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Karabakh Without Its Armenians

The Azerbaijani Government's Diplomatic Tour of September 2026

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Azerbaijani Government Organized Diplomatic Tour of Karabakh

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Dadivank Monastery in Karvachar. Photo source

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Terminology

Azerbaijani sources use Khankendi, Shusha, Aghdara, Kalbajar, Ganjasar and Khudavang. Armenian usage is Stepanakert, Shushi, Martakert, Karvachar, Gandzasar and Dadivank. This report uses dual terminology where it assists clarity. The expression East Zangezur is treated as an Azerbaijani governmental designation and is attributed rather than used as politically neutral terminology.

Executive Overview

On 11 and 12 September 2026, Azerbaijan's Presidential Administration took foreign diplomats on a two-day tour of Karabakh and of areas Baku designates as East Zangezur. Led by Hikmet Hajiyev, Assistant to the President and head of the Administration's Foreign Policy Affairs Department, the tour presented the region as rebuilt, resettled and open for investment. It left out the event that defines the region's present: following Azerbaijan's military operation of 19 September 2023, more than 100,000 Armenians—virtually the entire Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh—fled to Armenia. The public record of the tour contains no encounter with them, no discussion of their return and no reference to the International Court of Justice's binding Order of 17 November 2023, which requires Azerbaijan to ensure that those who left after 19 September 2023 and wish to return can do so in a safe, unimpeded and expeditious manner.

Azerbaijani authorities stated that 150 representatives of 58 countries and nine international organizations took part, describing the trip as the twenty-second such diplomatic visit since 2020, but published no roster. This dossier identifies named representatives of 21 countries—among them the United States, France, the United Kingdom, China, Iran, Brazil and the Netherlands—and of four international organizations: the European Union, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Organization for Migration and the International Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation. The attendance of the UN Resident Coordinator in Azerbaijan was announced in advance but could not be confirmed onsite.[1]

The itinerary was designed to normalize. Diplomats were taken through new transport hubs, Karabakh University, factories and housing, to Victory Park and Azerbaijani national and Islamic sites, and to a Mexican Independence Day reception in Shushi that Hajiyev presented as a new diplomatic tradition. Interviews published by Azerbaijani media were confined almost entirely to reconstruction, investment and bilateral relations, and the answers were overwhelmingly complimentary. No participant was publicly quoted raising the displaced population, their right of return, Armenian property, Armenian detainees or independent international access.

Armenian monasteries were reattributed before an international audience. At Gandzasar and Dadivank, Hajiyev presented both monasteries as Caucasian Albanian and accused Armenians of falsifying them. Mainstream specialist scholarship identifies both as medieval Armenian monasteries, and Gandzasar's Armenian-language construction and consecration inscriptions remain on the building. Hajiyev's use of blank manuscript replicas at Gandzasar was answered by the Matenadaran, which stated that the originals, including a manuscript dating to 909, are held in Yerevan and offered to show them to any diplomat.

The message continued after the tour. Within three weeks, the same interpretation was restated or defended by the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, the Western Azerbaijan Community, the Alban-Udi Christian Community and 52 Azerbaijani NGOs; carried by Hajiyev to the Arab Media Summit in Dubai; reinforced by the newly publicized claim that frescoes and *khachkars* (cross stones) from Dadivank had been entered in Interpol's Stolen Works of Art

[1] APA, "Diplomatic Corps' Visit to Karabakh and East Zangezur Begins."

Database in October 2025; enacted through Albanian-Udi rites at both monasteries; and extended by the Western Azerbaijan Community to a working group on "Albanian" heritage inside the Republic of Armenia. The alignment across state, academic, religious, civic and media channels is clear.

The format is set to expand to Nakhichevan. Hajiyev said Azerbaijan would organize a diplomatic visit to Nakhichevan in response to interest from the diplomatic corps. There, the medieval Armenian cemetery at Julfa was destroyed by 2005, Caucasus Heritage Watch found that 98 percent of the Armenian heritage sites it could locate and assess had been erased, and no independent international mission has been able to conduct an onsite assessment of Julfa.

The tour drew a substantial response. The Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, Catholicos Aram I, Armenian civil society, heritage specialists and members of the National Assembly condemned the presentation, and three members of the Dutch House of Representatives submitted 13 written questions on Dutch participation. EU Special Representative Magdalena Grono subsequently said she did not dispute the region's Armenian heritage, that reports of destruction required independent expert verification and that EU participation did not legitimize past force or violence. The Armenian government responded through the Matenadaran and private contacts rather than a formal diplomatic protest.

Throughout, the dossier distinguishes Azerbaijani government claims, independently corroborated facts and characterizations advanced by either side, and records where the evidence remains incomplete.

Research Status

- Azerbaijani government figure: 58 countries and nine international organizations.
- Publicly substantiated through named participants: 21 countries and four international organizations.
- Additional announced but not independently confirmed onsite: the UN Resident Coordinator in Azerbaijan.
- Remaining gap: 37 of the claimed 58 participating countries and five of the claimed nine organizations are not named in the public material reviewed.

1. The Visit and Its Organization

The two-day trip began on 11 September 2026 and was led personally by Hikmet Hajiyev. Azerbaijani media described approximately 150 participants representing 58 states and nine international organizations and called it the twenty-second organized diplomatic visit to the territories since 2020.[2]

Azerbaijani reporting identified Fuzuli International Airport as the first point on the route. The delegation arrived there by air before continuing through the region by bus.[3]

[2] APA, "Diplomatic Corps' Visit to Karabakh and East Zangezur Begins."
[3] 1news.az, Diplomats in Karabakh opinion article.

The itinerary was deliberately broad. It combined newly built transport, educational, industrial and residential infrastructure with Azerbaijani national-symbolic sites, Islamic monuments, Armenian Christian monuments presented through Azerbaijan's Caucasian Albanian historical narrative, and a diplomatic ceremony celebrating Mexico's Independence Day in Shushi.

The transport-centered staging followed an established pattern. A separate diplomatic tour on 20 and 21 June 2025 began at Lachin International Airport and concluded at Aghdam Railway Station, from which participants returned to Baku by high-speed train. That earlier visit does not identify participants in the September 2026 delegation, but it illustrates how airports, stations and new transport links have repeatedly been incorporated into Azerbaijan's presentation of reconstruction.[4]



Members of the delegation aboard an aircraft during the journey to Karabakh on 11 September 2026. Approximately 65 to 75 passengers are individually visible, with others obscured; the image corroborates the presence of a large delegation but does not independently verify the reported total of 150 representatives. Photo source.



Buses prepared to transport the diplomatic delegation after its arrival in Karabakh on 11 September 2026.
Photo source

[4] MENAFN and Trend, June 2025 diplomatic tour.

The New Shusha Mosque under construction in Shushi as the diplomatic delegation approaches the site on 11 September 2026. *Photo source*



2. Countries and Diplomats Publicly Identified

The following roster is the most complete that can presently be substantiated from public reporting. The Azerbaijani government's numerical claim is recorded separately from the countries whose participation can be tied to a named diplomat and this specific visit.

Country	Representative	Position and reported comments
United States	**Amy Carlon**	Chargé d'Affaires a.i. She said this was her second visit to Stepanakert and referred to new infrastructure and visible changes. She said Washington viewed developments in the South Caucasus as moving in the right direction, supported lasting Armenian-Azerbaijani peace and expected reciprocal visits to continue. She also referred to TRIPP, investment, AI and data centres, defence and security cooperation.[5]
France	**Sophie Lagoutte**	Ambassador. She described the scale of Azerbaijani reconstruction as very impressive, called the trip useful and informative and said French-Azerbaijani relations were developing positively.[6]

[5] Report.az, "US Expects Continued Reciprocal Visits by Azerbaijani and Armenian Delegations."
[6] APA, "French Ambassador: It Is Very Impressive to See the Scale of Azerbaijan's Reconstruction Work in Karabakh."

Country	Representative	Position and reported comments
United Kingdom	**Duncan Norman**	Ambassador. On his first trip to Karabakh, he praised the roads, tunnels, university, hotels and cultural centre. He noted British support for mine clearance since 2020 and said British architects had participated in preparing Shushi's master plan. In a separate interview during the tour, he said the two countries were working toward a strategic-partnership document, expected more British companies and ministerial visits, and referred to prospective projects in artificial intelligence and technology.[7]
Mexico	**María Victoria Romero Caballero**	Ambassador. She presided over a Mexican Independence Day reception in Shushi, called it an honour to celebrate there for the second time after 2024 and described Shushi as Azerbaijan's historic city and cultural capital. She also discussed political dialogue, university projects, investment and trade.[8]
Kyrgyzstan	**Maksat Mamytkanov**	Ambassador. He called for concrete implementation of the Azerbaijan-Kyrgyzstan alliance, recalled Kyrgyzstan's construction of a school in Aghdam district and referred to major plans for city-to-city cooperation.[9]
Uzbekistan	**Bahrom Ashrafkhanov**	Ambassador. He said Uzbek investors were studying project and investment opportunities in Karabakh and praised development in Stepanakert and at Karabakh University.[10]
China	**Ding Tao**	Chargé d'Affaires. AZERTAC reported that this was his third visit to Shushi and that he had also visited Stepanakert. He said he observed major changes on every visit and hoped both cities would continue developing. A separate interview with Ambassador Lu Mei did not provide sufficient evidence of her participation in this particular tour.[11]

[7] APA, UK ambassador on strategic partnership, AI and technology.
[8] AzTV, "Mexico's Independence Day Celebrated in Shushi."
[9] AZERTAC, interview with Kyrgyz Ambassador Maksat Mamytkanov during the diplomatic tour.
[10] Trend, interview with Uzbek Ambassador Bahrom Ashrafkhanov on investment opportunities in Karabakh.
[11] AZERTAC, "Chinese Diplomat: Every Time I Witness Great Changes in Shusha and Khankendi."

Country	Representative	Position and reported comments
Indonesia	**Berlian Helmy**	Ambassador. He voiced support for the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process and sustainable and long-term peace. He also discussed renewable energy, oil and gas, infrastructure, mining, transport, digital development and AI.[12]
Slovakia	**Elčin Gasymov**	Ambassador. He said Slovakia was implementing a Smart Village project in Aghdam, planning a Park Forest social project and seeking agricultural cooperation in Karabakh. He also referred to planned participation by Slovak Defence Ministry specialists in demining.[13]
Pakistan	**Qasim Mohiuddin**	Ambassador. He described the speed, scale and quality of reconstruction as remarkable and presented the process as a model. Pakistani reporting also reproduced his statement that Pakistan was ready to contribute companies and expertise.[14]
Saudi Arabia	**Issam bin Saleh Al-Jutaili**	Ambassador. He said this was approximately his tenth visit to Karabakh, praised the university, hospitals, cultural centre and transport construction, and said Saudi businesspeople planned to examine investment projects.[15]
Iran	**Mojtaba Demirchilou**	Ambassador. He visited the Istisu mineral-water plant in Karvachar. Hajiyev and the ambassador publicly drank Istisu together as a symbolic continuation of an earlier Aliyev-Pezeshkian gesture, and Hajiyev discussed possible sales of the water in Iran.[16]
Poland	**Paweł Radomski**	Ambassador. On what he said was his fourth visit, he praised the scale of reconstruction and modernization and the restoration of Shushi, saying that progress since earlier visits was clearly visible.[17]

[12] Report.az, "Indonesia Supports Azerbaijan-Armenia Peace Process, Ambassador Says."
[13] Report.az, "Ambassador: Slovakia Planning New Projects in Azerbaijan's Karabakh."
[14] Trend, interview with Pakistani Ambassador Qasim Mohiuddin during the diplomatic tour.
[15] Report.az, "Saudi Investors to Explore Opportunities in Karabakh."
[16] Report.az, "Hikmet Hajiyev Continues Aliyev-Pezeshkian Istisu Tradition with Iranian Ambassador."
[17] APA, "Polish Ambassador: Media Incidents Will Not Affect Azerbaijan-Poland Relations."

Country	Representative	Position and reported comments
Brazil	**Bernard Jörg Leopold de Garcia Klingl**	Ambassador. On his first visit, he said the pace and results of restoration and development were surprising and that he was deeply impressed by the speed of the work.[18]
Serbia	**Dragan Vladisavljević**	Ambassador. During the diplomatic corps' visit, Azerbaijani news agency Trend interviewed him in Shushi. He described Serbian–Azerbaijani relations as a strategic partnership and expressed confidence that bilateral cooperation would continue to grow.[19]
Belarus	**Dmitry Pinevich**	Ambassador. He was explicitly identified as part of the delegation and said Belarus planned joint construction of an agro-town in Karabakh in 2027 and joint lift production in Aghdam.[20]
Moldova	**Alexandr Esaulenco**	Ambassador. He said he and his wife visited Karabakh at least twice a year, praised the speed and resources devoted to reconstruction and singled out Karabakh University.[21]
Tajikistan	**Ilhom Abdurahmon Barotzoda**	Ambassador. In a same-day Shushi interview, he said he had visited more than ten times, praised new construction, infrastructure and restoration, and credited President Ilham Aliyev personally for the development.[22]
Ukraine	**Yuriy Husyev** (also transliterated as Yurii Husev)	Ambassador. In an interview with AnewZ during the tour, he said he had visited K12arabakh many times and saw huge progress, citing infrastructure projects, new buildings and new programmes, and described that progress as "inspiring us to move forward to recover Ukrainian occupied territories, which is very important for our country as well." During the tour he also met Hikmet Hajiyev and said they had discussed expanding Ukraine–Azerbaijan cooperation across a broad range of areas and strengthening coordination. He thanked

[18] Trend, interview with Brazilian Ambassador Bernard Jörg Leopold de Garcia Klingl during the diplomatic tour.
[19] Trend, "İnanıram ki, Azərbaycanla münasibətlərimizi daha yüksək səviyyəyə qaldıracağıq – səfir" ["I Believe We Will Raise Our Relations with Azerbaijan to a Higher Level—Ambassador"], 11 September 2026.
[20] Report.az, "Pinevich: Azerbaijani Prime Minister's Visit to Belarus Planned for Late 2026-Early 2027."
[21] Daily Baku, interview with Moldovan Ambassador Alexandr Esaulenco during the diplomatic tour.
[22] Daily Baku, "Tajik Ambassador Ilhom Abdurahmon Praises Shusha Restoration Efforts."

Country	Representative	Position and reported comments
		Azerbaijan for its continuing support, humanitarian assistance and solidarity with Ukraine.'
Kuwait	**Mohammad Faisal Al-Mutairi**	Ambassador. The Kuwaiti Embassy's official account stated that he joined the Karabakh visit with representatives of the diplomatic corps accredited in Azerbaijan. No substantive public comment by the ambassador about the region accompanied the post.[23]
Netherlands	**Birsel Aksu** **Mariëlle van der Linden** **Perry Somers**	The Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands identified Aksu as Operational Manager, van der Linden as First Secretary and Somers as Defence Attaché. The embassy described the tour as beneficial for understanding regional development.

Accordingly, 21 states can presently be linked to named participants through public evidence. Thirty-seven of the Azerbaijani government's claimed 58 countries remain publicly unidentified in the material reviewed. Representatives of additional embassies may appear in photographs or unpublished protocol lists, but participation should not be inferred merely because a state maintains an embassy in Baku.

3. International Organizations Identified

Organization	Representative	Statements and significance
European Union	**Magdalena Grono**	EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia. She welcomed positive movement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process and said the EU would support conflict-affected communities, reconstruction and demining. In an on-camera interview with AnewZ during the tour, she said: “It was most instructive and most interesting to see both the beauty of the region but also the vast effort that has gone into its demining, its rehabilitation, its reconstruction into creating

[23] Embassy of Kuwait in Azerbaijan, Official post confirming Mohammad Faisal Al-Mutairi's participation.

Organization	Representative	Statements and significance
		opportunities for people to live here, to work here … indeed in order to see peace really on the ground."[24] In a 15 September interview, she said she did not dispute the region's past Armenian presence or Armenian cultural heritage, called for protection of cultural and religious sites, said reports of destruction required independent expert verification, and rejected any interpretation of EU participation as legitimizing past violence. She also said the trip included informal encounters with former IDPs; no encounter with displaced Karabakh Armenians was described.[25]
UN Food and Agriculture Organization	**Muhammad Nasar Hayat**	He said each visit showed more development, praised infrastructure investment and the region's natural-resource potential, and said it could contribute more to Azerbaijan's economy. He also praised government restoration of historical monuments.[26]
International Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation	**Aktoty Raimkulova**	President. She described Karvachar and Karabakh as cultural and historical heritage of the entire Turkic world, praised construction and restoration, and emphasized the importance of international visits.[27]
International Organization for Migration	**Anar Iskandarov**	Head of Office, IOM Azerbaijan. IOM Azerbaijan stated that Iskandarov represented the organization on the government-organized familiarization visit. The public post did not include a substantive statement by him about the region.

[24] AnewZ, video report on the diplomatic corps' two-day visit to Karabakh, Facebook, 12 September 2026.
[25] NEWS.am, Magdalena Grono addresses criticism following the tour.
[26] Daily Baku, "FAO Official Says Karabakh and East Zangezur Can Boost Azerbaijan's Economy."
[27] Daily Baku, "International Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation Visits Karabakh."

UN Resident Coordinator Dmytro Shlapachenko had told President Aliyev before the visit of plans to travel to Karabakh with the diplomatic corps and hold an SDG-related activity at Karabakh University. In the absence of a photograph, UN statement or contemporary report placing him onsite, the UN Resident Coordinator's Office is best recorded as announced or probable participation rather than confirmed attendance.

4. What the Delegation Was Shown

Day One: Stepanakert and Shushi

After arriving through Fuzuli International Airport on 11 September, the delegation travelled to Stepanakert. Reported stops included the new railway and bus-terminal complex, the Cultural Center, Victory Park, Karabakh University and the AzCotton sewing factory. Elchin Yusubov, Aliyev's special representative in the area, told the delegation that approximately 28,000 people now live, work and study in the city.[28]

At Karabakh University, Rector Shahin Bayramov told the delegation that enrollment had risen from more than 1,000 students in the institution's first academic year to more than 2,000 in its second, with nearly 3,000 expected in the current year. APA reported that students receive tuition and accommodation free of charge, that a new economics building had entered service, and that additional campus buildings were planned.[29]

The delegation then travelled to Shushi, where the program included the New Shusha Mosque, Jidir Duzu, Karabakh Street, the central square, the House of Sadigjan and Yukhari Govhar Agha Mosque. Other reports documented visits to the fortress walls, residential complexes, the busts of Natavan, Bulbul and Uzeyir Hajibeyli, the Heydar Aliyev and Karabakh exhibition and additional restored or reconstructed cultural sites. Diplomats from Muslim countries were reported to have prayed in Yukhari Govhar Agha Mosque.

The day ended with a Mexican Independence Day reception in Shushi. Hajiyev explicitly presented the holding of foreign national-day celebrations there as a new diplomatic tradition, while the Mexican ambassador called it an honour to celebrate in the city for a second time.[30]

Day Two: Martakert and Karvachar

On 12 September, the delegation travelled through Martakert and Karvachar. It visited Gandzasar Monastery and then Dadivank, which Azerbaijani official sources call the Ganjasar and Khudavang monastery complexes. According to the official account, diplomats were briefed on alleged Armenian interference, alterations and falsification affecting these monuments. The delegation later visited the Istisu mineral-water plant and attended the Honey Festival in Karvachar.[31]

Advance reports also listed the Yukhari Vang hydropower plant, reconstruction in Zar village and

[28] Report.az, "First Day of Foreign Diplomats' Visit to Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur Concludes."
[29] APA, Foreign diplomats visit Karabakh University.
[30] APA, "Mexico's Independence Day Celebrated in Azerbaijan's Shusha."
[31] APA, "Diplomatic Corps' Visit to Karabakh and East Zangezur Concluded."

the Murovdag tunnel as expected stops. Final wrap-up reports did not provide the same explicit confirmation for every planned stop; the announced itinerary should therefore be distinguished from the confirmed itinerary.

A Proposed Follow-up Visit to Nakhichevan

During the 11 September briefing, Hajiyev said members of the diplomatic corps had expressed interest in a visit to Nakhichevan and indicated that Azerbaijan would organize such a trip. The proposal would extend the recurring diplomatic-tour format beyond Karabakh and the areas officially designated as East Zangezur.[32]

That prospect has a sensitive cultural-heritage context. The medieval Armenian cemetery at Julfa in Nakhichevan once contained thousands of *khachkars* (cross stones). Its destruction occurred in stages beginning in 1998, resumed in 2002–03 and culminated in December 2005. Video recorded from the Iranian side showed men in military uniforms smashing khachkars and dumping the debris into the Aras River; subsequent imagery showed the cemetery levelled and the site converted into a military firing range. Azerbaijani officials denied the destruction and, in some statements, the cemetery's Armenian identity or previous existence. Researcher Argam Ayvazyan had documented 89 Armenian churches, 5,840 khachkars and approximately 22,000 tombstones across Nakhichevan between 1964 and 1987; subsequent investigations reported that these monuments had disappeared.[33]

The broader evidence is not limited to Julfa. A satellite investigation by Caucasus Heritage Watch, summarized by Hyperallergic, located 108 medieval and early-modern Armenian monasteries, churches and cemeteries that it assessed as completely destroyed between 1997 and 2011. Of all Armenian heritage sites that the research team was able to locate and assess in Nakhichevan, 98 percent had been erased. This gives the proposed diplomatic visit a direct relevance to present concerns about the fate and official presentation of Armenian monuments under Azerbaijani control.[34]

International objections and attempted inspections were documented both during and after the destruction. On 16 February 2006, the European Parliament condemned the demolition of the Julfa cemetery and called on Azerbaijan to permit a parliamentary delegation to inspect the site. Azerbaijan subsequently rejected a proposed Council of Europe visit, while ICOMOS adopted a resolution concerning Julfa in 2008. A later account reports that a 2011 request by U.S. Ambassador Matthew Bryza to visit the site was also denied. No independent international mission was therefore able to conduct an onsite assessment after the cemetery's destruction.[35]

UNESCO's 2010 inscription recognizes Armenian cross-stone art, symbolism and craftsmanship on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity; it is not a World

[32] AZERTAC, Hajiyev on a proposed diplomatic visit to Nakhichevan.
[33] Amos Chapple, "When the World Looked Away: The Destruction of Julfa Cemetery," RFE/RL, 10 December 2020; The Guardian, Destruction of Julfa and Armenian heritage in Nakhichevan; Azatutyun, "Report Details Destruction of Ancient Armenian Cemetery in Azerbaijan," 7 March 2019; Armenian Cross-Stone Repository, "Julfa's Medieval Cemetery."
[34] Hyperallergic, Caucasus Heritage Watch satellite findings on Nakhichevan.
[35] European Parliament, 2006 resolution on cultural heritage in Azerbaijan; Geghard Scientific Analytical Foundation, International responses to the destruction at Julfa; Kate Fitz Gibbon, "The Azerbaijan Paradox: UNESCO Cultural Diplomacy in the Caucasus," Cultural Property News, 12 November 2025.

Heritage designation of the destroyed Julfa cemetery. UNESCO's limited public response to Julfa has nevertheless been criticized in the context of Azerbaijan's broader cultural diplomacy. In 2013, UNESCO hosted the exhibition "Azerbaijan—Land of Tolerance" following the establishment of a $5 million Azerbaijan–UNESCO trust fund, and Baku hosted the World Heritage Committee in 2019. OCCRP separately reported that companies involved in the Azerbaijani Laundromat paid $468,000 between 2012 and 2014 to Kalin Mitrev, the husband of then UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova; Mitrev maintained that the payments were legitimate compensation for consultancy work. These circumstances do not establish that UNESCO's handling of Julfa was influenced by the payments or Azerbaijan's financial contributions, but they form relevant institutional context for concerns about UNESCO's response. That context acquired renewed significance in November 2025, when Azerbaijan was elected through 2029 to UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation.[36]



Photos before and after the 2005 destruction of the cemetery at Julfa shows the ancient tombstones had been replaced with a shooting range set up on the site. Photo source

[36] UNESCO, Armenian cross-stone art and craftsmanship of khachkars; Paul Radu, Khadija Ismayilova and Madina Mammadova, "The Influence Machine," OCCRP; Amos Chapple, "When the World Looked Away: The Destruction of Julfa Cemetery," RFE/RL, 10 December 2020; UNESCO, "'Return & Restitution' Intergovernmental Committee," last updated 8 September 2026.



Delegation receiving a briefing at Gandzasar Monastery, 12 September 2026. Photo source



Enlarged detail of an Armenian-language inscription visible in a photograph from the delegation's visit to Gandzasar Monastery on 12 September 2026. Photo source



Delegation outside the Church of St. John the Baptist at Gandzasar Monastery, 12 September 2026. Photo source



Members of the delegation at Dadivank Monastery in Karvachar on 12 September 2026. Photo source

5. The Political Narrative Structured into the Tour

The reconstruction and Great Return narrative. Transport infrastructure, university facilities, factories, housing and public services were used to demonstrate normalization and economic development. Most diplomats interviewed by Azerbaijani media reinforced this theme, repeatedly using terms such as impressive, rapid, progress and development. At the Stepanakert Cultural Center, Hajiyev said that more than 40,000 former Azerbaijani IDPs had returned and that more than 45 settlements had been reconstructed and made available to them since 2020. He also put the number of people working, living and studying in Karabakh at around 100,000. These are Azerbaijani government figures.[37]

The transition from war to peace. Hajiyev told the delegation that Azerbaijan and Armenia had entered an era of peace and linked peace to reconstruction and connectivity. U.S., EU and Indonesian representatives also referred publicly to the peace process, though they did not necessarily adopt every element of the Azerbaijani government's historical presentation.

Normalization through repetition. An opinion article published by 1news.az on the first day of the visit argued that the twenty-two diplomatic tours had developed into a sustained practice through which foreign representatives were becoming acquainted with the post-conflict new realities. As evidence of the Azerbaijani public framing of the visit, the article supports interpreting the tour as an effort at diplomatic normalization rather than simply a familiarization exercise.[38]

Sovereignty and historical continuity. Hajiyev described Karabakh as the cultural heartland of Azerbaijan and framed reconstruction as restoration of what he said had been destroyed during Armenian control.

Cultural heritage. The most sensitive component was the presentation of Armenian Christian monuments through an official Caucasian Albanian narrative. The itinerary gave this interpretation diplomatic visibility by delivering it directly to foreign representatives at Gandzasar and Dadivank.

Parallel geopolitical messaging. Two AZERTAC interviews published on 11 September were not statements by members of the delegation and should not be used to identify participants. They nevertheless illustrate the surrounding official-media frame. Regional commentator Derya Soysal presented the Türkiye-Azerbaijan alliance and the Shusha Declaration as a model of strategic brotherhood and peace.[39]

Pakistani media executive Muhammad Ali Pasha promoted the proposed Zangezur Corridor, also referred to as TRIPP, as a project that could turn Nakhichevan from an isolated exclave into a trade gateway linking Azerbaijan and Türkiye.[40]

[37] AZERTAC, Hikmet Hajiyev on reconstructed settlements and returned former IDPs.
[38] 1news.az, Diplomats in Karabakh opinion article.
[39] AZERTAC, Derya Soysal on the Türkiye-Azerbaijan alliance.
[40] AZERTAC, Muhammad Ali Pasha on Nakhichevan and the proposed corridor.

6. Gandzasar and Dadivank

Hajiyev publicly presented Gandzasar and Dadivank as monuments of ancient Caucasian Albanian Christian heritage. Visiting diplomats were told that the sites had been subjected to Armenian alteration or historical falsification. That account should not be reproduced as a neutral description of the monuments because it is contested by mainstream specialist scholarship.

Patrick Donabédian of Aix-Marseille University, writing for the Association Internationale des Études Arméniennes, describes Gandzasar as a classic example of a medieval Armenian monastery. Its Church of St. John the Baptist was built between 1216 and 1238 by Prince Hasan Jalal-Dawla, identified in the scholarly account as an Armenian prince. Although Gandzasar later became the seat of the Catholicos of Caucasian Albania, the same account explains that the title had by that period lost an ethnic connotation and carried a regional meaning.[41]

The same academic project describes Dadivank as one of the largest monastic complexes in medieval Armenia, dating principally from the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries and serving as an episcopal and religious centre of the principality of Upper Khachen.[42]

International concern over Azerbaijan's reinterpretation of Armenian monuments as Caucasian Albanian predates this visit. The U.S. State Department's religious-freedom reporting cited concern that this narrative substituted a Caucasian Albanian identity for Armenian cultural heritage. Its 2023 report recorded a UN Special Rapporteur's warning about efforts either to remove traces of Armenian presence or reinterpret them as Caucasian Albanian and noted that the overwhelming majority of relevant specialists rejected such revisionist claims.[43]

CivilNet's contemporaneous review added site-specific evidence omitted from the Azerbaijani presentation: Gandzasar contains extensive Armenian-language inscriptions, including Hasan-Jalal's construction inscription and a record of the church's consecration in 1240. The report also cited Caucasus Heritage Watch findings that the number of destroyed Armenian heritage sites rose by 75 percent between autumn 2023 and spring 2024 and the number categorized as threatened rose by 29 percent. It further documented the 2026 demolition of Stepanakert's Holy Mother of God Cathedral and destruction of an Armenian-Russian cemetery in Shushi. These findings underscore the limitations of a state-curated itinerary without independent heritage access.[44]

Magdalena Grono's post-trip statements are therefore significant. Without openly confronting the Azerbaijani presentation during the tour, she subsequently acknowledged that deeply diverging views and narratives persisted regarding the origins of certain sites. In a direct interview on 15 September, she said she did not dispute the region's past Armenian presence or Armenian cultural heritage, called on states to protect cultural and religious sites, and said reports of destruction required independent verification by heritage experts. She also said the visit enabled

[41] Association Internationale des Études Arméniennes, Gandzasar Monastery.
[42] Association Internationale des Études Arméniennes, Dadivank Monastery.
[43] U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom reporting.
[44] CivilNet, Azerbaijan presents Armenian monasteries as Caucasian Albanian during diplomats' Karabakh tour.

onsite exchanges with Azerbaijani officials about deeply divisive narratives and rejected any interpretation of EU participation as legitimizing past force or violence.[45]

These reports also have a legal dimension. The International Court of Justice's Order of 7 December 2021, reaffirmed in November 2023, requires Azerbaijan to take all necessary measures to prevent and punish acts of vandalism and desecration affecting Armenian cultural heritage, including churches and other places of worship, monuments, landmarks, cemeteries and artefacts. At the hearing of 12 October 2023, Azerbaijan's Agent further undertook to protect, and not to damage or destroy, cultural monuments, artefacts and sites in the region, an undertaking the Court declared binding.[46] Presenting a monument as Caucasian Albanian is not in itself damage or destruction, and this dossier does not treat it as such. Satellite imagery analysed by Caucasus Heritage Watch has documented the demolition of Stepanakert's Holy Mother of God Cathedral between early March and early April 2026 and the destruction of the Old Armenian-Russian Cemetery in Shushi, including five medieval khachkars, between 9 and 14 May 2026.[47] Both fall squarely within the scope of obligations Azerbaijan has accepted before the Court. Satellite monitoring can establish that a site has been destroyed, but not the condition of interiors, inscriptions or movable objects, or the circumstances of a demolition. The absence of independent onsite access therefore leaves compliance with those obligations impossible to assess fully.

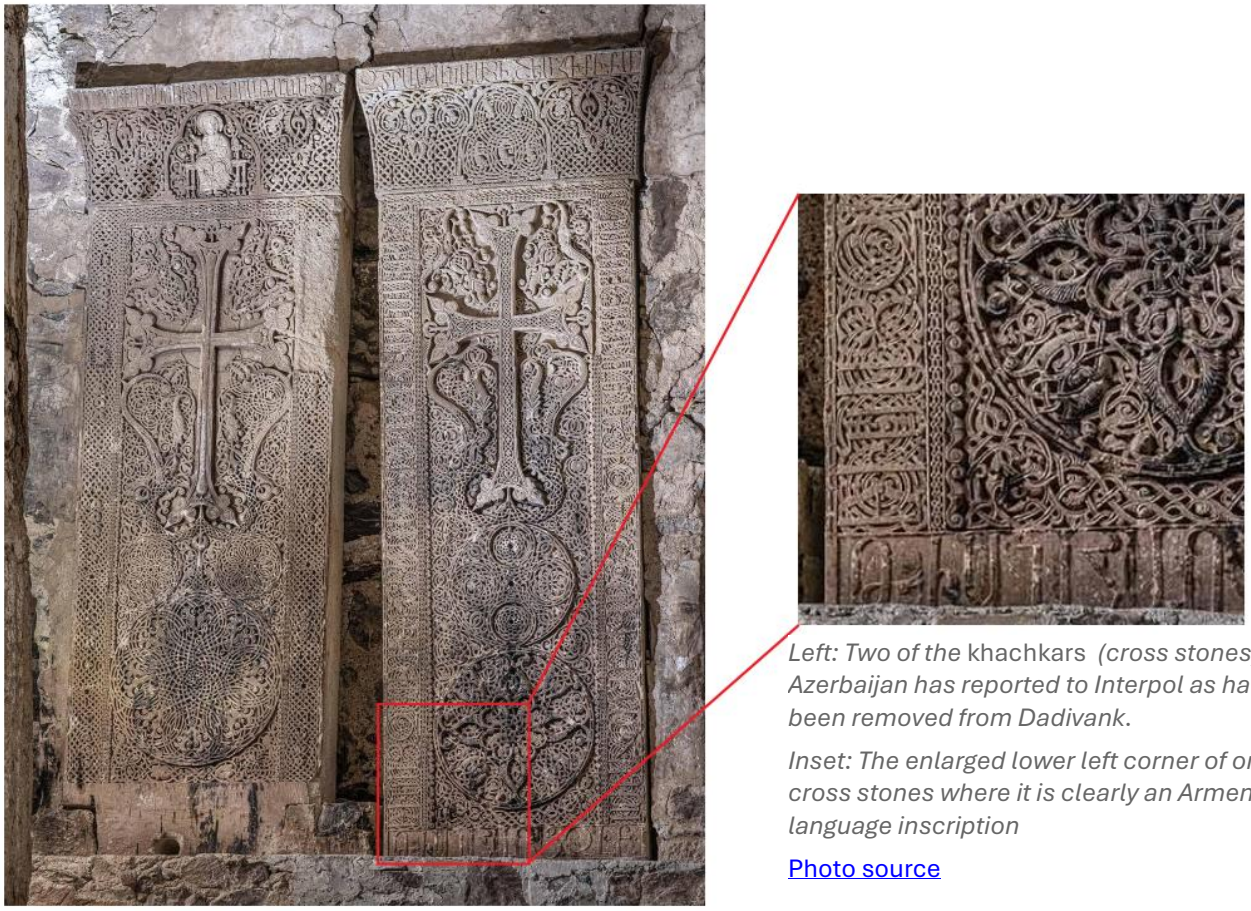
Interpol-linked claim concerning Dadivank artifacts

On 21 September 2026, Sabina Hajiyeva, head of Azerbaijan's State Service for Protection, Development and Restoration of Cultural Heritage, told APA that information about frescoes and *khachkars* (cross stones) allegedly removed from Dadivank had been entered into Interpol's Stolen Works of Art Database on 9 October 2025. She accused Armenian forces of removing crosses, bells, frescoes and other elements during the 2020 handover and said the database entry could support their return to Azerbaijan if located in an Interpol member state. The chronology is important: the reported database entry dates to 2025, but the official claim was newly publicized amid the September 2026 controversy. Interpol states that its database contains information supplied by national authorities and other authorized entities and cautions that it cannot guarantee the accuracy and validity of the submitted data; inclusion therefore does not by itself adjudicate ownership or establish that the objects were unlawfully removed. The Armenian outlet 301.am republished the report on 22 September and connected it to the concurrent Caucasian Albanian reattribution of Dadivank. The development extends the campaign from the monastery's identity to claims over movable objects associated with it.[48,49]

A contemporaneous Armenian account provides important context for at least some of the objects later cited by Azerbaijan. On 16 November 2020, the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin

[45] NEWS.am, Magdalena Grono addresses criticism following the tour.
[46] International Court of Justice, Order of 17 November 2023, para. 4 (recalling the Order of 7 December 2021), paras. 61–62 (undertakings of the Agent of Azerbaijan) and para. 72 (reaffirmation of earlier provisional measures).
[47] For the cathedral, Hyperallergic, "Azerbaijan Destroys Armenian Holy Mother of God Church in Artsakh" and RFE/RL, "Azerbaijan Defends Destruction Of Karabakh Armenian Churches"; for the cemetery, Caucasus Heritage Watch, "A Cemetery Lost in the Rebuilding of Shusha."
[48] APA, Sabina Hajiyeva on Dadivank artifacts and the Interpol database.
[49] 301.am, Dadivank artifacts, Interpol and the September 2026 heritage controversy.

reported that, before Dadivank came under the control of Russian peacekeepers, the monastery's well-known *khachkars* had been removed to preserve its spiritual and cultural heritage. The statement publicly acknowledged the removal at the time and presented it as a protective evacuation during the 2020 handover, rather than a covert appropriation. It does not, however, establish the location or subsequent status of every object later cited by Azerbaijan, nor does it address the separate allegation concerning removed frescoes.[50]



Left: Two of the khachkars *(cross stones) Azerbaijan has reported to Interpol as having been removed from Dadivank.*

Inset: The enlarged lower left corner of one of the cross stones where it is clearly an Armenian-language inscription

Photo source

Post-tour Albanian-Udi activity at the same monuments

The presentation made to the diplomatic delegation was followed by Albanian-Udi statements, religious activities and media coverage focused on the same two monasteries. On 18 September, Robert Mobili, chairman of Azerbaijan's Alban-Udi Christian Community, directly condemned the Armenian reaction to the tour, asserted that Gandzasar and Dadivank formed part of Caucasian Albanian heritage and alleged that Armenians had altered the monuments. These assertions remain contested and conflict with the specialist scholarship cited above.[51]

On 21 September, representatives of the community performed religious rites and prayers at

[50] Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, "Famous Cross-Stones of Dadivank Have Been Removed for Rescue Purposes," 16 November 2020.
[51] AZERTAC, Robert Mobili and the Alban-Udi response to criticism of the tour.

Gandzasar. Mobili described the monastery as a pearl of Caucasian Albanian architecture and as the community's native heritage. Euronews subsequently covered the service as part of an Azerbaijani government program concerning the region's Christian heritage and religious traditions, giving the same historical interpretation an international media platform.[52]

On 28 September, Albanian-Udi community representatives performed religious rites, prayed and lit candles at Dadivank. Deputy chairman Rafik Danakari said that the community had visited the monastery annually since 2020 and characterized the churches as the heritage of the Azerbaijani people. The sequence connects the narrative presented to diplomats with subsequent religious activity and public diplomacy at the same monuments. It does not by itself establish centralized coordination, but it demonstrates that the diplomatic presentation was not an isolated event.[53]

7. The Absent Population

The most consequential omission in Azerbaijani state-media coverage was the fate of the region's Armenian population. Following Azerbaijan's military operation of 19 September 2023, more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians, virtually the entire Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, fled to Armenia. Human Rights Watch records that the operation followed months of severe shortages after Azerbaijani restrictions on movement and, from June 2023, the blockage of humanitarian goods and intermittent obstruction of ICRC medical transfers.[54]

In its Order of 17 November 2023 in Armenia v. Azerbaijan, a case brought under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the International Court of Justice observed that, according to United Nations reports, more than 100,000 persons of Armenian national or ethnic origin had found themselves compelled to leave their place of residence and reach the Armenian border since the operation Azerbaijan commenced in Nagorno-Karabakh on 19 September 2023. The Court placed that operation in the context of the population’s long-standing exposure to vulnerability and social precariousness, noting that residents had been severely affected by the prolonged disruption of the Lachin Corridor. It then indicated provisional measures requiring Azerbaijan, in accordance with its CERD obligations, to ensure that persons who left Nagorno-Karabakh after 19 September 2023 and wish to return are able to do so in a safe, unimpeded and expeditious manner; that those who remained and wish to leave can do so in the same manner; and that those who remained or returned and wish to stay are free from the use of force or intimidation that may cause them to flee. The Court further required Azerbaijan to protect and preserve registration, identity and private property documents and records concerning these persons and to have due regard to them in its administrative and legislative practices. It also recorded undertakings made by Azerbaijan’s Agent at the hearing of 12 October 2023, stated that they were binding and created legal obligations, and directed Azerbaijan to report within eight weeks on the steps taken to give effect both to the measures and to those undertakings. The Court found that these undertakings helped mitigate the risk of

[52] AZERTAC, Albanian-Udi community visit and rites at Gandzasar.
[53] AZERTAC, Albanian-Udi community visit and rites at Dadivank.
[54] Human Rights Watch, World Report 2024, Azerbaijan.

irreparable prejudice but did not remove it entirely; it adopted each of its measures by thirteen votes to two and reaffirmed the provisional measures indicated in its Orders of 7 December 2021 and 22 February 2023.[55]

The Order indicated provisional measures pending a final decision. It is binding on Azerbaijan, but it is not a judgment on the merits and makes no legal finding that Azerbaijan breached the CERD or that ethnic cleansing occurred. Precision therefore requires distinguishing characterization from fact. Armenian officials, human-rights advocates and many Armenian organizations describe the mass displacement as ethnic cleansing. Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry responded to the Order by asserting that the residents had decided to leave of their own accord.[56] The scale of the departure is not in dispute: the September 2023 Azerbaijani military operation was followed by the exodus of more than 100,000 Armenians, essentially the region's entire Armenian population, whom the Court, relying on United Nations reports, described as having been compelled to leave.

Against this background, the imagery of foreign diplomats inspecting new housing, a university, factories and cultural monuments in September 2026 carried political significance beyond ordinary diplomatic tourism.

8. What Diplomats Said and Did Not Say

A clear pattern emerges from the interviews selected for publication by Azerbaijani media. Nearly all named ambassadors were asked about reconstruction, bilateral relations, investment, connectivity, demining or future economic projects. Their answers were overwhelmingly complimentary.

France's ambassador called the scale of reconstruction impressive; Britain's ambassador praised infrastructure; Brazil's ambassador said the speed surprised him; Poland's ambassador stressed visible progress; Pakistan's ambassador called the process exemplary; Saudi Arabia's ambassador discussed investment; Moldova's ambassador praised the resources devoted to rebuilding; Tajikistan's ambassador praised Shushi; and Uzbek and Slovak representatives discussed investment and development projects.

Among the public comments reviewed, Azerbaijani media did not quote a participant asking about the former Armenian inhabitants of Stepanakert, their return, which the ICJ has ordered Azerbaijan to ensure can take place safely, the property and identity records the same Order requires Azerbaijan to preserve, Armenian detainees, or independent international access and monitoring. Nor was a visiting diplomat quoted publicly challenging Hajiyev's account of Gandzasar or Dadivank while standing at the sites.

Grono's subsequent statements were the clearest exception. Her on-camera remarks to AnewZ during the tour addressed the region's beauty, its demining, rehabilitation and reconstruction, and the opportunities for people to live and work there, without reference to the displaced

[55] International Court of Justice, Order of 17 November 2023, paras. 55–56, 61–65, 69–74.
[56] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, Press Release No. 658/23 on the decision of the International Court of Justice of 17 November 2023.

Armenian population; her statements on Armenian heritage, independent verification and the meaning of EU participation came after the tour.[57] In her 15 September interview, she said she did not contest the region's Armenian presence and heritage, called for preservation of cultural and religious sites, said destruction reports required independent expert verification, and described onsite exchanges with Azerbaijani officials about divisive narratives. She also rejected any interpretation of EU participation as legitimizing past violence. Grono said the trip included informal meetings with former Azerbaijani IDPs; neither her interview nor the public tour program described an encounter with displaced Karabakh Armenians. After returning to Yerevan, however, she said she met displaced Karabakh Armenians and civil-society representatives and heard their concerns, without disclosing details of those meetings.[58]

9. Armenian Criticism Following the Visit

The tour drew immediate criticism from Armenian commentators and civil-society actors. A commentary published on 12 September argued that foreign participation risked legitimizing the outcome of the 2023 displacement and named Amy Carlon, Sophie Lagoutte, Duncan Norman, Magdalena Grono, María Victoria Romero Caballero, Qasim Mohiuddin, Berlian Helmy, Bahrom Ashrafkhanov and Maksat Mamytkanov. The piece was opinion commentary rather than neutral reporting, but it illustrates the political reaction generated by the diplomatic presence.[59]

On 14 September, Armenian civil-society organizations issued a statement on protecting Armenian cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh. They argued that the tour was accompanied by denial of the Armenian origin of religious monuments and promotion of the Caucasian Albanian narrative.[60]

Historian and journalist Karen Harutyunyan addressed an open letter to Grono through CivilNet on 13 September. He argued that participation in the Azerbaijani-organized tour was itself a diplomatic choice and warned against treating documented Armenian heritage and state-sponsored denial as equivalent narratives. He wrote that reconciliation must rest on truth, the dignity of victims and responsibility, and criticized the absence of attention to displaced Karabakh Armenians and Armenian detainees in Baku.[61]

CivilNet also documented a broader set of reactions. Artsakh heritage official Sergey Shahverdyan argued that diplomats visiting Stepanakert should ask where its former residents were and, at Armenian monasteries, why their identity was being altered. Former Artsakh state minister Artak Beglaryan called for public statements about ethnic cleansing. Commentator Karpis Pashoyan said Armenian inscriptions, *khachkars* (cross stones) and historical sources had been ignored, while Laura Baghdasaryan and Gayane Abrahamyan questioned the manuscript presentation and the delegation's access only to the Azerbaijani government's

[57] AnewZ, video report on the diplomatic corps' two-day visit to Karabakh, Facebook, 12 September 2026.
[58] RFE/RL, Grono meets displaced Karabakh Armenians and civil-society representatives in Yerevan.
[59] 301.am, "Foreign Diplomats Legitimize Azerbaijan's Ethnic Cleansing through Visit to Occupied Artsakh," 12 September 2026.
[60] Protection of Rights Without Borders, Statement on Armenian cultural heritage.
[61] CivilNet, Open letter to Magdalena Grono.

account.[62]

In a separate opinion commentary, analyst Tigran Grigoryan described the visit as both a legitimizing spectacle and a failure of diplomacy. He highlighted the delegation's appearance at Victory Park, its exposure to historical revisionism at Gandzasar and Dadivank, and the psychological impact on displaced Karabakh Armenians. The article is advocacy commentary rather than neutral reporting, but it captures a central strand of the political and ethical criticism directed at the participating diplomats.[63]

The Nagorno Karabakh Committee for the Defense of the Fundamental Rights of the Artsakh People issued an open letter to the diplomatic corps stating that the visits projected normality in a territory emptied of its Armenian population, displaying homes without their owners and churches without their congregations. It criticized the diplomats' silence concerning prisoners of war, civilian detainees and political hostages, and called on them to decline state-curated tours that legitimize forced displacement, reject historical revisionism, demand independent access for UNESCO and other monitors, condemn cultural erasure and support the right of return.[64]

On 15 September, more than 80 listed representatives of Artsakh, Armenian and diaspora civil society, cultural-heritage, academic, legal, journalistic and other circles submitted a protest appeal to diplomatic missions accredited in Armenia. It argued that visits and public acts in Azerbaijani-controlled Artsakh could be used to create an impression of international acceptance of the consequences of unlawful force and ethnic cleansing. The signatories urged diplomatic missions to assess the political, legal and ethical basis of such participation; avoid legitimizing state-curated activities; acknowledge and help protect the Armenian identity of heritage sites; demand compliance with the International Court of Justice's orders and the displaced population's right of return; and press for unhindered access by an independent UNESCO mission.[65]

Armenian cultural specialists focused on Hajiyev's presentation of blank manuscript mock-ups at Gandzasar. Former Artsakh culture minister Lernik Hovhannisyan called it manipulation and said valuable books had been moved to safety during the 2020 war, leaving display replicas behind.[66]

Matenadaran director Ara Khzmalyan separately explained that the manuscripts shown at Gandzasar were replicas and that the originals, including a manuscript dating to 909, were held in Yerevan; he offered to show them to any diplomat who questioned their authenticity.[67]

The dispute also reached parliament. Hayastan Alliance parliamentary leader Anna Grigorian demanded that the government state publicly that Gandzasar is Armenian. National Assembly Speaker Ruben Rubinyan called Hajiyev's claims baseless and unhelpful to peace, while stressing that the new peace required care. Former ambassador-at-large Edmon Marukyan

[62] CivilNet, Armenian criticism grows over diplomats' Karabakh visit as state remains silent.
[63] CivilNet, The grotesque spectacle of foreign diplomats in emptied Nagorno-Karabakh.
[64] Artsakh Committee, Open letter to the diplomatic corps.
[65] Step1.am, Protest appeal to diplomatic missions accredited in Armenia.
[66] RFE/RL, Lernik Hovhannisyan on the Gandzasar manuscript display.
[67] RFE/RL, Hajiyev's blank pages and the Armenian inscription at Gandzasar.

demanded an official statement from the prime minister and foreign minister and called for protest notes to be sent to the embassies represented on the tour.[68]

Catholicos Aram I described the presentation of Armenian churches and historical monuments as Albanian structures as a horrific distortion of history. He criticized the sight of Armenia's supposed friends celebrating in Shushi while accepting that narrative, attributed the situation to Armenian disunity and shortsighted policy, and warned against a false facade of peace.[69]

The Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin strongly condemned Hajiyev's denial of the Armenian identity of Gandzasar and Dadivank and his mocking treatment of Armenian spiritual and cultural heritage. It called the tour a propaganda exercise intended to mislead the international community, expressed particular concern that foreign diplomats and representatives of international organizations had been drawn into disseminating historical falsehoods, and urged them not to legitimize the appropriation of Armenian heritage. It also called for an adequate response and effective action by the Armenian authorities and for international efforts to prevent further destruction and appropriation.[70]

French-language Armenian media criticized the participation of French Ambassador Sophie Lagoutte and EU representative Magdalena Grono, emphasizing the absence of the former Armenian population from the Azerbaijani-organized presentation.[71]

The French Armenian National Committee addressed Lagoutte directly, accusing her of compromising both herself and French diplomacy and concluding, 'La honte.'[72]

The Armenian government's response developed in stages and remained cautious rather than taking the form of a formal public protest against the tour. On 14 September, Deputy Foreign Minister Vahan Kostanyan accompanied Grono to the Matenadaran, where she was shown the Armenian manuscript collection, the history of the manuscripts, preservation and restoration work, and the preparation of replicas for museum display. The Foreign Ministry said Kostanyan and Grono then discussed her recent activities and their effectiveness in the context of institutionalizing peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan.[73]

After the Matenadaran visit, Grono said she did not contest the past Armenian presence and rich footprint in Karabakh and had seen that heritage during the tour. On 15 September, Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan said the Foreign Ministry had taken the necessary steps, praised the Matenadaran's response and said conduct of this kind by Baku did not strengthen peace and instead generated pessimism, although he did not specify a formal diplomatic protest.[74]

On 16 September, Security Council Secretary Alen Simonyan confirmed that he had spoken with Hikmet Hajiyev after the tour and raised concern that such incidents should not obstruct the peace process. He declined to disclose the full conversation and said Yerevan should not answer

[68] RFE/RL, Armenian government silent as parliament speaker rejects Azerbaijani claim.
[69] Catholicos Aram I, Statement on the tour and heritage claims.
[70] Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, Statement on Gandzasar and Dadivank.
[71] Armenews, “Artsakh: L’indécente visite guidée des diplomates étrangers.”
[72] French Armenian National Committee, Response to Ambassador Lagoutte.
[73] Armenian Foreign Ministry, Grono's visit to the Matenadaran.
[74] RFE/RL, Foreign minister says necessary steps were taken over Gandzasar controversy.

every statement from Baku publicly or frame the dialogue simply as a contest over which side was right, a position that itself drew criticism from opponents of the government.[75]

Later on 16 September, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan told parliament that Armenia had responded through what he called the most competent state institution: the Matenadaran and its director, Ara Khzmalyan. He said this had placed Gandzasar's Armenian origin on the record, while arguing that trying to prove the point to Azerbaijan was pointless and would change nothing for Armenia. The statement was the clearest direct response by the prime minister to the controversy, but it still did not amount to a formal protest against the diplomatic tour.[76]

Dutch parliamentary scrutiny

On 25 September, MPs Don Ceder, Henk Vermeer and Chris Stoffer submitted 13 written questions to the Dutch foreign minister concerning reported Dutch participation in the tour. The questions addressed the 2023 displacement, the International Court of Justice's orders, destruction and reattribution of Armenian heritage, the Nakhichevan precedent and whether Dutch representatives challenged the presentation of Gandzasar and Dadivank as Caucasian Albanian. The questions constitute parliamentary scrutiny rather than a Dutch government conclusion; subsequent first-party embassy evidence separately confirmed Dutch participation.[77]

Azerbaijani Counter-Reaction

The Azerbaijani group of the government-supported Peace Bridge Initiative responded on 14 September that a diplomatic visit to Azerbaijan's sovereign territory should not be controversial and that verbal attacks on participating ambassadors contradicted Armenia's recognition of Azerbaijani territorial integrity. Its statement said cultural heritage in Azerbaijan belonged to the Azerbaijani people, called for reciprocal and professional dialogue, and warned that what it termed revanchist pressure could damage the peace process. The signatories were Farhad Mammadov, Kamala Mammadova, Rusif Huseynov, Dilara Afandiyeva and Ramil Iskenderli.[78]

A same-day APA analysis went further. It argued that the reactions by Armenian political, church and diaspora figures exposed a contradiction between Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's peace rhetoric and Armenian conduct concerning Karabakh. It treated National Assembly Speaker Ruben Rubinyan's criticism as evidence that the campaign extended into the governing party, characterized Armenian objections as interference in Azerbaijan's internal affairs, and linked the controversy to Baku's demand that Armenia remove what Azerbaijan regards as constitutional foundations for future territorial claims. Because this was an analysis published by an Azerbaijani outlet, it is evidence of the counter-narrative surrounding the tour rather than an independently established account of Armenian government policy.[79]

Between 15 and 18 September, closely aligned statements from the Western Azerbaijan

[75] RFE/RL, Armenian official reveals phone call with Aliyev aide.
[76] RFE/RL, Pashinyan says Armenia responded through the Matenadaran.
[77] Netherlands House of Representatives, Written parliamentary questions on reported Dutch participation.
[78] Peace Bridge Initiative, Azerbaijani response to Armenian criticism.
[79] APA analysis, Azerbaijani counter-narrative on Armenian reactions.

Community, the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences and the Alban-Udi Christian Community cast Armenian objections as revanchism, interference in Azerbaijan's sovereignty or a threat to peace. ANAS went further by asserting that Gandzasar had no connection with Armenian history and alleging that Armenians had altered its inscriptions, crosses and tombs. These are institutional claims, not independently established findings, and they conflict with the scholarly and epigraphic evidence summarized in Section 6.[80]

A 52-signatory statement by Azerbaijani NGOs used still sharper language. It described the Armenian reaction as aggression, irredentism and a coordinated provocation, rejected the Matenadaran's authority to address Gandzasar's origin and called on the Armenian government to hold accountable individuals and organizations advancing what the signatories termed hostile or irredentist ideas. The demand for accountability is particularly significant because it moves beyond rebutting Armenian historical claims and urges action by Armenia's authorities against their proponents.[81]

OC Media documented a related shift in Azerbaijani pro-government coverage. It reported that outlets including AZERTAC, APA and Caliber, which had previously tended to distinguish Pashinyan's government from Armenia's opposition, now used the controversy to accuse Armenia more broadly of revanchism and unreadiness for peace. This is independent reporting on the information environment surrounding the tour and should be distinguished from proof of formal coordination among the outlets.[82]

International amplification

At the Arab Media Summit in Dubai on 16 September, Hajiyev carried the same historical framing to a wider audience during a Euronews Forum panel with Georgia's foreign minister and the UAE's minister of economy and tourism. He invoked the ancient Kingdom of Caucasian Albania, alleged Armenian destruction or alteration of religious and cultural sites and presented Azerbaijan as preserving Christian heritage. The appearance extended the narrative beyond the tour itself to an Arab and international media platform moderated by the chief executive of Euronews.[83]

On 22 September, the Western Azerbaijan Community explicitly linked the diplomatic visit to a new working group tasked with studying what it calls Albanian Christian heritage in present-day Armenia, historical Zangezur, Daralayaz and the Lake Sevan basin. The Community said the tour had demonstrated that cultural heritage had moved onto the diplomatic agenda and connected the proposed research with its campaign for the return of Azerbaijanis to Armenia. This development links the tour's heritage narrative directly with the broader Western Azerbaijan program.[84]

[80] Western Azerbaijan Community, Statement on Armenia's reaction and cultural heritage.
[81] Trend, Statement signed by 52 Azerbaijani NGO representatives.
[82] OC Media, Shift in Azerbaijani pro-government media coverage.
[83] Euronews, Hajiyev at the Arab Media Summit in Dubai.
[84] AZERTAC, Western Azerbaijan Community working group on Albanian heritage.

10. Assessment

The evidence assembled in this dossier supports a clear conclusion: the September 2026 tour was not a neutral familiarization visit but a state-organized exercise in diplomatic normalization and narrative consolidation. That conclusion rests on three things that can be documented—what the itinerary included, what it left out and what followed—rather than on assumptions about intent.

What the itinerary included. Each major stop carried a message of permanence: arrival at a new airport, a university with rising enrollment, factories, housing for resettled Azerbaijanis, Victory Park and a foreign national-day reception in Shushi framed as a new diplomatic tradition. The most consequential stops were Gandzasar and Dadivank, where senior officials delivered a Caucasian Albanian interpretation of the monasteries to representatives of dozens of states. That interpretation conflicts with specialist scholarship and with the monuments' own epigraphy, and U.S. State Department religious-freedom reporting has recorded concern that it substitutes an Albanian identity for Armenian heritage. Delivered to a domestic audience, the claim would have been familiar; delivered onsite to foreign diplomats, it acquired an international platform.

What it left out. The event that produced Karabakh's present demography—the departure of more than 100,000 Armenians after the September 2023 operation, people whom the International Court of Justice, citing United Nations reports, described as compelled to leave—was absent from the official presentation. Diplomats toured Stepanakert, where Azerbaijani officials said some 28,000 people now live, work and study, without any public reference to the city's former residents, the ICJ's binding Order that they be able to return safely, the property they left behind and the records that Order requires Azerbaijan to preserve, Armenian detainees in Baku or the absence of independent international access to the region and its monuments. In a tour of this kind, the omissions are not incidental; they are part of the message.

What followed. The reattribution did not end with the tour. In the following weeks it was repeated across state, academic, religious, civic and media channels, carried to an international forum in Dubai, attached to an Interpol-linked recovery claim over objects associated with Dadivank, enacted through Albanian-Udi rites at both monasteries and extended, through the Western Azerbaijan Community's new working group, to sites within the internationally recognized territory of Armenia. That last step matters most for the peace process: a heritage claim directed at Armenia's own territory sits uneasily with the mutual respect for territorial integrity that both governments invoke. Whether or not these activities were centrally coordinated, their timing and consistency had the effect of a sustained, multi-channel campaign, and that effect does not depend on proof of coordination.

Presence is not endorsement, but it is not neutral. The strongest case for participation is that diplomats should see conditions for themselves and that engagement can create room for difficult conversations. Magdalena Grono's conduct shows this is possible: she described onsite exchanges with Azerbaijani officials about contested narratives, later affirmed the region's Armenian heritage and called for independent verification of reported destruction, and met displaced Karabakh Armenians in Yerevan. Those statements, however, came after the tour and

after public criticism. No participant was publicly recorded challenging the presentation at Gandzasar or Dadivank, and for most participating states the only public record is praise for reconstruction. In that setting, presence functioned as validation whatever the participants intended, and responsibility for clarifying what participation did not signify rests with the governments that sent them.

Who placed the objection on record. The Armenian government chose a restrained course, answering through the Matenadaran and private contact with Hajiyev, with the Prime Minister describing efforts to prove Gandzasar's Armenian origin to Azerbaijan as pointless. As a result, the international record of objection was created principally by the Armenian Church, civil society, scholars and a foreign legislature rather than by a formal protest from Armenia.

Implications. The announced visit to Nakhichevan would take the same format to the place where the erasure of Armenian heritage is most complete and least independently examined. Building on the questions already put by Dutch parliamentarians, participating governments can reasonably be asked whether their representatives raised the displaced population, the ICJ's orders or Armenian detainees; whether they accept the Caucasian Albanian attribution of Gandzasar and Dadivank; whether they will support unhindered access for an independent UNESCO mission; whether they will press Azerbaijan to honour the undertakings it gave the Court, including its commitment to protect, and not to damage or destroy, cultural monuments, artefacts and sites; and on what terms, if any, they would take part in a visit to Nakhichevan.

Current Participant Count

As of 2 October 2026, the evidence supports the following formulation: 58 countries claimed by Azerbaijan; 21 countries publicly identified by named representatives in available reporting; nine international organizations claimed; four organizations clearly identified with named onsite representatives; and one UN representative whose participation was announced in advance but not independently confirmed onsite.

The roster is open to revision if embassies, diplomatic missions, international organizations or Azerbaijani authorities publish additional photographs, protocol lists or post-visit statements.

2 October 2026

ARMENIAN NATIONAL COMMITTEE – INTERNATIONAL

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