in Yerevan, at the permanent representation of the Republic of Artsakh

By Tigran Grigoryan

In Democracy Watch’s previous [report](#) my colleague Karena Avedissian and I referred to remarks by Gagik Melkonyan, a ruling party lawmaker, who said, “The people of Karabakh should conduct themselves as guests in Armenia.” Melkonyan’s statement, which has not been condemned by the ruling party, is not just a case of an irresponsible official making a statement, but rather part of a political pattern and deliberate policy, which aims to gain political dividends by instrumentalizing ‘Karabakhophobia’ and legitimizing anti-Karabakh narratives.

Stereotypes and hate speech about Artsakh people have existed in Armenian society for at least the last two decades. The main reason was probably that the second and third presidents of Armenia were originally from Nagorno-Karabakh, and associations with the vicious phenomena of their administration automatically spread to all Artsakh people. However, until

recently, all these narratives existed only in everyday conversations, not in politics, and were publicly voiced only by marginal groups and figures.

This situation gradually began to change after the Armenian authorities' policy shift on the Karabakh issue. By this, I mean Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's policy of "lowering the bar" on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh and all subsequent developments, the peak of which was the ethnic cleansing of Artsakh last September.

The influx of more than 100,000 refugees into Armenia caused serious political fears among Armenia's ruling elite. The main fear of the authorities and in their close circles was that the majority of refugees who have lost everything will be actively involved in internal political processes, strengthening various opposition movements.

It is precisely because of these fears that the Armenian authorities and media outlets and public figures under their control began to legitimize the anti-Karabakh narratives mentioned above, taking them from everyday life to national politics. As a result, by bringing these stereotypes to an official level, government propaganda multiplied their negative impact, targeting the most vulnerable group living in Armenia.

In this process, the media outlets under the direct control of the ruling party show particular zeal. We can include Public Television in this list, which, as mentioned in a [previous Democracy Watch report](#), was criticized by the Media Ethics Monitoring Body for violating journalistic norms while covering opposition demonstrations and for spreading hate speech against Artsakh people.

Another media outlet under the control of the ruling party, civic.am, also stands out for spreading anti-Karabakh sentiments. The main message of this outlet and similar media outlets to the Armenian public is that refugees from Artsakh, who are said to have special sympathy for Russia, are the bulk body of demonstrators that take part in the opposition demonstrations.

The instrumentalization of this type of hate speech and propaganda narratives for domestic political purposes deepens the contradictions within society and increases the likelihood refugees will be targeted.

Armenia's law enforcement agencies are also inactive. No proceedings due to the public manifestation of hate speech directed against Artsakh refugees has been initiated by the law enforcement system as of today. During the last few months, one of the former members of the ruling party has been spreading open hatred toward Artsakh people. One of his [last posts](#), in particular, is a poll asking users if they would like the refugees from Artsakh to leave Armenia. Despite the existence of similar posts by this and many other users, none of them have been held accountable for spreading hate.

It is noteworthy that, when government critics commit hate speech, [criminal prosecutions](#) are launched.

At this stage, Armenian society, and even its most active parts, are trying to turn a blind eye to this problem. The most common approach is that this is a marginal phenomenon that does not deserve public attention. Many deny the existence of a problem at all, noting that such behavior in social networks is mainly exhibited by fake accounts.

However, the main difference between this wave of hate speech and previous ones is that in this case, there is a clear political agenda. Targeting Artsakh refugees gives propagandists an opportunity to find a scapegoat for the government's failures in recent years and deflect public discontent against the government.

Targeting one group through propaganda also enables the ruling party to ensure internal political mobilization. These trends, if ignored, can undermine public solidarity in the country and complicate the process of democratic consolidation. After all, the presence of “us versus them” politics may be the first signs of democratic regression and the rise of populist authoritarianism.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/798112/hate-speech-against-karabakh-armenian-refugees-as-a-domestic-political-tool-in-armenia/>

17 September 2024 —

Targeting the opposition: A growing trend at Yerevan’s city hall



By Tigran Grigoryan and Karena Avedissian

Local Level Political Suppression

An opposition member of Yerevan’s city council Grigor Yeritsyan was relieved of his duties last week, with ruling “Civil Contract” party cited repeated absences from the meetings of the Standing Committee on Legal Affairs of the Council as the reason for his removal.

Yeritsyan has dismissed the claims as false and politically motivated, saying that he and his colleagues plan to challenge the decision in court.

This follows a similar incident eight months ago, when former Mayor Hayk Marutyan, now the leader of the opposition National Progress faction, was also ousted from city hall by the ruling party, also for absenteeism.

This reflects a growing and concerning trend in Armenia’s political landscape: The ruling party is increasingly employing sophisticated legal maneuvering and administrative resources to remove or disqualify opposition figures at the local level. This strategy, often executed through seemingly legitimate bureaucratic processes, allows the ruling party to consolidate power by eliminating potential challengers before they can gain significant traction or influence.

It is important to highlight that both Marutyan and Yeritsyan represent pro-democracy forces and stand in opposition to the ruling party. By suppressing their activities, the ruling party is in effect eliminating potential challengers who could offer a democratic alternative, and in doing

so, is consolidating its hold on power. The current dichotomy of “previous regime vs. current government” represents an expedient way for the ruling party to present itself as the only democratic option in Armenia.

Targeting Karabakh Armenian Refugees

In an interview last week with the media outlet 24News, ruling party lawmaker Gagik Melkonyan made false and hostile statements [targeting Karabakh Armenian refugees](#). His remarks included a claim that Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh had voluntarily given up their land and should now conduct themselves as guests in Armenia.

Melkonyan’s statement is problematic on multiple levels. Firstly, it propagates a false narrative about the complex situation surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its aftermath. Additionally, his statement constitutes hate speech against a vulnerable refugee population, which raises serious ethical concerns.

Moreover, Melkonyan’s statement directly contradicts the official position of the Armenian government, which has emphasized its commitment to integrating Karabakh Armenian refugees into Armenian society. This requires accepting them in society not as temporary guests, but as an integral part of the nation. This contradiction between a ruling party member’s statement and the government’s declared policy has led to consternation among both the refugee community and the wider Armenian public.

The implications of such statements extend beyond simple political disagreements. Melkonyan’s divisive rhetoric risks exacerbating existing societal tensions — with potentially harmful outcomes for an at-risk group like refugees — and highlights the importance of engaging in responsible public discourse.

Despite the public outcry over Melkonyan’s statements, the ruling party has neither condemned nor distanced itself from him or his rhetoric.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/797071/targeting-the-opposition-a-growing-trend-at-yerevans-city-hall/>

10 September 2024 —

Armenia needs political competition based on policies, not personalities



By Karena Avedissian

In online Armenian spaces, it is not uncommon to see political forces labeling people they disagree with “Turks,” “traitors,” or “Russian agents.” Some degree of polarization is typical in any society, but at a certain point, when it becomes about “us versus them,” it becomes toxic and signals something more troubling — fundamental problems in democratic development.

The loss of Artsakh in 2020-2023, has shaken Armenians’ national identity, which is now undergoing major shifts, with many collective core assumptions being rapidly broken. While a new shared vision is still taking shape, different political forces are struggling to influence what comes next. At times like this, windows of opportunity appear and disappear, with different factions trying new approaches to see what sticks.

Finding compromise and agreeing on an acceptable middle ground is easier when discussing social spending or investment priorities, but when it comes to the existential threats that Armenia is dealing with, the stakes are higher, and compromise is more elusive. The polarization here becomes “either/or,” based on seemingly unchangeable identities.

Even in fully democratic societies, a certain degree of polarization is not only normal, but also beneficial. It offers voters clear programmatic alternatives, which increases political engagement. However, polarization becomes toxic when it moves beyond genuine political

debate. In those cases, societal differences increasingly align along one single axis to two camps with an overriding “us versus them” mentality.

When my colleague Tigran Grigoryan and I started *Democracy Watch* in April, our goal was to examine troubling trends in Armenia’s democratic institution building in a systematic way. Since the 2018 democratic revolution, Armenia has made commendable progress in democratic development, and we welcome these advancements. However, following the 2020 Karabakh War, we noticed a shift toward concerning trends that we felt many of our peers were not adequately highlighting, both for domestic and international audiences.

One of the main problems we have noticed in our *Democracy Watch* work is the problem of toxic, polarizing rhetoric, both from the ruling party and from the main opposition factions. This rhetoric is not only polarizing, but also reinforces personalistic politics —characteristic for Armenia, but also one of the biggest hindrances to the health of the country’s democratic institutions.

Why focus on democratic institution building? Because it establishes transparent, accountable, and rules-based systems that protect citizens’ rights and promote good governance. These institutions ensure that political decisions are made through established procedures, nurturing a political culture of consistency, accountability, and predictability. These are precisely the aspects of long-term state resilience and capacity. In contrast, personalistic politics, where leadership is driven by the charisma or power of individual figures, can lead to arbitrary rule and predatory elite practices, undermining the mechanisms in place to support and protect citizens.

This summer, Armenia’s ruling Civil Contract party launched a [coordinated information campaign](#) targeting the leaders of the protest movement that emerged in April to oppose the transfer of four abandoned villages to Azerbaijan. These protesters, who quickly began calling for Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s resignation, were portrayed on social media as acting on Russia’s behalf. Users affiliated with Civil Contract claimed, without evidence, that Bagrat Galstanyan, the archbishop-turned-protest leader, was backed by former President Robert Kocharyan and the Kremlin. Some of the images shared depicted the archbishop photoshopped alongside prominent Russian figures, including President Vladimir Putin and media executive Margarita Simonyan.

While the protest movement may have some connections to Russian interests, it is both misleading and factually incorrect to brand it as entirely orchestrated by Moscow. Simply put, this disinformation campaign was aimed at delegitimizing political opponents and deflecting criticism of policies related to Armenia’s national security.

But crucially, it is not just the ruling party engaging in such rhetoric. In June, Galstanyan’s account on the social platform X [posted](#) a bizarrely worded, yet unmistakable, threat: “No matter where you try to escape, we will find you and come. If necessary, we will come alone; if necessary, we will come with others. We will come on a donkey or by metro if needed.”

There is much to criticize Pashinyan for, but resorting to confronting individuals instead of focusing on policies, principles, or expounding on how to do politics differently is counterproductive. What is the vision for positive change? What are the steps to achieve it? Rather than presenting a constructive alternative, Galstanyan's statements make personal threats, creating divisive, hostile exchanges.

Both the ruling party's smear tactics and the opposition's confrontational rhetoric highlight the erosion of democratic norms for dialogue. The political arena is becoming a battleground for personal attacks, intimidation, and disinformation, all of which endanger Armenia's state resilience by inflaming divisions and undermining the integrity of its institutions.

Armenia needs political competition based on policies and ideas, rather than personalities. This is essential for long-term democratic consolidation because it fosters an environment where citizens can trust that their voices will be heard, regardless of who is in power. Moreover, institutions outlast individual leaders, providing stability and continuity in governance that personalistic politics cannot. Institutions help to channel political conflict into peaceful contestation, reducing the risk of violence and authoritarian backsliding.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/796351/armenia-needs-political-competition-based-on-policies-not-personalities/>

2 September 2024 —

A Rising Tide of Conflicts of Interest in Armenia's Governance



Illustration generated by AI.

By Tigran Grigoryan and Karena Avedissian

The state-run Corruption Prevention Commission has fined the heads of Hrazdan and Artashat towns 300,000 drams (approximately \$776) each for failing to submit required written statements about conflicts of interest. These community leaders signed contracts with relatives and politically connected individuals without notifying the Commission, as mandated by law.

An earlier [investigation](#) by the media organization *Hetq* revealed that, over the past few years, the Hrazdan municipality has repeatedly awarded contracts to companies owned by relatives of Mayor Sevak Mikaelyan, including his brother and in-laws. These contracts, involving significant sums for services like supplying gas and repairing roads, have sparked concerns about potential conflicts of interest. Despite these family connections, municipal officials deny any wrongdoing, claiming that the tender processes were transparent and compliant with the law.

Meanwhile, in Artashat, Narek Baghdasaryan, a city council member from the Civil Contract party, has been awarded road construction subsidy projects totaling approximately 723 million drams (\$1.87 million) over the past two years.

Party and personal connections also appear to have influenced decisions in the administration

for the Ararat region, where Artashat is located. In 2023, Ararat regional administration staff signed a contract worth approximately 109 million drams (\$282,000) with Garant Capital Construction LLC, a company owned by Baghdasaryan, for construction work in Artashat.

In another similar case, [CivilNet reported](#) last month that Sokrat Pambukchyan, the 71-year-old retired father of Yerevan Deputy Mayor Armen Pambukchyan, acquired 40 hectares of land in Shenik village in Armavir province. The elder Pambukchyan also started a new company, Sungarden, to set up an orchard on this plot, marking his first venture into business as either a director or shareholder. Pambukchyan secured a loan of 1.5 billion drams (\$3.88 million) to develop his orchard and attributes his success to his business plan.

Another [Hetq investigation](#) last month revealed that a Los Angeles property owned by the sister of Environment Minister Hakob Simidyan also serves as the registered address for the U.S. branches of the My Step Foundation, a charity headed by the prime minister's wife, and First Channel America, a subsidiary of Armenian Public Television.

These developments all highlight a concerning trend in Armenia: Ruling party officials disregarding apparent conflicts of interest.

Such behavior undermines the principles of transparency and accountability crucial for Armenia's democratic growth. It erodes public trust in institutions, hampering efforts to build a fair and just society. When political power is misused for personal gain, it weakens the rule of law and fosters an environment where governance is driven by favoritism rather than merit.

Public TV Promotes Hate Speech

The Media Ethics Observatory, an independent watchdog, issued a [decision](#) last month finding that Armenian Public Television violated journalistic ethics in its coverage of anti-government rallies in May and June. The broadcasts falsely implied that participants were paid to attend and misrepresented Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians' distinctive dialect, leading to unfair generalizations against the Karabakh community.

The Observatory criticized Public Television for failing to critically assess the official information it received and for fostering an atmosphere of hostility toward Karabakh Armenians. The finding underscores the need for responsible journalism, especially in a context as sensitive as Armenia's, where media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions and social cohesion.

When a state-affiliated media company spreads false narratives about a vulnerable refugee population, it can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and exacerbate social divisions. In Armenia's democratic society, Public Television, which is supposed to serve the public interest, should serve as a platform for accurate information and diverse perspectives, rather than as a tool for spreading disinformation and fostering hostility.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/795409/a-rising-tide-of-conflicts-of-interest-in-armenias-governance/>

28 August 2024 —

Armenia’s democratic gains at risk: what the West should and shouldn’t do



The police blocked the way of the participants of the ‘Tavush for the Motherland’ movement to the National Assembly building

By Tigran Grigoryan

Armenia has been lauded for its democratic progress in the years following the 2018 Velvet Revolution. The promise of a more transparent, accountable, and inclusive government ignited hope among its citizens and caught the attention of the international community. However, alongside notable advancements in electoral processes and freedom of speech, concerning trends have been occurring in recent years in the country’s democratic trajectory.

These trends have become especially evident since Armenia’s defeat in the Second Karabakh War and the subsequent period of domestic instability and geopolitical fragility. The ruling party, facing internal and external challenges, has adopted approaches that are not in line with the values that underpinned the Velvet Revolution of 2018. Instead of focusing on building strong institutions that would channel existing societal and political conflicts toward non-violent solutions, the ruling party has borrowed its opponents’ practices and rhetoric in the domestic political struggle. This has raised questions about the ruling party’s commitment to the process of democratic consolidation in Armenia.

Since the snap parliamentary elections of 2021, certain patterns of behavior and trends have emerged that jeopardize the democratic achievements of the Velvet Revolution. These concerning developments can be categorized into several key areas.

The first is political polarization and divisive rhetoric. After the transition of power in 2018, the former ruling elites, now in opposition, began targeting the new government, labeling them as disciples of George Soros and as individuals inserted into Armenia's political scene by external actors. Following the defeat in the Second Karabakh War, the opposition escalated its attacks, labeling Nikol Pashinyan and his team as 'traitors.'

Instead of addressing the problem of divisive and polarizing political rhetoric, the ruling party followed the opposition's lead and created its own narratives targeting political opponents. At some point, Nikol Pashinyan and his team began positioning themselves as defenders of sovereignty, [labeling all their challengers as a "fifth column."](#) The pinnacle of this approach was the 2022 Yerevan mayoral race, when Pashinyan and other members of the ruling party targeted their former ally and main contender, Hayk Marutyan, with these narratives.

As a result of this policy, the problem of political polarization and divisive rhetoric has become more severe. This poses a deadly threat to the newly emerging Armenian democracy, as all the main political actors tend to delegitimize their opponents and shrink the space for civilized political debate. The dichotomous, black-and-white narratives create fertile ground for political radicalization.

Another concerning trend that could push Armenia toward democratic backsliding is the ruling party's takeover of independent bodies. This trend intensified after the snap parliamentary elections of 2021. Facing challenges both from within and outside the system, the ruling party began systematically taking control of institutions that are supposed to be autonomous.

For example, the President of Armenia is a former minister in the Pashinyan government, as is the head of the Supreme Judicial Council. The head of the Central Electoral Commission is a former MP from the ruling party. Armenia's public television is also controlled by former ruling party MPs and individuals close to the Pashinyan family.

The ruling party's intolerance toward the existence of independent public institutions was recently demonstrated by the replacement of the director of Armenia's public radio, Garegin Khumaryan. A key official involved in this process [admitted](#) that the primary reason for the decision was Khumaryan's [public criticism](#) of Prime Minister Pashinyan's policies.

The logic behind these actions is clear: after a tumultuous post-war period, the ruling party seeks to have full control over all state institutions. However, it is obvious that in the absence of institutional checks and balances, democratic consolidation is not feasible.

Local elections are another problematic area that raises questions about the ruling party's commitment to democratic norms. Although the quality of elections at all levels has significantly improved after the revolution, the ruling party has initiated [post-electoral processes](#) in several towns to oust elected opposition mayors and appoint its allies. This pattern casts serious doubt on the ruling party's assurances that there won't be a return to the era of electoral fraud.

The aforementioned trends are reminiscent of the processes that led to democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe over the past decade. In this sense, Armenia is currently closer to “Hungarization” than to democratic consolidation. Another cautionary tale for Armenia is neighboring Georgia, where similar processes have unfolded in recent years.

To prevent these scenarios from unfolding in Armenia, the country’s Western partners should reconsider their approach. Too often, the serious mistakes and shortcomings of Armenia’s ruling elite are overlooked by Western governments. For instance, both the US and the EU continue to praise the Armenian government for its commitment to the reform process, despite the fact that some major reforms supported by these external actors have failed.

The most vivid example of this is the police reform. The entire concept behind establishing the Ministry of Internal Affairs was to ensure civilian oversight of security institutions. However, this plan ended with Nikol Pashinyan appointing Vahe Ghazaryan, the chief of police and a close ally and schoolmate of the prime minister, as the head of the newly created ministry. In this case, domestic political goals took precedence over the need for genuine institutional reform.

After this intentional sabotage of a Western-supported reform, there has been no strong reaction from either the EU or the US. The same was true following the brutal use of police force against protesters on June 12. While several [Armenian civil society organizations](#) and [international watchdogs](#) condemned the police violence, the [reaction](#) from Western governments was notably weak.

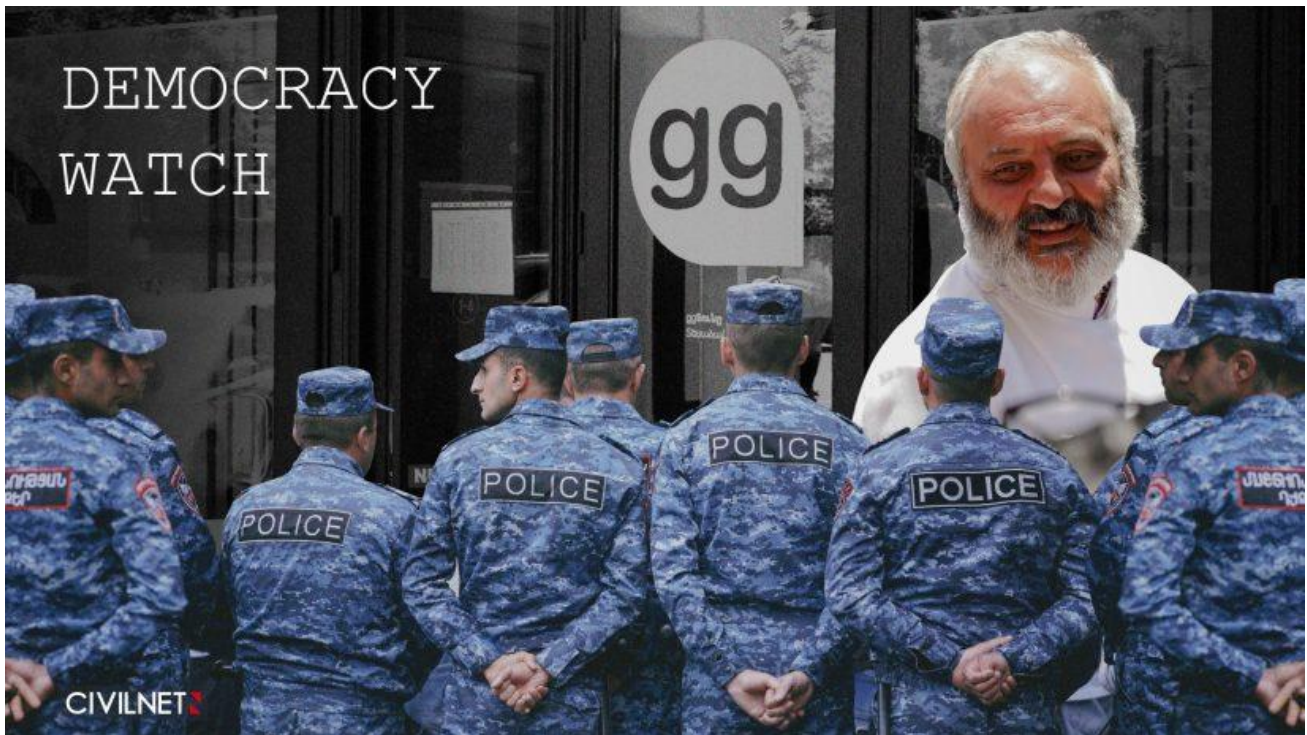
This passive and at times supportive stance of Western partners might encourage Armenia’s ruling party to prioritize consolidating its power over democratic consolidation. The EU and the US should focus on supporting democratic institutions and norms, rather than individuals and political forces they consider pro-democracy. Moreover, the increasing economic support to Armenia should also include conditionalities designed to mitigate the risks of democratic backsliding.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/794748/armenias-democratic-gains-at-risk-what-the-west-should-and-shouldnt-do/>

24 June 2024 —

Disproportionate Police Violence Against Protesters



By Tigran Grigoryan and Karena Avedissian

Police violently suppressed a Tavush for the Homeland protest with stun grenades and beatings last week, injuring dozens of demonstrators and journalists.

While some protestors displayed violent behavior, the majority did not, making the police's response excessive and disproportionate.

Both [Amnesty International](#), and over a dozen [Armenian civil society organizations and figures](#) separately issued statements condemning the police violence. The statement criticized the police for their use of force, particularly the use of stun grenades without prior warning. It also called for the Prosecutor General's Office and the Investigative Committee to initiate criminal charges against those responsible for the violence against participants and journalists. The statement urged the Ministry of Internal Affairs to respect peaceful protesters' rights and demanded that the authorities uphold human rights and the rule of law in Armenia.

The statement further highlighted the constitutional and international guarantees of peaceful assembly and protection from inhuman treatment, emphasizing the need for a clear justification for extreme measures and proper oversight of police actions.

The organizations noted a persistent lack of accountability for police violence in recent years, attributing this to systemic impunity reinforced by investigative and judicial bodies. They viewed Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's [public support](#) for police actions, which he referred to

as proportionate and professional, as encouragement for further violence and an obstacle to objective investigations.

The statement reaffirmed the organizations' call for police reforms and demanded immediate criminal investigations into the June 12 events.

GG Offices Raided

Armenia's Investigative Committee [conducted a search](#) at the head office of a major taxi company, GG, on Saturday, shortly after the company's founder called for people to join anti-government protests in Yerevan.

The search also targeted the homes of the company's founders and senior leadership. Lawyers present during the search reported that all 26 computers at the headquarters were confiscated.

These raids indicate a political motivation as they coincide with GG's founder's outspoken support of the anti-government protest movement.

Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan's Problematic Rhetoric

The Twitter account of Bagrat Galstanyan, the leader of the anti-government protest movement, [posted a tweet](#) on June 12 stating, "No matter where you try to escape, we will find you and come. If necessary, we will come alone; if necessary, we will come with others. We will come on a donkey or by metro if needed."

The threatening tone, which can be interpreted as a promise of retribution, is not appropriate for a legitimate opposition leader. Political figures positioning themselves as the alternative should be advocating for change through peaceful, democratic means rather than resorting to intimidation. Additionally, the emphasis on pursuing and confronting individuals rather than focusing on policies, principles, or constructive solutions is problematic. Legitimate political leaders should emphasize a vision for positive change and the steps for achieving it.

Serena Bush contributed research for this article.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/782959/disproportionate-police-violence-against-protesters-democracy-watch/>

4 June 2024 —

Police Misconduct Against Opposition MPs



By Tigran Grigoryan and Karena Avedissian

Opposition deputy Ashot Simonyan was [physically and verbally assaulted](#) last week by riot police in an incident involving over a dozen officers who surrounded the politician. While one officer was fired, no criminal charges have been brought against him or any other officers involved in the assault.

Several Armenian civil society organizations have [condemned the police violence](#).

In another incident on May 31, riot police [verbally insulted](#) opposition deputy Anna Mkrtchyan.

Legislators are generally granted parliamentary immunity to protect them from arrest or legal action related to their legislative duties. This ensures they can perform their roles without fear of retribution or undue influence from the executive branch or law enforcement. This is important for safeguarding freedom of speech and democratic processes. While these protections are not absolute and deputies should be accountable for actions outside their official duties, they are essential for the effective functioning of the legislative branch.

Unconstitutionality of Bagrat Galstanyan's Bid for Prime Minister

Bagrat Galstanyan has been named as the opposition's candidate for prime minister. This presents a significant problem as Armenia's constitution forbids those who hold foreign citizenships to take the office. Even if Galstanyan renounces his Canadian citizenship, he still doesn't fulfill the requirement of having been solely an Armenian citizen for the past four years.

Opposition figures suggest overcoming this obstacle by implementing constitutional changes through the National Assembly. Arsen Babayan, a member of the Homeland Party and a participant in the protest movement, stated in an [interview with Civilnet](#) that, “the Constitution should be sidelined when the state’s salvation is at stake.”

The requirement for Armenia’s prime minister to have held only Armenian citizenship for the four years preceding an election is relatively strict by international standards, though not the most stringent. The 1995 Armenian Constitution, before the country transitioned to a parliamentary system, had even stricter requirements: the president must have held only Armenian citizenship for the preceding six years.

Constitutions should evolve over time to address changes in the political, economic, or social environment. Amendment procedures exist to adapt them to new circumstances without disrupting their legal continuity. However, if political leaders amend the constitution to suit their immediate needs, it promotes manipulation of legal frameworks for personal or partisan gain. Ad hoc amendments can erode public trust in the government and the legal system, leading people to regard the constitution as a tool for political convenience, rather than a safeguard of their rights and liberties. The constitution’s authority is derived from its stability and longevity.

Targeting Karabakh Mayors in Armenia

The exiled mayors of Stepanakert, Askeran, and Martakert in Nagorno-Karabakh were [arrested and charged with fraud and forgery](#) in Yerevan, following their support for protests against Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

Armenia’s Investigative Committee alleges that Stepanakert mayor Davit Sargsyan registered municipal vehicles illegally in the names of friends and relatives, and Martakert mayor Misha Gyurjyan misappropriated a car. Both mayors were detained, while Hayk Shamiryan, the mayor of Askeran, was put under house arrest under similar charges. All three deny the allegations.

The apparent targeting of exiled Karabakh mayors in Armenia appears as a tactic to quell dissent among those unsettled by Armenia’s surrender of disputed border areas to Azerbaijan. By focusing on these mayors from Nagorno-Karabakh, the government likely hopes to dissuade further opposition to Pashinyan and support of Bagrat Galstanyan. The fraud and forgery charges have political implications, and raise concerns about the erosion of democratic principles and rule of law in Armenia.

The fact that the charges were made eight months after the entry of these individuals into Armenia and only after the opposition movement gained momentum further suggests political motivation behind the government’s actions.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/780016/police-misconduct-against-opposition-mps/>

27 May 2024 —

ANIF Dissolution Raises Questions on Investments and Governance

By Tigran Grigoryan and Karena Avedissian

The Armenian National Interests Fund (ANIF) is set to be [dissolved](#), with its management transitioning to the State Property Management Committee.

ANIF is a governmental organization [established](#) in 2019, with a mandate “to consolidate and effectively manage the ownership of Armenian state-owned enterprises, to promote export growth and investments in Armenia by providing co-financing in large-scale projects at their initial stage of development.”

Initiated during a meeting chaired by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on March 14, the dissolution process of ANIF raises questions about the rationale behind this decision and the fate of ANIF’s investments and subsidiaries, which remain unexplained by the government.

ANIF’s major investment in the national airline Fly Arna ended in failure, as acknowledged by Pashinyan earlier this year. The airline had ceased operations and had its license suspended, despite the Armenian government’s infusion of at least 4.8 billion drams (around \$13 mln) into the project.

Furthermore, ANIF co-financed the Hard Rock Café in downtown Yerevan, using at least \$500,000 in public funds. However, concerns raised by the International Monetary Fund question the wisdom of investing public resources in the hospitality sector.

In another venture, ANIF partnered with the Emirati company Masdar to develop a solar power plant. Despite these plans, construction has yet to commence, and inquiries made by CivilNet in March regarding Masdar’s future intentions remain unanswered.

In 2023, the State Control Service conducted an inspection of ANIF. CivilNet discovered that during these inspections, ANIF engaged consulting firm Ernst and Young to conduct a study on salaries in similar funds worldwide, spending \$30,000 for this purpose.

Presently, the Investigative Committee is conducting a criminal investigation into certain activities of ANIF, although no charges have been filed as of yet.

The construction of an additional upscale mansion, valued at approximately \$230,000, is nearing completion in a neighborhood of luxurious residences near Yerevan’s Avan administrative district. The owner of this mansion is 67-year-old retiree Olga Sanosyan.

In March 2023, according to a [Hetq investigation](#), Olga Sanosyan, the mother of Gnel Sanosyan who is the Minister of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure, purchased a 1000 square meter plot of land in Arinj village, adjacent to Avan. She bought it for 19.2 million drams (\$50,000), which is about half the market value. Both this year and last year, the price per

square meter in Arinj was roughly 100 dollars. Hence, the plot's estimated value would be \$100,000 or 38.9 million drams.



Minister's Retired Mother Constructing \$230,000 Mansion

In 2021, Gnel Sanosyan submitted his income and property declaration to the Central Election Commission as he was a parliamentary candidate from the Civil Contract Party. At that time, he declared ownership of a house and three land plots in Tsakkar village, Gegharkunik Province, totaling 2,800 square meters. He also declared a 2002 Mercedes-Benz. His declared financial assets included only 2.5 million drams and 70 thousand rubles (\$900). Gnel Sanosyan has yet to submit his 2023 declarations for himself and cohabiting persons to the Corruption Prevention Commission.

Gnel Sanosyan's mother doesn't live with the minister's family, which means she isn't required to submit a declaration. However, questions still arise about how retired Olga Sanosyan is funding the acquisition of a land plot and the construction of an expensive house.

In response to Hetq's questions, Gnel Sanosyan said, "The house is being built by my brothers for our parents. My father and two brothers have been working in Russia for years; my brothers are still employed there. The purchase of the land and the construction of the house are financed with their earnings."

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/778662/democracy-watch-anif-dissolution-raises-questions-on-investments-and-governance/>

15 May 2024 —

Armenia’s ruling party frames anti-government protesters as ‘Russia-backed’ on social media



By Tigran Grigoryan and Karena Avedissian

Ruling party links protesters to Russia on social media accounts

Leaders of the protest movement opposing the transfer of four Tavush villages to Azerbaijan are demanding the resignation of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. And in recent days, they have become targets of a coordinated social media disinformation campaign. [A CivilNet investigation](#) has found that the campaigns, mostly on Facebook, are generated by the country’s ruling party. Among the main targets is the leader of the protest movement Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, the Primate of the Tavush Diocese.

During the lead-up to and throughout the September 2023 Yerevan municipal elections, some of these same Facebook pages [disseminated](#) false narratives about the primary opposition candidate, former Yerevan Mayor Hayk Marutyan.

These news pages claim that the archbishop is backed by former Armenian President Robert Kocharyan as well as the Kremlin. They circulate videos and photos suggesting his involvement in a “Russian plan to destabilize Armenia.” Some of these images depicted the archbishop alongside prominent Russian figures such as President Vladimir Putin and Russian media executive Margarita Simonyan.

While the protest movement may maintain some connections with Russia, branding it entirely

as orchestrated by Moscow is both problematic and factually incorrect. This campaign is aimed at delegitimizing political opponents and weakening societal discourse and discontent regarding policies related to National Security in Armenia.

Protest movement speaker Anais Sardaryan’s comments about “non-Armenians”

Actress Anais Sardaryan addressed the protest rally on Sunday, saying that those who are not Armenian should leave the country.

She [later clarified](#) that she believed her reference to non-Armenians had been misinterpreted, arguing that the “non-Armenians” she referred to are current government officials.

This rhetoric is problematic as it constitutes the delegitimization of political opponents through an extreme us vs. them framing. This approach not only points to nativist ideology, it also alienates Armenia’s ethnic minorities.

At the time of this writing, none of the protest leaders have condemned her statements.

No plurality of voices being aired on Armenian Prime Time TV

Since the first protest rally against the handover of the four villages in the Tavush region at Republic Square on May 9, the state-run public television channels have not invited any movement representatives for comments or discussions. The prime time political talk show “Interview with Petros Ghazaryan” on Public Television has featured three guests so far on the topic – two deputies from the ruling party, and one expert who backed the government’s position on border delimitation, criticizing the protest movement.

Additionally, a [CivilNet investigation](#) revealed that as of May 3, there has been no coverage featuring residents from the Tavush region, where the transfer of four villages to Azerbaijan is planned and where the impact of the policy will be felt most.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/776291/armenias-ruling-party-frames-anti-government-protesters-as-russia-backed-on-social-media-democracy-watch-4/>

6 May 2024 —

Violent dispersion of protesters and media polarization



By Tigran Grigoryan and Karena Avedissian

Violent Dispersion of Protesters in Kirants

Police have violently dispersed demonstrators protesting the handover of four villages to Azerbaijan. The detainment of three dozen protesters who were blocking the road in Kirants, Tavush region violates Armenian citizens' right to peaceful assembly.

Armenian human rights defender Artur Sakunts [notes that](#) “when peaceful demonstrators are detained, law enforcement must provide valid justification for their actions,” and continues highlighting that in this case, the police’s actions contravene both local laws and the European Convention on Human Rights. Furthermore, the response by law enforcement appears disproportionate to the nature of the protests. Physical force should only be employed by police in exceptional circumstances, and even then, citizens must be duly informed of the intention to use force. Kirants residents assert they received no prior warning before the police intervened forcefully.

Several independent civil society organizations have criticized the police for resorting to disproportionate measures. An [excerpt](#) from a statement endorsed by a group of NGOs reads: “In this regard, the instances of the police using clearly disproportionate force against protesting citizens in the village of Kirants, and the instances of illegal detention of peaceful demonstrators are inexcusable. [...] The police’s suppression of residents’ legitimate concerns

and struggles is not justifiable and can lead to increased feelings of insecurity and mistrust among residents.”

Criminal charges initiated for insulting PM’s wife

A protester from the National Democratic Pole, a fringe nationalist group, was charged with a criminal offense. This happened after he, alongside others, [called](#) the Prime Minister’s wife, Anna Hakobyan, a traitor and genocider, among other insults, at the Armenian Genocide Memorial. The crime was labeled as “public speech intended to incite or promote hatred, discrimination, intolerance, or hostility.” While recognizing the damaging nature of such language, the government’s actions are a misuse of legislative measures, aiming to silence critics and restrict freedom of speech.

Reporters Without Borders Armenia 2024 Report

RSF’s [2024 Armenia report](#) reveals a complex picture. While noting some progress, the report highlights that Armenia’s media landscape reflects the political polarization in the country, with many outlets aligned with various political figures, both current officials and individuals tied to the former regime.

While independent platforms like Civilnet.am and Azatutyun.am thrive, mainstream media face pressure over editorial independence. Legal reforms have not adequately protected press freedom, with disinformation and gag orders persisting. Economic constraints, such as limited advertising revenue and state control, hinder media independence. Journalism faces societal disdain and hate speech, with politicians exacerbating hostility. Safety concerns arise from border clashes with Azerbaijan and persistent violence against journalists, often without consequences.

ANIF Investigation

A [recent Civilnet investigation](#) revealed that the Armenian National Interests Fund (ANIF) entered into a \$30,000 contract with Ernst and Young audit company’s Yerevan offices. The contract was meant to assess the salaries of high-ranking staff within the ANIF, a state-owned enterprise, and to compare them with those of similar companies abroad. ANIF initiated this analysis in response to inspections by Armenia’s State Supervision Service. Importantly, ANIF maintained control over the selection of companies used as a benchmark for salary comparison.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/774380/democracy-watch-violent-dispersion-of-protesters-and-media-polarization/>

29 April 2024 —

Call for transparency, divisive rhetoric and political polarization



The past week saw a surge in the use of divisive and polarizing language by key political figures in Armenia. The government’s decision earlier this month to initiate the delimitation process with Azerbaijan has sparked a significant public backlash, as many see the government’s current approach as unilateral and devoid of consensus. Here are three examples:

1. On April 21, lawmaker Vahagn Alexanyan, from the ruling Civil Contract party, [called](#) the opposition and those involved in the ongoing protests in Armenia’s northeastern Tavush region a “fifth column.”
2. On April 25, opposition lawmaker Anna Mkrtychyan [called](#) Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan a “Turk,” an inflammatory word choice in the Armenian context given the legacy of genocide.
3. Also on April 25, Pashinyan’s deputy chief of staff, Taron Chakhoyan, [called](#) the Tavush protesters a “fifth column.”

Armenia’s political elites — both ruling party officials and opposition figures — are now resorting to a language of treason and loyalty. Such rhetoric portrays domestic political rivals as genuine security risks. In each instance, the objective is to divide political opponents by developing conspiracy theories and narratives that influence both political supporters and the general public. This delegitimization of political adversaries constricts the space for constructive political discourse and lays the foundation for undemocratic and anti-

constitutional maneuvering. It is particularly troubling that ruling party lawmakers and officials are involved in this behavior.

On April 23, the Yerkrpah Union of Volunteers, Armenia's largest and most influential veterans' group, [attempted to disperse](#) protests in Tavush against the handover of four abandoned border villages to Azerbaijan. This action likely had government involvement. Sasun Mikayelyan, a close associate of Pashinyan, heads the Yerkrpah Union. Several protesters were detained, and one was arrested, but none of the Yerkrpah members were held.

The Yerkrpah Union, initially established to protect Armenia's borders, has been repeatedly used by successive Armenian governments for domestic political purposes. The continuation of this practice after the 2018 Velvet Revolution raises concerns about the current government's commitment to democratic principles.

The use of paramilitary organizations is common in autocratic states to safeguard government officials' interests. This practice can pose risks to the constitutional order, as these organizations often operate outside the constitution, without accountability, institutional control, or oversight.

GRECO calls Armenia for greater transparency in officials' discretionary expenditures

The Group of States against Corruption, the Council of Europe's anti-corruption body, has [urged](#) Armenia's authorities to enhance transparency with regard to discretionary expenditures of key officials, including the prime minister, parliament speaker, and president. Earlier this month, GRECO requested that the procurement process for officials' expenses be made public again.

In 2016, Armenia adopted new regulations that classify discretionary expenditures, including senior officials' transportation, catering, and entertainment expenses confidential.

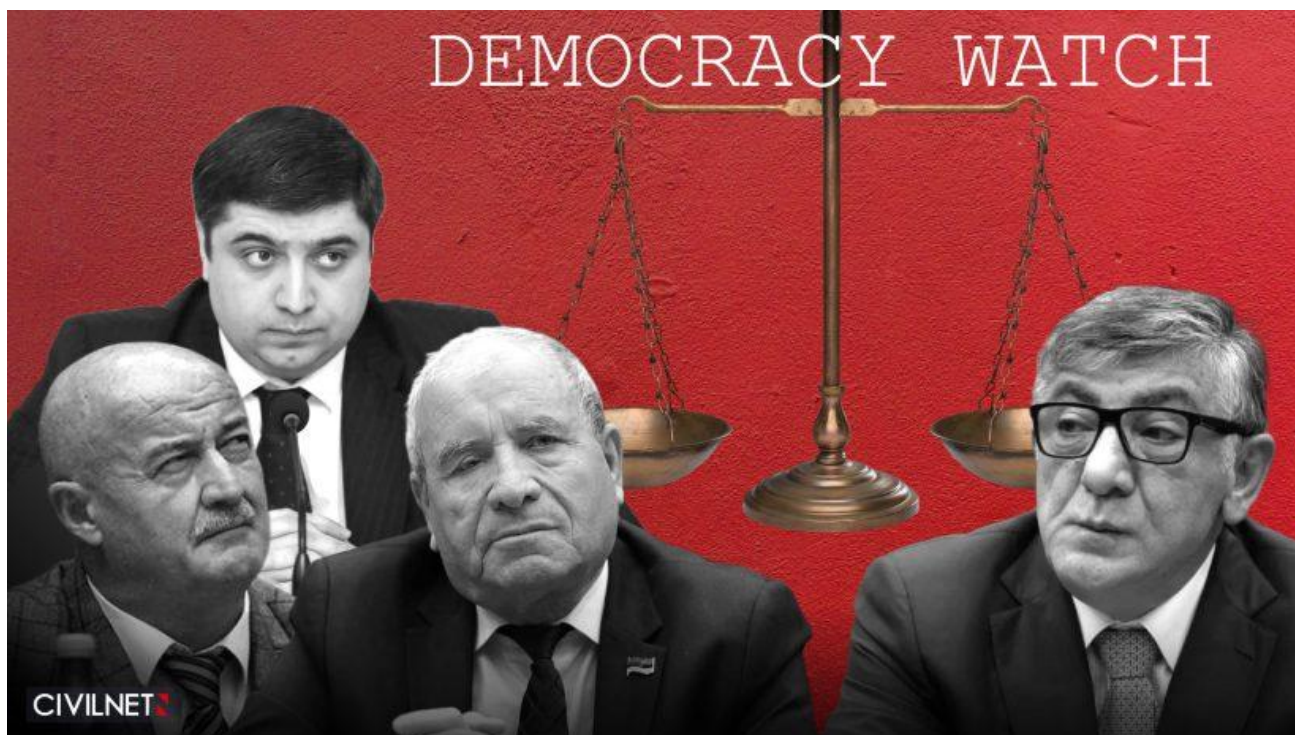
The adoption of this law was preceded by a number of controversial procurements in 2016. Since then, successive governments have refused to provide any information about any procurement expenses. Even after 2018, this regulation remains unchanged, exacerbating corruption risks.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/773559/call-for-transparency-divisive-rhetoric-and-political-polarization-democracy-watch/>

22 April 2024 —

Assault on opposition activist, attack on the media, controversial land deals and procurements by ruling party members



Introduction

Welcome to DEMOCRACY WATCH, brought to you by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security. Weekly recaps will highlight and examine the pivotal challenges facing Armenia's democratic institutions.

Political Repression

On April 15, opposition activist Samvel Vardanyan confronted ruling party deputy Hakob Aslanyan on a bus and [began insulting him](#). After this incident, police officers arrived at Vardanyan's home and detained him. On the trip to the police station, the officers stopped the car and left, claiming they needed to relieve themselves.

Vardanyan reports that masked individuals then approached the car and began [assaulting him](#). They spat on him and threatened him with sexual violence. An opposition deputy who later visited Vardanyan in detention noted a swollen hand.

Armenia's Investigative Committee charged Vardanyan with hooliganism and incitement of hatred through digital technology. After posting a seven million dram (\$18,000) bail, he was [placed under house arrest](#). At the time of this writing, his attackers remain unidentified, and no criminal case has been opened against them.

The fact that the two police officers left the detainee unattended in the police car ahead of the assault raises suspicions of government orchestration behind the attack. Notably, the head of police shares a close friendship with Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

The newspaper Haykakan Zhamanak, owned by Pashinyan's family, published an [interview with a pro-government analyst](#) prior to the incident involving Vardanyan. The analyst stated, "If police officers do not respond appropriately, then we should engage them on their own terms, employing methods they understand."

Corruption

According to [Hetq](#), a nearly four-hectare complex with 12 buildings in Tsaghkadzor is linked to two deputies from the ruling party, Khachatur Sukiasyan and Vagharshak Hakobyan. Sukiasyan's nephew and Hakobyan's father each own 50% of the company. Hetq reports that the land was purchased for 413 million drams — nearly four times less than its market value. The market rate for one square meter is \$97, but it was sold for \$27. The total market value was approximately \$3,773,000, but it was sold for \$1,066,000. The mayor of Tsaghkadzor is also a member of the ruling party.

During the 2018 revolution, Pashinyan emphasized the need to separate business and politics, framing his team's objective as "de-oligarchization." However, during the 2021 elections, several business figures were included in their party list and became deputies, raising questions about consistency in their stance.

According to an [investigation by CivilNet](#), the Ararat municipality purchased a Volkswagen ID.6 CROZZ Electric vehicle for \$45,000 for the mayor. The car was sourced from a company owned by the son of a ruling Civil Contract deputy, Hovik Aghazaryan. Interestingly, the municipality specified the exact model of the car in the open procurement call. This is noteworthy as the law on procurements discourages any references to trademarks, company names, models, country of origin, or producers when possible. This law aims to prevent officials from buying personal items – a clause intended to combat corruption.

Attacks On the Media

Khachatur Sukiasyan, a member of parliament from the ruling Civil Contract Party and a prominent businessman, found himself embroiled in yet another scandal last week. Following an investigation into his nephew's land purchase in Tsakhkadzor, Sukiasyan [verbally attacked](#) Hripsime Jebejyan, a journalist at Aravot Daily, when she questioned him about alleged tax evasion. His response included insults directed at Jebejyan and accusations against Aravot of receiving funds from the "KGB." In response, several media organizations [condemned Sukiasyan's behavior and called for him to apologize](#) to Jebejyan and Aravot.

This incident underscores a troubling trend in Armenia and globally, where politicians target journalists and question their integrity. We echo the sentiment emphasizing the importance of

politicians maintaining tolerance toward the press, even when faced with challenging or provocative questions.

Democracy Watch is a joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, a Yerevan-based think tank.

Source: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/772788/democracy-watch-assault-on-opposition-activist-attack-on-the-media-controversial-land-deals-and-procurements-by-ruling-party-members/>