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ANALYTICAL RESOURCE
FOR POLICYMAKERS
AND THE PUBLIC

“JUSTICE” ACCORDING TO AZERBAIJAN

The Prosecution, Trial and Conviction of Ruben Vardanyan

An assessment of the indictment and judgment
of the Baku Military Court of 17 February 2026.



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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
SOURCES AND METHOD	4
1. BACKGROUND	5
Ruben Vardanyan.....	5
The conflict in brief	5
Arrest and detention.....	6
Proceedings.....	6
2. A TRIAL WITHOUT FAIR-TRIAL GUARANTEES	7
A military court for a civilian	7
No lawyer of his choosing	7
Case files he could not read	8
Motions ignored, witnesses unable to help the prosecution.....	8
Closed to the world.....	8
Allegations of coercion and ill-treatment.....	8
3. WHAT THE JUDGMENT ITSELF SHOWS.....	9
3.1 A fourteen-year sentence for an offence not in the verdict of guilt	9
3.2 “Recidivism” for a man with no prior conviction.....	9
3.3 A conviction without a sentence, and charges dropped without explanation	9
3.4 An incident that ends before it begins	9
3.5 Conduct from before he arrived	10
3.6 A conviction for a time-barred offence	10
4. THE CHARGES, ONE BY ONE.....	10
5. THE PATTERN	13
6. WHY IT MATTERS BEYOND ONE HOSTAGE.....	14
7. AZERBAIJAN’S POSITION	14
8. INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES	15

9. RECOMMENDATIONS	17
To the Government of Azerbaijan	17
To the European Union and its member states.....	17
To the United States	18
To other states, including the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Belgium and Switzerland.....	18
To the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the United Nations.....	18
To the legal and academic community	18
APPENDIX A. TARON SIMONYAN’S ANALYSIS (PASTINFO, IN ARMENIAN, ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN).....	19
APPENDIX B. PAGE INDEX TO THE PRIMARY DOCUMENTS	20
SOURCES	21

***Note on preparation:** This report was prepared by the Armenian National Committee–International. An AI assistant was used to help draft and edit the text, to compare statements with the cited source documents, and to format the document. ANC–International directed the analysis, reviewed and edited the text, and is responsible for its content and conclusions.*

office@armeniancause.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 17 February 2026 the Baku Military Court sentenced Ruben Vardanyan, a philanthropist and former State Minister of Nagorno-Karabakh (Republic of Artsakh), to twenty years' imprisonment. He faced 42 charges under Azerbaijan's Criminal Code, ranging from “aggressive war” and crimes against humanity to terrorism, mercenaryism and illegal border crossing. The alleged conduct spans 1988 to 2024. Vardanyan held public office in Nagorno-Karabakh for three and a half months during 2022-2023.

This study examines whether the judgment proves what it claims to prove. It draws on the English translations of the indictment and judgment, published in September 2026; on a fifteen-part legal analysis by the international lawyer Taron Simonyan, published in Armenian, English and Russian by Pastinfo in October 2026; and on the findings of independent international bodies. Its conclusions are as follows.

- **The judgment attributes three decades of conflict to one man.** Most of the conduct charged took place before Vardanyan moved to Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2022, some of it in 1988–1994, when he was a student and young professional in Moscow. In place of individual acts, the judgment relies on conflict-wide statistics and on his “membership” of a “criminal organization” that it equates with the entire Armenian administration of Nagorno-Karabakh.
- **Across the core charges, no individual act is identified.** For murder, torture, enforced disappearance, deportation and persecution, the judgment names no victim, order, decision or communication connecting Vardanyan to the crime. The judgment cites more than 2,000 forensic medical reports; none mentions him. Of the 540 victims and 77 relatives of victims heard in court, three mention his name: two in the formula “armed formations financed by Ruben Vardanyan”, and one on the strength of what he had read on social media. None describes any act of his.
- **The judgment contradicts itself on its face.** It imposes fourteen years under Article 214-2 although that article appears nowhere in the 1,969-page indictment and not in the court's own verdict of guilt. It treats “recidivism” as an aggravating factor for a man it describes as having no prior conviction. It convicts under Article 218.2 without imposing any sentence. It records a flight-jamming incident as ending 41 minutes before it began. Each of these is verifiable at the page references given in this study.
- **The trial did not meet basic fair-trial standards.** A military court tried a civilian. His international lawyer was refused entry to Azerbaijan. The 422 volumes of case files were provided only in Azerbaijani. Defence motions were dismissed without reason. Of nearly 60 hearings, none was open to independent international observers; attendance was limited to a government-approved list. The International Commission of Jurists, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have each reached this conclusion independently.
- **International opinion is consistent.** The European Parliament has three times demanded the release of the Armenian hostages, by large cross-party majorities, and in 2025 described their trials as “sham trials”. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has twice called for their release. Amnesty International called the outcome “nothing short of a travesty”.

- **The stakes extend beyond one hostage.** By treating a whole civilian administration as a criminal enterprise, the judgment creates a template that can be used against every Armenian who served in it, against the right of the displaced Armenian population to return, and potentially against Armenia itself.

ANC-International calls for the immediate and unconditional release of Ruben Vardanyan and all Armenian hostages held in Azerbaijan; for independent access to them in the meantime; for the release of the hostages to be a condition of deeper relations between Azerbaijan and the European Union, the United States and other partners and part of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process; and for international support of the applications now pending before the European Court of Human Rights. Detailed recommendations are set out in section 9.

SOURCES AND METHOD

This study draws on three kinds of material, kept distinct throughout: what the indictment and judgment say; what Taron Simonyan argues in his published analysis; and what ANC-International has independently checked against the documents (marked “ANC-I check”). It also draws on the findings of international bodies and human rights organizations, cited as numbered sources.

The primary documents are the English translations of the indictment (1,969 PDF pages) and judgment (1,864 PDF pages) published in September 2026. [1] [2] Page references are to the PDF pages of those files; the printed page numbers inside the translations differ. ANC-International has not had access to the full case file, exhibits, recordings or the authenticated Azerbaijani originals, and its findings are subject to correction against them. A discrepancy in a translation may reflect a drafting error, a translation error or a substantive defect; those identified in section 3 are listed because they appear consistently and go to the core of the case.

Simonyan’s articles were published in Armenian, English and Russian by Pastinfo; the English translation of the full series is also available from Free Armenian Prisoners, together with French and Spanish translations. [3] [4] They are summarized here, not reproduced; the summaries are ANC-International’s and have not been reviewed by Simonyan or Pastinfo.

This revised edition adds the 2024 opinion of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention on Vardanyan’s detention (sections 1 and 7, and the recommendations) and a published source for ANC-International’s assessment of Armenia’s relationship with Artsakh in section 1.

1. BACKGROUND

Ruben Vardanyan

Ruben Vardanyan (born 1968, Yerevan) built one of Russia's leading investment banks, Troika Dialog, before turning to philanthropy and education. He co-founded the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative (2015), whose annual Aurora Prize honours people who risk their lives to save others; the UWC Dilijan international school in Armenia (2014); and a series of regional development programmes. [5] In September 2022, during a period of mounting pressure on the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, he renounced his Russian citizenship and moved there. He served as State Minister of the region's *de facto* government from 4 November 2022 to 23 February 2023, with responsibility for economic and social affairs, and was a private individual thereafter.

The conflict in brief

Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh to Armenians) is a mountainous region of the South Caucasus with a historically Armenian-majority population. In 1921 the Soviet authorities placed it within Soviet Azerbaijan, and in 1923 it became the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (Region). [6] Throughout the Soviet period Armenians there complained of discrimination and of policies that reduced their share of the population, from about 94% in the early 1920s to 77% by 1989. [7]

In February 1988 the oblast's regional council voted to request transfer to Soviet Armenia. [7] The movement was met with anti-Armenian pogroms in Azerbaijan, beginning in Sumgait, and violence and expulsions followed on both sides. [8] On 1 December 1989 the parliament of Soviet Armenia declared the unification of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. [9] In 1991, after Azerbaijan declared independence from the USSR, Nagorno-Karabakh declared its own independence on 2 September. It did so under the Soviet law of April 1990 on secession, which allowed autonomous regions within a seceding union republic to decide their own status. [10] A referendum in December 1991, boycotted by the Azerbaijani population, confirmed the declaration. [11] Full-scale war followed. By the Russian-brokered ceasefire of May 1994 (signed by the three warring sides: Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan) [12], Armenian forces held most of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding districts. Armenian figures for Armenian losses range from about 6,000 to about 7,000 soldiers and some 1,260 to 1,300 civilians; Azerbaijan's military authorities reported 11,557 soldiers killed. Estimates of the total death toll vary widely. [13]

For the next quarter-century the region functioned as a *de facto* independent state, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (from 2017 also officially the Republic of Artsakh). [14] No UN member state formally recognised it. Armenia also withheld formal recognition, but its relationship with Artsakh contained substantial elements of recognition. [15] Talks mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States, produced no settlement. Clashes along the front line recurred, most seriously in April 2016.

On 27 September 2020 Azerbaijan launched a large-scale offensive. [16] The 44-day war ended with a trilateral statement of 9 November 2020, signed by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia. [17] Under it, Azerbaijan kept the roughly one-third of Nagorno-

Karabakh it had captured, including Shushi/Shusha and Hadrut, and regained the surrounding districts. About 2,000 Russian peacekeepers were deployed in the remaining Armenian-held area and along the Lachin corridor, its only road link to Armenia. [18] Armenia put its dead at 3,825, and Azerbaijan its military dead at 2,907. [16] [19]

From 12 December 2022 the Lachin corridor was blocked. At first the blockade was carried out by Azerbaijanis presenting themselves as environmental protesters, and from April 2023 by an Azerbaijani military checkpoint. [20] The region's roughly 120,000 residents faced severe shortages of food, fuel and medicine. [21] In February 2023 the International Court of Justice ordered Azerbaijan to ensure unimpeded movement through the corridor. [22] On 19 September 2023 Azerbaijan launched a military offensive. A ceasefire the next day required Artsakh's forces to disarm. [23] Within days virtually the entire Armenian population, more than 100,000 people, was forcibly expelled. [24] A decree providing for the republic's dissolution by 1 January 2024, signed under duress on 26 September 2023 and announced two days later, was never officially published. The same president annulled it by a decree signed in Yerevan on 19 October 2023, which was made public in May 2025. [25] The Russian peacekeepers completed their withdrawal in June 2024. [18]

In August 2025, at the White House, Armenia and Azerbaijan initialled a peace agreement. [26] It has not yet been signed. [27] The question of return for the expelled Karabakh Armenians remains unresolved.

Arrest and detention

Vardanyan was arrested on 27 September 2023 at the Azerbaijani checkpoint on the Lachin corridor, while leaving for Armenia among the displaced population. He was one of sixteen Armenians detained after the offensive, among them three former presidents, a former speaker of parliament, a former foreign minister and the former commanders of the region's army. [28] [29] Fifteen of them were tried jointly; Vardanyan was tried separately.

He has been held for more than three years, first in the detention centre of Azerbaijan's State Security Service and, since April 2026, at the Umbaki prison complex near Baku. [29] He went on hunger strike in April 2024 and again in 2025. His lawyers have submitted communications to the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concerning his treatment in custody. [28] The Working Group's Opinion No. 46/2024, adopted in November 2024, before his trial began, found his detention not arbitrary; see section 7. [30]

Proceedings

Date	Development
27 September 2023	Arrest; initial charges under Articles 214-1 (financing terrorism), 279.3 (illegal armed formations) and 318.1 (illegal border crossing). [1, p. 2]
5 December 2024	Charges substantially expanded. [1, p. 2]
28 December 2024	Indictment approved by the Prosecutor General in criminal case No. 232990101. [1, p. 1]
17 January 2025	Trial opens before the Baku Military Court; Vardanyan's request to be tried together with the other fifteen is refused. Nearly 60 hearings follow, the last on 10 February 2026. [31] [32]

Date	Development
21 October 2025	Vardanyan dismisses his lawyer, saying the conditions for a defence do not exist; he later refuses a court-appointed replacement. [28]
17 February 2026	Judgment in case No. 1-1(093)-60/2025: twenty years’ imprisonment, the first ten in prison. The prosecution had sought life. [2] [28]
25 February 2026	Vardanyan declines to appeal, calling it “a conscious refusal to legitimize a process that, from the outset, bore none of the hallmarks of justice.” [29]
19 July 2026	Application lodged with the European Court of Human Rights alleging violations of eight Convention articles. [33]
4 September 2026	English translations of the indictment and judgment published; legal scholars invited to examine them. [34]

The indictment charged Vardanyan under 42 provisions of the Criminal Code. The court dropped two (Articles 279.1 and 279.2), convicted him under the remaining 40, and then imposed a sentence under Article 214-2, which appears in neither the indictment nor the verdict of guilt. This is why other sources give 40, 41 or 42 charges. [1, p. 1] [2, pp. 1859, 1862–1863]

2. A TRIAL WITHOUT FAIR-TRIAL GUARANTEES

The fairness of the proceedings has been examined by the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) in its 2026 report *Justice Under Pressure: Independence of Lawyers and the Right to a Fair Trial in Azerbaijan*, which treats the trials of the former Nagorno-Karabakh officials as a case study and notes that most available information concerns Vardanyan’s case. [28] Its findings, together with those of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, are summarized below.

A military court for a civilian

Vardanyan, a civilian, was tried by a military court. International standards hold that military courts should not try civilians. The ICJ also found that Azerbaijan’s own Code of Criminal Procedure confines military courts to offences concerning war and military service or committed by military personnel, so that assigning these cases to the military court was “inconsistent with the jurisdictional criteria established by Azerbaijan’s own criminal procedure legislation.” [28, pp. 25–28] Amnesty International called the use of a military court “in itself ... incompatible with fair trial guarantees.” [35]

No lawyer of his choosing

The Prosecutor General’s Office refused entry to Azerbaijan to Vardanyan’s international counsel, Jared Genser, which the ICJ described as apparently arbitrary and a denial of the right to counsel of one’s choice. [28, pp. 14–15] In October 2025 Vardanyan dismissed his Azerbaijani lawyer, stating that more than sixty defence motions had been filed and none granted, that most had not been addressed at all, and that “the role of a lawyer ... is reduced to maintaining the appearance of legality in the trial.” [28, p. 15]

Case files he could not read

The case file ran to 422 volumes, some 105,000 pages, almost entirely in Azerbaijani, a language Vardanyan does not speak. The defence received access only 23 days before the second hearing. Key documents were withheld as "state secrets"; the Russian translation of the indictment contained significant errors and was not certified; one translated ruling referred to Belarusian legislation. [28, pp. 19–20, 29–30] Amnesty International noted that the defendants were convicted "based on 'evidence' in a language they could not understand." [35]

Motions ignored, witnesses unable to help the prosecution

Defence motions were dismissed without reason and often omitted from the trial record. The defence could not call its own witnesses. The prosecution's witnesses themselves stated that they were not aware of Vardanyan's activities in Nagorno-Karabakh and had no evidence linking him to Armenian armed forces. The ICJ concluded that the cumulative effect violated Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights. [28, pp. 28–29]

Closed to the world

Azerbaijan described the trials as public. In practice, only two state outlets, the news agency AZERTAC and the broadcaster AzTV, were admitted to the opening hearing. [31] Thereafter, attendance was restricted to people on a government-approved list; local journalists and law students were occasionally admitted, but no independent or foreign media. [28, p. 31] [32] Independent and foreign journalists, international observers and the defendants' families were excluded. Diplomats accredited in Baku applied to attend and were refused; entry required permission from the Prosecutor General's Office or the Supreme Court. [28, p. 30] [36] None of the nearly 60 hearings in Vardanyan's case was open to independent international observation. [28, p. 31] [32] The US State Department has said that embassy staff attend hearings in Baku "where possible"; according to the hostages' lawyer, that has meant only sessions the authorities chose to open. [37] Amnesty International's requests for information about the trial and the evidence went unanswered. [35] As a result, almost everything the public knows about the hearings comes from Azerbaijani state media.

Allegations of coercion and ill-treatment

On the eve of trial Vardanyan stated that he had never given testimony, that documents bearing his signature had been falsified, and that he, his lawyer and his interpreter had been pressured to sign them. [28, pp. 15, 20] During his first hunger strike he was reportedly moved to a punishment cell and subjected to continuous lighting, forced standing and deprivation of drinking water. [28, p. 17] In September 2026 he reported that he was denied medical tests even at his own expense and allowed outdoor exercise once a week for 20 to 40 minutes; Azerbaijan's ombudsperson's office rejected these claims. [38] Since Azerbaijan closed the International Committee of the Red Cross delegation in September 2025, no international organization has regular access to the hostages. [28, p. 17] [38]

The ICJ’s overall conclusion: the proceedings “fall short of the guarantees of fairness, equality of arms, and public scrutiny required under international human rights law and standards” and “reflect wider systemic problems rather than isolated departures from established practice.” [28, p. 33]

3. WHAT THE JUDGMENT ITSELF SHOWS

The following findings come from the court’s own text. Each has been checked by ANC-International against the published English translation, at the page given (PDF page numbers of the published files). They do not depend on any contested evidence; they are visible on the face of the judgment.

3.1 A fourteen-year sentence for an offence not in the verdict of guilt

The indictment’s formal list of charges does not include Article 214-2 (public calls to terrorism). Neither does the court’s operative list of the offences of which Vardanyan is found guilty. Yet the sentencing list that follows imposes fourteen years’ imprisonment under Article 214-2. [1, p. 1] [2, pp. 1859, 1862–1863] Article 214-2 is not mentioned anywhere in the 1,969-page indictment; in the 1,864-page judgment it appears exactly once, in the sentencing list. A defendant must be told clearly which offences he is charged with and convicted of before he can be punished for them. The statutory maximum for this offence is five years, as Simonyan notes and as the Council of Europe’s analysis of Azerbaijani legislation records. [3, Part 11] [39] The sentence thus exceeds the legal maximum almost threefold, for an offence with which Vardanyan was never charged and of which he was never convicted.

3.2 “Recidivism” for a man with no prior conviction

The judgment records that Vardanyan has no previous conviction. [2, p. 9] It then lists recidivism among the aggravating circumstances, citing Article 61.1.2 of the Criminal Code. [2, p. 1860] The aggravating factor thus contradicts the court’s own findings.

3.3 A conviction without a sentence, and charges dropped without explanation

The judgment convicts Vardanyan under Article 218.2 (participation in a criminal organization) but imposes no sentence for it, although, as Simonyan notes, Article 66.1 of the Criminal Code requires a sentence for each offence. [3, Part 12] It also convicts him under Article 218.1 as the organization’s leader, so that he is punished as both leader and ordinary member of the same structure. It drops Articles 279.1 and 279.2 and reclassifies Article 228.3 as 228.2.1 without visible explanation. [2, pp. 1862–1863]

3.4 An incident that ends before it begins

The judgment records interference with a Singapore–Helsinki flight on 8 July 2022 as beginning at 02:09 and ending at 01:28. [2, p. 265] All the flight incidents cited took place between May and August 2022, before Vardanyan moved to Nagorno-Karabakh.

3.5 Conduct from before he arrived

The indictment fixes the start of Vardanyan’s alleged membership of the criminal organization in “early December 2020”, [1, p. 3] yet charges him with displacement of the Azerbaijani population in 1988–1994, [1, pp. 14–19] enforced disappearances from 1989 to 2020 [1, pp. 20–22] and killings from 1988 onwards. The ICJ found that prosecuting him for conduct dating back to 1988, when he was a student at Moscow State University, “raises fundamental concerns under the principle of legality” and “suggests application of criminal law in an arbitrary manner.” [28, p. 25]

3.6 A conviction for a time-barred offence

For Article 270-1.2 (interference with air navigation), the court acknowledges that the two-year limitation period has expired and convicts without imposing a penalty, citing Article 44.2.1 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. [2, p. 1859] Whether that course was lawful in the circumstances requires separate review. Simonyan observes that the conduct the judgment actually describes, radio jamming, falls under the time-barred Article 270-1.2, while the seven-year sentence was imposed under Article 270-1.4, which requires an aircraft actually destroyed or damaged; none is identified (see section 4).

4. THE CHARGES, ONE BY ONE

Taron Simonyan’s fifteen-part analysis examines each group of charges against the judgment. The table below summarizes his findings; where ANC-International has checked a point against the translated documents, this is marked “ANC-I check”. Simonyan’s articles were published by Pastinfo in Armenian, English and Russian and are listed in Appendix A. The series does not discuss two further convictions, under Articles 112 and 228.2.1, which are added to the table from the judgment.

Charge (Criminal Code)	Sentence	What is alleged	What the judgment fails to establish
Art. 100.1 Planning aggressive war	11 years	Taking part, within a “criminal organization”, in preparing “new attack plans”.	No target state, plan, date, author or recipient is identified. The “evidence” is documents seized from Vardanyan’s office after his arrest and undisclosed “operational information”, whose content the judgment does not set out. None of the “new attacks” took place, and the court does not claim otherwise.
Art. 100.2 Waging aggressive war	20 years	“Joining” the “continued occupation of sovereign territories” in December 2020.	Vardanyan never held a military role. The sole factual basis is a humanitarian grant by the Aurora initiative on 9 December 2020 and a visit Nagorno-Karabakh by an Aurora laureate. By then the war had ended under a statement signed by Azerbaijan’s own president, and Vardanyan lived in Moscow. ANC-I check: membership dated from early December 2020 [1, p. 3].
Art. 107 Deportation	14 years	Displacement of 442,841 Azerbaijanis from 924 settlements, 1988–1994.	Vardanyan was then aged 20 to 26 and living in Moscow. The state agency letter relied on gives a different figure (635,646), unexplained. Applying a 2006 law to conduct before 2000 breaches the rule against retroactivity that the judgment itself quotes. ANC-I check: [1, pp. 14–19].

Charge (Criminal Code)	Sentence	What is alleged	What the judgment fails to establish
Art. 109 Persecution	9 years	Persecution on national and political grounds; obstructing the return of displaced persons.	No victim, decision, act or statement of Vardanyan is identified. The discriminatory motive is in effect inferred from his Armenian ethnicity.
Art. 110 Enforced disappearance	20 years	Withholding information on the fate of 3,980 persons, 1989–2020.	The whole period precedes his arrival. Nothing shows that, in three and a half months as state minister in charge of economic and social affairs, he had such information or authority. The state commission letter relied on gives 3,890, not 3,980. ANC-I check: [1, pp. 20–22].
Art. 112 Deprivation of liberty contrary to international law	7 years	Detention and other deprivation of liberty of persons "contrary to international legal norms", within the conflict-wide narrative since 1988.	Not discussed in Simonyan's series and not analysed in this report; listed for completeness. ANC-I check: conviction and sentence [2, pp. 1859, 1862].
Art. 113 Torture	9 years	Torture of 414 prisoners of war and 1,284 civilian hostages over the course of the conflict.	No victim, incident or date is linked to him; aggregate figures for the whole conflict stand in for individual proof. ANC-I check: [1, pp. 39–43].
Art. 114.1 Mercenarism	11 years	Recruiting "at least 2,000" foreigners from September 2020; an "agreement" with the VoMA self-defence school; funding "Kurdish mercenaries".	There is no list, name or payment record for the 2,000. An Aurora Prize award is treated as mercenary payment. VoMA's instructors are Armenian citizens and cannot be mercenaries: under the UN Mercenaries Convention, to which Azerbaijan is a party, a national of a party to the conflict is not a mercenary. The "agreement" date given, 2013, is the year VoMA was founded. ANC-I check: [1, pp. 45–49].
Art. 115.2 Violating the laws of war (mines)	9 years	At least 1,087,226 mines laid over 1,166,702 hectares, 1988–2024.	No order, unit or minefield is linked to him. The claim that mining "accelerated" after his arrival rests on no comparative figures.
Art. 116 (six subparagraphs) Violating international humanitarian law	20 years (one term)	18,850 killed and 56,268 attempted killings, 1988–2024; hostages; cluster munitions; mines.	Six distinct offences receive one undifferentiated sentence. Of the 540 victims heard, none describes an act by Vardanyan; three testimonies mention his name, from hearsay. ANC-I check: [2, pp. 269–441]. The "victims" include a car that slid into a minefield in heavy rain and a serviceman who tripped in the dark while carrying a box of ammunition. [2, p. 443]
Art. 120.2 Aggravated murder	20 years	18,850 killed, 1988–2024; one dated episode: shelling of Mollalar on 19 September 2023.	None of the more than 2,000 forensic medical reports cited in the judgment mentions him; Simonyan's figure of more than 208 refers to the reports on causes of death. ANC-I check: [2, pp. 493–1011]. The one dated episode occurred during Azerbaijan's own offensive, seven months after he left office. The same aggravating factors are counted twice, which Article 61.3 forbids.
Arts. 29 and 120.2 Attempted murder	15 years	56,268 victims, including 882 injured by mines.	Attempted murder requires intent to kill a specific person; none is shown. The accidents listed above are counted as attempted murders.

Charge (Criminal Code)	Sentence	What is alleged	What the judgment fails to establish
Art. 192.3.1 Illegal entrepreneurs hip	6 years	Operating Ameriabank, Aurora, "We Are Our Mountains" and Troika Dialog without Azerbaijani registration; "damage" of 103 billion manat.	Two of the four are charities; Ameriabank is licensed by Armenia's Central Bank; Troika Dialog is Russian; none operated in territory under Azerbaijani control. The offence requires income on an especially large scale; in its place the court puts 103 billion manat, which the indictment itself presents as the total "damage" caused during the conflict, not as income earned by Vardanyan. Only 1,584 manat in court costs was recovered. ANC-I check: [1, pp. 49–56].
Art. 214.2 Terrorism	20 years	308 "terrorist episodes", 1988–2023, and 285 mine explosions, 1990–2024.	The episodes are acts of armed forces in a 35-year armed conflict, governed by international humanitarian law and excluded from the terrorism conventions. The only physical evidence (grenades and cartridges found in a cabinet) is the subject of a separate charge. The count continues into 2024, while he was in custody.
Art. 214-1 Financing terrorism	13 years	\$212,000 raised in May 2023 for the "Artsakh Security and Development Front"; attempts to buy drones and electronic-warfare systems; "David Bek" exercises.	Bank records show the funds came from named public foundations through official accounts, which is the opposite of how terrorism is financed. The court itself describes "David Bek" as a six-month competition for schoolchildren aged 16 to 18 in Armenia. The drones were for surveillance, and the purchase never took place.
Art. 214-2 Public calls to terrorism	14 years	No act is formulated.	Not mentioned anywhere in the indictment and absent from the verdict of guilt; see section 3.1. The statements quoted, such as "I will not surrender to Azerbaijan's conditions", contain no call to violence. ANC-I check: [1, p. 1] [2, pp. 1862–1863].
Art. 218.1 Creating or leading a criminal organization	11 years	Decisions on armed resistance and funding as State Minister; creation of the "Front"; "ASALA" and "Nemesis" groups.	No order, decision, minutes or chain of command is produced. The court dates the "organization" to 1987 and names other leaders, so Vardanyan could not have created it. In substance, the "organization" is the entire administration of Nagorno-Karabakh: its government, army, schools and elected bodies.
Art. 218.2 Participation in a criminal organization	None imposed	"Joining" in early December 2020 and participating until arrest.	Conviction recorded, no sentence imposed; see section 3.3.
Art. 228.2.1 Illegal possession of weapons by a criminal association	5 years	Acquisition, storage and transport of firearms, ammunition and explosives as part of a criminal association (reclassified from Art. 228.3).	Not discussed separately in Simonyan's series, which notes that the only physical evidence, grenades and cartridges found in a cabinet, is the subject of this charge. ANC-I check: [2, pp. 1858, 1862–1863].
Art. 270-1.2 Interference with air navigation	None (time-barred)	Jamming of civilian flights with electronic warfare systems.	The flights cited (31 May, 8 July, 11 August 2022) predate his move. One incident ends before it begins; see section 3.4. His name appears once, in a generic formula, "under the direct leadership of Ruben Vardanyan and others".

Charge (Criminal Code)	Sentence	What is alleged	What the judgment fails to establish
Art. 270-1.4 Destroying or damaging aircraft	7 years	Planning to acquire drones and electronic-warfare systems.	The offence requires an aircraft actually destroyed or damaged; none is identified. The evidence is correspondence about drone purchases that never happened.
Art. 278.1 Violent seizure of power	20 years	Accepting the post of State Minister, 4 November 2022 – 23 February 2023.	No violence or threat of violence is alleged. He was appointed within an administration that had existed since 1991, under the arrangements of a statement Azerbaijan had signed, and he left office after three and a half months.
Art. 279.3 Illegal armed formations causing death	20 years	Creating, arming and training armed formations; exercises, May–August 2023.	The offence requires a causal link to deaths; none is shown. The Defence Army had existed since 1992. The two witnesses’ trial testimony differs from each other and from their pre-trial statements, which are almost word for word identical; the court itself records the contradictions and reads the pre-trial statements into the record [2, pp. 484–486]. ANC-I check: Arts. 279.1 and 279.2 dropped [2, pp. 1862–1863].
Art. 318.2 Illegal border crossing	4 years	Entering via the Lachin corridor in September 2022 and later movements.	Under paragraph 6 of the 2020 trilateral statement the corridor was under Russian peacekeepers, with Azerbaijan guaranteeing safe passage. Azerbaijan’s checkpoint was installed only on 23 April 2023. The border-control data cited show no crossings, which is consistent with there being no checkpoint, not with a crime.

Simonyan’s analysis also notes that the judgment treats Vardanyan’s refusal to testify as evidence of guilt, although remaining silent is a defendant’s constitutional right. [40]

5. THE PATTERN

Read together, the charges show a consistent method. The judgment begins with a conflict-wide account of events since 1988, declares the Armenian administration of Nagorno-Karabakh a “criminal organization”, fixes Vardanyan’s “membership” from December 2020, and then attributes to him every harm recorded over three decades, including events that happened long before he entered public life and even after his arrest. Philanthropy becomes mercenarism and terrorist financing; a school competition becomes paramilitary training; accepting a ministerial appointment becomes a violent seizure of power; travelling on a road guaranteed by an international agreement becomes an illegal border crossing.

Nothing in this study denies that the conflict caused grave suffering to Azerbaijani civilians, including the displaced and the missing, or that their families are entitled to truth and justice. Precisely because those harms are real, they cannot be answered by a conviction that never connects them to the person convicted.

6. WHY IT MATTERS BEYOND ONE HOSTAGE

Criminalizing an entire administration. The judgment treats the institutions of Nagorno-Karabakh, its ministries, army, schools and elected bodies, as one criminal organization existing since 1987. Applied consistently, this makes every teacher, doctor or official who worked in that system a member of a criminal organization. Simonyan has warned that this construction could be used to support future claims against Armenia, and it sits uneasily with any prospect of the displaced Armenian population exercising a safe and dignified right to return. [41]

Hostages as leverage. The Armenia–Azerbaijan peace agreement initialled in Washington in August 2025 contains no provision on the Armenian hostages. [29] As long as their release is left outside the peace process, the hostages remain available as leverage. Armenian rights advocates describe this as “hostage diplomacy”.

The wider pattern in Azerbaijan. The ICJ treats these trials as illustrating structural problems: a bar association under executive control, a judiciary dependent on the executive, and the harassment of independent lawyers. The European Parliament has made the same link, addressing the Armenian hostages alongside Azerbaijani political prisoners. [28] [42] What happened to Vardanyan is a measure of the justice system that anyone accused in Azerbaijan faces.

7. AZERBAIJAN’S POSITION

Azerbaijan maintains that the detainees committed serious crimes, including war crimes, and that they are not covered by the 2020 trilateral statement’s provisions on the exchange of prisoners. It dismissed the European Parliament’s April 2026 resolution as “unfounded and biased”, summoned the EU ambassador, and its parliament announced that it was severing ties with the European Parliament. [43]

Azerbaijan also relies on Opinion No. 46/2024 of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, adopted at the Working Group’s session of 11–15 November 2024 and published in 2025, which found that Vardanyan’s detention was not arbitrary; according to Azerbaijan’s Foreign Ministry, it accepted that his arrest rested on reasonable suspicion. [30] [44] The opinion was adopted before the trial began in January 2025, so it could not assess the proceedings, the evidence or the judgment examined in this report. In April 2026 human rights organizations asked the UN to set it aside and to issue a new opinion, alleging that one of the Working Group’s members should have recused herself because of undisclosed ties to Azerbaijan. [45] [46]

The answer to that position is not to deny that crimes were committed in a long and bitter conflict. It is that a state confident of its evidence has every reason to present it openly: before a civilian court, with defence counsel of the accused’s choosing, with case files the accused can read, and with observers in the courtroom. Azerbaijan chose none of these. Its refusal to let the world see the evidence is itself the strongest indication of how little the evidence shows.

8. INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES

Body	Position
European Parliament, 13 March 2025	Resolution on “the unlawful detention and sham trials of Armenian hostages, including high-ranking political representatives from Nagorno-Karabakh”: demanded their immediate and unconditional release and called for sanctions on officials responsible for human rights violations (523 in favour, 3 against). [47]
European Parliament, 30 April 2026	Resolution on supporting democratic resilience in Armenia: “Condemns Azerbaijan’s unjust detention of Armenian prisoners of war, detainees and hostages; demands their immediate and unconditional release” (para. 13); supports the right of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians to “a safe, unimpeded and dignified return under appropriate international guarantees” (para. 12) (476 in favour, 47 against). [43]
European Parliament, 8 October 2026	Called again for the immediate and unconditional release of Armenian political prisoners and prisoners of war, and made any future EU–Azerbaijan partnership agreement conditional on tangible human rights improvements (492 in favour, 23 against). [42]
Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 27 January 2025	Resolution 2580 (2025): “continues to follow the situation with detained representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh and all Armenian prisoners of war currently held in Azerbaijan, reiterating its call to Azerbaijan to release these people” (para. 4.2). [48]
Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, January 2026	Resolution on the progress of the Assembly’s monitoring procedure: urges Azerbaijan to “release immediately all those detained on politically motivated charges, including 23 Armenian detainees” (75 in favour, 1 against). [49]
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 7 April 2025	Michael O’Flaherty told the Parliamentary Assembly that the situation of the Armenian prisoners was a priority, that he was following their trials, and that he had twice requested permission to visit Baku. He was responding to a statement on the conditions of detention of Ruben Vardanyan and others. [50]
International Commission of Jurists, May 2026	The trials “fall short of the guarantees of fairness, equality of arms, and public scrutiny required under international human rights law.” [28]
Amnesty International, 17 February 2026	The convictions are “nothing short of a travesty”; trying civilians before a military court is “incompatible with fair trial guarantees.” [35]
Human Rights Watch, 21 September 2026	The proceedings “raised serious fair trial concerns”; civilians including Vardanyan were tried by a military court “in hearings largely closed to independent scrutiny.” [38]
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 3 March 2025	Told the 58th session of the Human Rights Council: “All those arbitrarily detained in Azerbaijan, including ethnic Armenians, must be released immediately.” [51]

Body	Position
US House Foreign Affairs Committee, July 2026	On 22 July 2026 adopted, 44 to 7, an amendment by Rep. Brad Sherman to H.R. 9087 expressing the sense of Congress that Azerbaijan should immediately and unconditionally release all Armenian prisoners of war and political prisoners. [52] [53]
US Senators Gary Peters, Edward Markey, Bill Cassidy and Thom Tillis, 4 April 2024	Letter to the Secretary of State naming Ruben Vardanyan among the detained Nagorno-Karabakh leaders; urged that their release be prioritized, including as “a condition of any peace deal reached by Armenia and Azerbaijan”, and that sanctions be imposed on Azerbaijani officials responsible for human rights violations. [54]
101 members of the US Congress (26 Senators, 75 Representatives), 5 October 2026	Letter to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, led by Senators Gary Peters and Adam Schiff and Representatives Gus Bilirakis and Frank Pallone, urging the administration to “withhold U.S. military assistance” from Azerbaijan unless it releases the Armenian prisoners, protects Armenian cultural heritage and withdraws its forces from Armenian territory. [55]
Government of Canada, 2025–2026	In January 2025, as the Baku trials opened, Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly called for “the unconditional release of all Armenian prisoners of war and arbitrarily detained ethnic Armenians in Azerbaijan”. On 10 August 2025 her successor, Anita Anand, welcoming the Washington peace summit, listed “the release of all Armenian detainees and prisoners of war” among the issues still to be resolved; according to Radio Canada International, Canada was the only G7 government whose statement raised the detainees. On 15 January 2026 Canada welcomed the release of four Armenian prisoners as “a positive step toward a just and durable peace”, adding: “We look forward to continued confidence-building measures, including additional prisoner releases, as Azerbaijan and Armenia advance towards mutual peace and prosperity.” [56]
Government of the United Kingdom, 2024–2025	In a written answer in the House of Lords in March 2025, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office stated: “We also continue to call for the release of all remaining prisoners of war.” It said the UK had asked Azerbaijan to ensure that those detained after the September 2023 military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh receive a fair trial and are held in safe conditions; that the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary had conveyed the same messages; that Minister of State Stephen Doughty had raised the issue with the Azerbaijani President’s Special Representative, Elchin Amirbekov, in October 2024; and that the British Embassy in Baku monitors the cases. [57]
All-Party Parliamentary Group for Armenia, UK Parliament, 1 April 2025	Letter from the chair, Jessica Morden MP, and the vice-chairs to UK ministers, condemning the “continuing detention and trials of the 23 Armenian prisoners in Baku” and urging the Government to “put pressure on Azerbaijan to help achieve their release”, to seek visits by British Embassy officials to the prisoners, and to press for the return of the International Committee of the Red Cross. The letter expressed particular concern for the health of Ruben Vardanyan, who had recently been on hunger strike for almost a month. [58]

Body	Position
Government of France, 2025–2026	In March 2025 the Government told the Senate that Azerbaijan must ensure that “every individual has the right to due process and a fair trial”, and “that allegations of torture and ill-treatment must be promptly and impartially investigated”. In June 2026, answering a written question in the National Assembly, the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs stated that France “calls for the release of all persons arbitrarily detained in Azerbaijan” and has paid particular attention to the fate of the Armenian prisoners since their trials opened in January 2025 (ANC-I translations). [59]
French National Assembly, 3 February 2026	Resolution “calling for the release of the Armenian prisoners held by Azerbaijan”, adopted 183 to 0: condemns “the arbitrary imprisonment and trial of the political leaders of the Republic of Artsakh” and demands “their immediate and unconditional release”; invites the Government to require Azerbaijan to release the Armenian prisoners without delay. The preamble notes that the defendants are tried by a military court on “unfounded, even entirely fabricated” charges, that the first preliminary hearings were held in secret, that international observers, NGOs and foreign media are barred, and that the case files are in Azerbaijani or Russian (ANC-I translations). [60]
French Senate, 17 January 2024	Resolution on the territorial integrity of Armenia: disapproves of “the arbitrary arrest of the political leaders of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh” and demands “their release without delay”; invites the Government to demand from Azerbaijan, “under penalty of sanctions”, the release without delay of the civilian and military prisoners it holds. (ANC-I translations). [61]

Legal remedies are being pursued, but their outcome is pending. Vardanyan’s application to the European Court of Human Rights was lodged on 19 July 2026. A joint application on behalf of the fifteen co-defendants, whose convictions were upheld on appeal on 6 August 2026, followed on 21 August 2026, alleging violations of Articles 6 (fair trial) and 7 (no punishment without law). [33] [62]

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Azerbaijan

- Release Ruben Vardanyan and all Armenian hostages immediately and unconditionally.
- Pending release: restore regular access for the International Committee of the Red Cross; guarantee family contact, independent medical care and access to lawyers of the hostages’ choosing; and provide each hostage with an official copy of his judgment in a language he understands.
- Cooperate fully with the European Court of Human Rights in the pending applications.

To the European Union and its member states

- Implement the European Parliament’s resolutions of 2025 and 2026, including by making any new partnership agreement with Azerbaijan, and any deepening of energy cooperation, conditional on the hostages’ release.
- Raise the cases publicly and by name in every high-level contact with Azerbaijan.

- Consider targeted measures under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime against officials responsible for the hostages’ arbitrary detention and ill-treatment, as the European Parliament has urged.

To the United States

- As host of the August 2025 Washington summit at which the peace agreement was initialled, make the release of the Armenian hostages an explicit element of the Armenia–Azerbaijan settlement.
- Act on the House Foreign Affairs Committee’s call for immediate and unconditional release and seek diplomatic access to the hostages and to any further proceedings.

To other states, including the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Belgium and Switzerland

- Call publicly and in bilateral contacts with Azerbaijan for the immediate and unconditional release of Ruben Vardanyan and all Armenian hostages, and treat their release as integral to a just and durable peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan.
- Seek diplomatic access to the hostages and to any further proceedings, and coordinate monitoring with like-minded embassies in Baku.
- Act on the calls already made by their parliaments, including the French National Assembly’s resolution of 3 February 2026 and the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for Armenia’s letter of 1 April 2025, and consider targeted measures against officials responsible for the hostages’ arbitrary detention and ill-treatment.
- As members of the Council of Europe, the European states among them should support the applications pending before the European Court of Human Rights, including through third-party interventions where the Court permits.

To the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the United Nations

- Council of Europe: the Commissioner for Human Rights and the Parliamentary Assembly should seek access to the hostages and give the pending applications their full support.
- OSCE: the Chairpersonship and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights should raise the hostages’ cases with Azerbaijan and seek access to them and to any further proceedings. OSCE Parliamentary Assembly: support the proposed humanitarian visit by parliamentarians to the hostages in Baku. [63]
- UN Special Rapporteur on torture: act on the communication already submitted on Vardanyan’s behalf. UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention: review Opinion No. 46/2024 in the light of the trial record and of the pending complaint concerning its adoption.

To the legal and academic community

- Examine the published indictment and judgment. The documents are available in English; their deficiencies can be verified by anyone, and independent professional scrutiny is the best protection against their being treated as a model.

APPENDIX A. TARON SIMONYAN'S ANALYSIS (PASTINFO, IN ARMENIAN, ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN)

Part	Subject	Published	Link
1	Planning aggressive war (Art. 100.1)	5 October 2026	https://www.pastinfo.am/en/news/2026/10/05/Pastinfo-begins-analysis-of-the-verdict-in-the-case-of-Ruben-Vardanyan/1982923
2	Waging aggressive war (Art. 100.2)	6 October 2026	https://www.pastinfo.am/en/news/2026/10/06/Conducting-an-Aggressive-War/1983040
3	Deportation (Art. 107)	7 October 2026	https://www.pastinfo.am/en/news/2026/10/07/Ruben-Vardanyan-Found-Guilty-of-Deporting-the-Azerbaijani-Population/1983141
4	Persecution (Art. 109)	8 October 2026	https://www.pastinfo.am/en/news/2026/10/08/Ruben-Vardanyan-charged-with-an-offense-where-the-sole-evidence/1983301
5	Enforced disappearance (Art. 110)	9 October 2026	https://www.pastinfo.am/en/news/2026/10/09/Justice-According-to-Azerbaijan-part5/1983431
6	Torture (Art. 113)	12 October 2026	https://www.pastinfo.am/en/news/2026/10/12/Ruben-Vardanyan-Found-Guilty-of-Torturing-414-Prisoners/1983646
7	Mercenarism (Art. 114.1)	13 October 2026	https://www.pastinfo.am/en/news/2026/10/13/Aku-Court-Treats-Aurora-Prize-Money-as-Mercenary-Payment/1983790
8	Laws of war and IHL (Arts. 115.2, 116)	14 October 2026	https://www.pastinfo.am/en/news/2026/10/14/Ruben-Vardanyan-Accused-of-Mining-1166702-Hectares-of-Territory/1983919
9	Murder and attempted murder (Arts. 120.2, 29)	15 October 2026	https://www.pastinfo.am/en/news/2026/10/15/Justice-According-to-Azerbaijan-Part-9/1984041
10	Illegal entrepreneurship (Art. 192.3.1)	16 October 2026	https://www.pastinfo.am/en/news/2026/10/16/Aurora-Troika-Dialog-and-Ameriabank-labeled-as-Illegal-Entrepreneurship-in-Azerbaijan/1984174
11	Terrorism and its financing (Arts. 214.2, 214-1, 214-2)	19 October 2026	https://www.pastinfo.am/en/news/2026/10/19/Ruben-Vardanyans-political-stance-framed/1984396
12	Criminal organization (Arts. 218.1, 218.2)	20 October 2026	https://www.pastinfo.am/en/news/2026/10/20/Ruben-Vardanyans-tenure-as-State-Minister-was-itself-considered-a-crime/1984505
13	Aviation offences (Arts. 270-1.2, 270-1.4)	21 October 2026	https://www.pastinfo.am/en/news/2026/10/21/SingaporeHelsinki-flight/1984654
14	Seizure of power; armed formations (Arts. 278.1, 279.3)	22 October 2026	https://www.pastinfo.am/en/news/2026/10/22/Usurpation-of-Power/1984767
15	Illegal border crossing (Art. 318.2)	23 October 2026	https://www.pastinfo.am/en/news/2026/10/23/Crime-Against-the-Order-of-Governance/1984865

APPENDIX B. PAGE INDEX TO THE PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

Issue	Indictment (PDF page)	Judgment (PDF page)
Approval of indictment; charges; initial detention	1–2	1, 9
Conflict-wide narrative; alleged criminal organization	3–6, 14–19	9–10
Date of alleged “membership” (December 2020)	3	—
Displacement, 1988–1994	14–19	—
Missing persons	20–22	—
Treatment of captives	39–43	—
Mercenaries and foreign fighters	45–49	—
Economic charges	49–56	—
Singapore–Helsinki flight incident	—	265
Limitation period, Art. 270-1.2	—	1859
No prior conviction; “recidivism”	—	9, 1860
Verdict, sentencing list, Art. 214-2	1	1859, 1862–1863
Aggregate sentence	—	1863

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