



IODA
International Observatory
for Democracy in Armenia

ARMENIA PRE-ELECTION REPORT



JUNE 2026



REPORT

Assessment of Democratic Conditions and the Pre-
Electoral Environment in Armenia

June 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The International Observatory for Democracy in Armenia (IODA) prepared this report based on two fact-finding missions conducted in Armenia in March and May 2026. It assesses the political and civic environment ahead of the 7 June parliamentary elections. The findings indicate that while Armenia's formal democratic institutions remain in place, their practical functioning is increasingly shaped by concentrated political power, uneven electoral conditions, selective application of legal and administrative measures, and growing pressure on dissenting political and civic voices.

- 1. Concentration of Political Power and Uneven Electoral Conditions:** The assessment identifies an increasingly uneven electoral environment shaped by the concentration of political power around the ruling Civil Contract party and the extensive use of administrative resources by incumbents. Formal democratic institutions remain in place; however, the distinction between the ruling party and the state apparatus continues to erode. Decision-making is highly centralized in the Prime Minister's office, while appointments across state institutions, law enforcement bodies, and regulatory agencies increasingly depend on political loyalty rather than institutional independence. These dynamics give incumbents disproportionate access to state resources, institutional visibility, and administrative leverage throughout the pre-electoral period. Public sector influence, state-affiliated structures, and administrative mechanisms operate in ways that advantage the ruling party and distort conditions of equal political competition, further weakening already fragile checks and balances.
- 2. Expanding Use of State Mechanisms and Pressure on Dissent:** The report notes a growing pattern of intimidation driven by the expanding use of state institutions, law enforcement mechanisms, and legal instruments to suppress political dissent and discredit critical voices. Opposition actors, journalists, civic activists, clergy, and government critics face surveillance, selective legal proceedings, administrative pressure, and coordinated public smear campaigns designed to deter criticism and restrict political participation. Intrusive surveillance practices, including phone tapping, interception of private communications, covert recordings, biometric monitoring, and facial recognition technologies, operate alongside weak oversight of state access to personal data, creating conditions of fear and self-censorship in politically sensitive contexts. Authorities apply administrative and law enforcement measures selectively against protest activity and dissent. The "Red Berets" special police unit stands at the center of repeated allegations of disproportionate force, arbitrary detentions, violence against peaceful protesters, and obstruction of independent media coverage, while accountability mechanisms for alleged abuses remain ineffective.
- 3. Rule of Law and Selective Application of Justice:** Despite reforms introduced through the 2021 Criminal Procedure Code aimed at limiting pre-trial detention and expanding non-custodial alternatives, courts continue to rely heavily on detention measures. Judicial decisions frequently invoke standardized risks such as absconding or obstruction of justice without individualized justification. Strong alignment emerges between judicial rulings and prosecutorial requests, particularly in politically sensitive cases. Broad criminal provisions such as *"hooliganism," "calls for violence,"* and *"calls for overthrow of the constitutional order"* apply in cases involving opposition figures, clergy, journalists, activists, and public commentators. Their application shows patterns of selectivity and disproportionate targeting of dissenting voices.
- 4. Media Environment & Digital Ecosystem:** Media pluralism exists formally, yet the information environment remains highly polarized and segmented along partisan lines. Major outlets maintain close links to political or economic actors associated with either the ruling party or former governing elites, producing a fragmented media landscape dominated by competing political narratives.

Increased defamation penalties exert a chilling effect on investigative journalism and political commentary. Journalists and media actors face legal pressure, strategic litigation, online harassment, coordinated discrediting campaigns, and reputational attacks. Pro-government media ecosystems and affiliated online networks actively amplify narratives targeting critics and opposition figures, further narrowing the space for independent reporting. The pre-electoral period also shows a growing circulation of AI-generated and manipulative digital content, including synthetic audio-visual material, edited recordings, and fabricated statements presented as authentic. These tools expand the spread of unverifiable information across social media and messaging platforms, where content outpaces verification processes. Alongside this, anonymously produced posts and untraceable claims further blur the line between factual reporting and coordinated disinformation. Existing legal and regulatory frameworks do not adequately address these developments, as Armenia lacks clear mechanisms to regulate AI-generated political content, ensure transparency of synthetic media, or enable timely identification and correction of manipulated material during electoral periods.

5. **Securitization of Political Discourse and Shrinking Space for Opposition:** The political environment increasingly frames competition through securitized narratives centered on sovereignty, national security, and stability. The ruling Civil Contract party positions itself as the principal guarantor of state security, while opposition actors, clergy, journalists, protest movements, and critical voices face portrayals linking them to foreign interests or vaguely defined “*hybrid threats*.” This framing redefines political disagreement as a security issue rather than a democratic process, narrowing space for legitimate opposition in the pre-electoral period. Opposition actors face heightened legal scrutiny, restrictive measures, and stigmatizing rhetoric, which reduces their ability to campaign freely and weakens conditions for genuine political pluralism. Citizens face constrained conditions for informed political choice, undermining both inclusiveness and competitiveness in the electoral process. Authorities also deploy increasingly hostile and stigmatizing rhetoric toward vulnerable groups, particularly Artsakhi refugees. Representatives of the ruling party, including Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, use narratives that vilify, intimidate, or politically instrumentalize displaced Artsakh Armenians, deepening polarization and social tension in an already fragile post-displacement context. Of particular concern, the campaign targeting the Armenian Apostolic Church involves legal proceedings, public rhetoric, media campaigns, and institutional measures affecting senior clergy and church governance structures. These developments raise serious questions regarding constitutional guarantees of institutional autonomy, separation between church and state, and protections under the European Convention on Human Rights.

The report situates these dynamics within the broader pre-electoral environment, where citizens form political opinions and exercise political rights under increasingly uneven conditions. Armenia’s formal legal and institutional framework broadly aligns with democratic standards; however, its implementation increasingly reflects concentrated political power, informal governance practices, selective enforcement of laws, securitized political discourse, and expanded reliance on administrative and coercive instruments.

Within this context, concerns arise regarding the extent to which Armenia meets its obligations under the ICCPR, the ECHR, and the OSCE Copenhagen Document in practice, particularly in relation to political pluralism, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, institutional independence, and equal participation in public life ahead of the 7 June parliamentary elections.

METHODOLOGY

The report draws on findings from two **fact-finding missions conducted in Armenia between 7-12 March and 22-27 May 2026**. The first fact-finding delegation, representing the IODA Executive Board, included Kenneth Roth, Sarah Leah Whitson, Mark Jones, and Philippe Kalfayan. During the second mission, the delegation was composed of Sarah Leah Whitson, Philippe Kalfayan, Diana Kearney, and Bryan May. Following the mission, the findings were shared with and reviewed by the rest of the Executive Board members.

The Initiative is guided by a seven-member Executive Board, which collectively approves all public statements and analytical outputs. The Board is composed of individuals selected for their demonstrated expertise in democratic governance, rule of law, human rights, and electoral processes, all serving in a voluntary capacity without remuneration. Its members bring extensive international experience across legal practice, multilateral institutions, and human rights advocacy.

- **Kenneth Roth**, currently a Visiting Professor at Princeton University and former Executive Director of Human Rights Watch for nearly three decades, is widely recognized for his work in advancing global human rights standards.
- **Sarah Leah Whitson**, former Executive Director of DAWN and former head of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa Division, has led extensive regional human rights work and is a published author on governance and foreign policy.
- **Jose Aranaz**, a former United Nations official with over two decades of service, has held senior advisory roles in constitutional law, mediation, and electoral assistance across multiple regions.
- **William Bourdon**, a Paris-based attorney and former Secretary General of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), has been active in international justice, anti-corruption, and whistleblower protection initiatives.
- **Mark Jones**, a barrister of England and Wales, has over twenty years of experience working with the Council of Europe, UNDP, OSCE, and other international bodies, including prior assignments in Armenia and the wider region.
- **Bryan May**, former Member of Parliament in Canada, has held senior governmental roles and contributed to strengthening parliamentary and diplomatic relations with Armenia.
- **Philippe Kalfayan**, PhD, legal scholar and practitioner, former Secretary General of International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), legal expert for the Council of Europe, with a focus on international human rights law and rule of law.

During the missions, the IODA delegation carried out consultations with a broad range of stakeholders, including representatives of state institutions, independent bodies, the judiciary, civil society organizations, political actors, legal professionals, and religious authorities.

Institutional meetings were held with the Central Electoral Commission, including Armen Smbatyan (Secretary of the Commission) and Hermine Harutyunyan (Foreign and Public Relations Department). Consultations with the Supreme Judicial Council, included Karen Tumanyan (Member of the Supreme Judicial Council), Arshak Vardapetyan (First Deputy Head of the Judicial

Department), and Arus Hayrapetyan (Deputy Head of the Judicial Department). Engagements were also conducted with the Office of the Human Rights Defender (Ombudsman), represented by Vladimir Hovhannisyan, Head of the Department for Protection of Civil, Socio-Economic and Cultural Rights.

The delegation met with religious leadership, including **His Holiness Garegin II**, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, as well as Archbishop Natan Hovhannisian, Director of the External Relations and Protocol Department of the Mother See, and Rev. Fr. Yesayi Artenyan, Director of the Information System of the Mother See.

Consultations were also held with legal professionals, including defense lawyers involved in politically sensitive cases; Chairman of the Chamber of Advocates Simon Babayan, and representatives of the Association of Judges, including Alexandre Azaryan (Chairman) and Davit Harutyunyan (member).

Further engagements included the State Investigative Committee, represented by Armen Margaryan and Vache Mkhitarian, as well as the State Anti-Corruption Committee, including Armen Asatryan (Deputy Chairman), Garegin Begoyan, and Angela Grigoryan.

The delegation also engaged with political actors, including parliamentary opposition factions: the “Armenia” faction (Seyran Ohanyan, Anna Grigoryan, Arthur Khachatryan) and the “With Honour” faction (Hayk Mamijanyan).

Consultations were further conducted with a wide range of extra-parliamentary political forces and civic initiatives, including:

- **Hayaqve Civic Union** | *Avetik Chalabyan*
- **“Our Way / Strong Armenia”** | *Gohar Meloyan, Alexandre Sargsyan, Aram Vardevanyan, Arthur Sargsyan*
- **Prosperous Armenia** | *Arman Abovyan*
- **Wings of Unity** | *Narek Paronyan*
- **Homeland Party** | *Babken Harutyunyan*
- **Armenian National Congress** | *Armen Khachatryan*
- **European Party of Armenia** | *Tigran Khzmalyan*

IODA also sought meetings with representatives of the ruling “Civil Contract” parliamentary faction, as well as with the Ministries of Internal Affairs and Justice. While receipt of the requests was acknowledged, no meetings were ultimately scheduled. A request for a meeting with the Constitutional Court was declined due to scheduling constraints. These factors constitute a limitation of the assessment, particularly regarding direct engagement with executive authorities.

During the second fact-finding mission, consultations were held with the Corruption Prevention Commission (Tigran Tsaturyan and Narek Abgaryan), the Ambassador of Canada to the Republic of Armenia Andrew Turner, lawyers, experts, and other relevant stakeholders, such as organizations dedicated to the protection of Artsakhi Armenians’ rights. Additional meetings

included representatives of the **Wings of Unity party** - Arman Tatoyan, and members of the **Prosperous Armenia party**- Arman Abovyan, Elinar Vardanyan, and Luiza Sargsyan.

Requests for meetings were also submitted to the Human Rights Defender Anahit Manasyan, the Constitutional Court, and the Investigative Committee. The Ombudsman's Office declined due to scheduling constraints, while the Constitutional Court and Investigative Committee responded positively; however, meetings were ultimately not facilitated because of time limitations and uncertainty regarding representatives' availability.

Recognizing the importance of varied local contexts in the provinces, the mission prioritized visits outside the capital to ensure a comprehensive understanding of political, social, and institutional dynamics. Special attention was devoted to local manifestations of the pre-electoral process, conditions for political competition, potential use of administrative resources, and issues related to the exercise of citizens' political and civil rights. Prior to the mission, coordination was requested with all election-participating parties to facilitate regional meetings. Responses were received from the **Armenian National Congress, Armenia Alliance, Prosperous Armenia, and Hayaqve Initiative** (part of the Strong Armenia Alliance).

Regional consultations were conducted in **Kotayq (Hrazdan), Gegharkunik (Sevan), Tavush (Ijevan and Dilijan), Lori (Spitak), and Shirak (Gyumri)**. In Vanadzor, the delegation met with the **Helsinki Citizens' Assembly–Vanadzor** NGO, part of the “Independent” observer alliance, while in Gyumri, discussions were held with the **Progress of Gyumri** short-term observer group. Back in Yerevan, the delegation also met with the **Eyewitness/Akanates observer mission**, a joint initiative of Transparency Armenia and the Law Development and Protection Foundation, whose representatives were present during the meetings. Meeting was also held with **OSCE long-term observers**, Rishi Datta and Nadia Simoes.

All consultations were conducted in a structured format. Interlocutors were first invited to present their institutional mandates, organizational structures, and areas of competence. This was followed by an exchange during which IODA experts raised questions based on information obtained through parallel consultations, legal analysis, and publicly available sources. Information was cross-checked across multiple sources to ensure consistency and to identify recurring patterns.

In addition to stakeholder consultations, the assessment is based on desk research, including analysis of relevant legislation, statistical data, jurisprudence, and publicly available reports. The methodology relies on qualitative assessment and triangulation of information from multiple sources.

The findings presented in this report reflect patterns identified across a range of engagements and sources, rather than isolated incidents. The assessment aims to provide a substantiated overview of key developments affecting democratic governance in Armenia in the pre-electoral period.

CHAPTER 1 | DEMOCRATIC AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitutional and legal framework of the Republic of Armenia establishes the formal foundations of democratic governance, including the nature of the state, the organization of public authority, the protection of fundamental rights, and the regulation of electoral processes.

The **Constitution** in **Article 1** defines Armenia, as a sovereign, democratic, social state governed by the rule of law. Sovereignty is vested in the people, who, pursuant to **Article 2**, exercise power through free elections, referenda, and through state and local self-government bodies. The same provision explicitly prohibits and criminalizes the usurpation of power. The constitutional order places the individual at its center: **Article 3** identifies human dignity as the highest value and establishes that fundamental rights and freedoms are directly applicable and binding on all public authorities. These rights also function as substantive limits on the exercise of state power.¹

The organization of the state is based on the principle of separation and balance of powers, as set out in **Article 4**, which requires the legislative, executive, and judicial branches to operate within a system of mutual constraint. Political pluralism is guaranteed under **Article 8**, which provides for a multiparty system and ensures the free formation and operation of political parties under conditions of legal equality. Political parties are explicitly recognized as instruments for the formation and expression of the political will of the people.

The Constitution also defines the relationship between the state and religious institutions. **Article 17** guarantees the freedom of activity of religious organizations and establishes their separation from the state. At the same time, **Article 18** recognizes the role of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church in the spiritual and cultural life of the nation, reflecting its historical significance.

Armenia operates under a parliamentary system of governance. Legislative authority is vested in the National Assembly, which, under **Article 88**, functions as the representative body of the people and exercises legislative power, adopts the state budget, and oversees the executive. According to **Article 89**, the Assembly is unicameral, composed of **at least 101 deputies**, and elected through a proportional electoral system. The same provision requires that the electoral framework ensure the formation of a stable parliamentary majority and allows for the possibility of a second round of elections where such a majority is not achieved.

Executive power is exercised by the Government, which is defined in Article 146 as the supreme body of the executive, and is **headed by the Prime Minister (Article 150)**. It is responsible for developing and implementing domestic and foreign policy and for the general administration of the state. **The President of the Republic serves as head of state** under **Article 123**, with the function of ensuring compliance with the Constitution and acting in an impartial manner in the general interest. The President is elected by the National Assembly in

¹ Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, adopted 6/12/2025 | <https://www.president.am/en/constitution-2015/>

accordance with the multi-round procedure set out in **Article 125**, reflecting the parliamentary character of the system.

The Constitution guarantees a range of fundamental rights and freedoms that are central to democratic governance. **Article 42** protects freedom of expression, including the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media, and guarantees the freedom of the press and the existence of independent public broadcasting. **Article 44** establishes the **right to peaceful and unarmed assembly**, providing for a notification-based regime for outdoor assemblies while exempting spontaneous assemblies from prior notification requirements.

Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is guaranteed under **Article 41**, which includes the right to change religion or belief and to manifest it individually or collectively. **Articles 33 and 34** further provide **protections for private life**, including the secrecy of communications and the right to personal data protection, subject to safeguards defined by law and, in principle, judicial oversight. Across these provisions, restrictions on rights are permissible only when prescribed by law and justified by specific legitimate aims, such as state security, public order, or the protection of the rights of others.

- Electoral Framework

The **electoral framework** for the National Assembly is grounded in **Article 89 of the Constitution and further elaborated in the Electoral Code**. Members of parliament are elected through a nationwide proportional representation system based on closed party lists, with seats allocated using the d'Hondt method.² Electoral thresholds are set at 4 per cent for political parties and 8 per cent for alliances composed of two parties and 10% for alliances with more than two parties. The framework provisions mechanisms intended to balance representation and governability, including the guarantee that **at least three political forces are represented in parliament** and provisions allowing for the allocation of additional seats to ensure the formation of a governing majority. It also includes provisions for a second round of elections in cases where a government cannot be formed within the prescribed timeframe.

The Electoral Code contains additional measures aimed at inclusiveness. These include **reserved seats for national minorities** (Assyrians, Kurds, Russians, and Yazidis) and gender representation requirements for candidate lists. As a result of these provisions, women's representation in the National Assembly increased from **18.37 per cent** in 2018 to **33.64 per cent** following the 2021 elections.

The electoral framework has undergone several amendments in recent years. Changes adopted in **April and May 2021** replaced the previously used open-list proportional system with a closed-list system and revised electoral thresholds. They also modified the mechanism for ensuring a stable parliamentary majority.³

² European Parliament Briefing, Understanding the d'Hondt method, June 2019

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/637966/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)637966_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/637966/EPRS_BRI(2019)637966_EN.pdf)

³ Constitutional Law of the Republic of Armenia "Electoral Code of the Republic of Armenia", adopted 25/05/2016

<https://res.elections.am/images/forWebPages/NA2026/ElectoralCode.pdf>

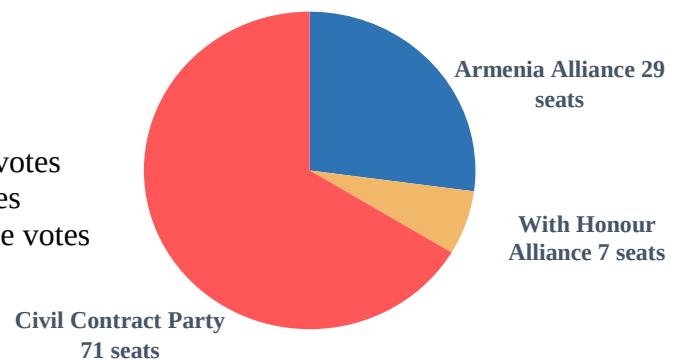
Under the revised rules, a party or alliance that receives a plurality but less than 52 per cent of seats may be allocated additional seats to reach that threshold. The law further establishes a structured process for coalition formation within defined timeframes and provides for a second round of elections between the two leading contestants if a government cannot be formed. These provisions replaced earlier arrangements that provided different majority thresholds and coalition procedures.

Early parliamentary elections were held on 20 June 2021 following a period of political instability and anti-government protests in the aftermath of the November 2020 ceasefire agreement that ended the 44-day war in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. The elections were announced on 18 March 2021, following the Prime Minister's decision to call early elections, and his resignation on 25 April as part of the process leading to the elections.

The campaign period was marked by a focus on national security, the consequences of the war, and economic challenges, including those linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. The elections were conducted under the revised electoral framework, including the newly introduced closed-list proportional system.

According to official results:

- The **Civil Contract Party** received 53.95% of the votes
- The **Armenia Alliance** received 21.11% of the votes
- The **I Have Honour Alliance** received 5.22% of the votes



In accordance with the Electoral Code, additional seats were allocated to ensure compliance with rules concerning the distribution of mandates, resulting in a **National Assembly composed of 107 members**, including representatives of national minorities.

Several opposition alliances contested the election results, alleging irregularities and filing complaints before the courts. These claims were rejected by the Central Electoral Commission, the Government, and the winning party. On 17 July 2021, the Constitutional Court upheld the election results, confirming their validity.⁴

Following the elections, the new National Assembly convened its first session, and on 1 August 2021 the President appointed **Nikol Pashinyan as Prime Minister**. His appointment was confirmed by the National Assembly on the following day.

The next parliamentary elections are scheduled for 7 June 2026.

⁴ Armenia National Assembly June 2021 Election | Election results | Armenia | IPU Parline: global data on national parliaments. (n.d.). IPU Parline: Global Data on National Parliaments. <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/AM/AM-LC01/election/AM-LC01-E20210620/>

Armenia is a member of the Council of Europe and a party to the European Convention on Human Rights. These commitments form part of the broader legal framework within which constitutional rights are interpreted and applied. In the electoral field, Armenia has committed to the principles reflected in the **Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters**,⁵ including universal and equal suffrage, transparency in electoral administration, stability of electoral legislation, and the availability of effective legal remedies.

⁵ Code of good practice in electoral matters. (n.d.). Council of Europe.
https://www.venice.coe.int/images/SITE%20IMAGES/Publications/Code_conduite_PREMS%20026115%20GBR.pdf

CHAPTER 2 | POLITICAL POWER & GOVERNANCE

While the constitutional framework of the Republic of Armenia establishes a parliamentary system grounded in the separation and balance of powers, the practical functioning of this system has been significantly shaped by the political configuration that emerged following the early parliamentary elections of June 2021. These elections resulted in a decisive victory for the Civil Contract Party, led by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, which secured a dominant position in the National Assembly.

With 71 seats in a legislature expanded to 107 members, **the ruling party commands a level of parliamentary control that extends well beyond a simple governing majority.** This configuration has direct implications for the operation of the political system. Although the National Assembly formally retains its legislative and oversight functions, **the predominance of a single political force has narrowed the scope for substantive parliamentary engagement.** Legislative initiatives are largely shaped within the ruling majority, and the capacity of opposition actors to influence policy outcomes appears limited. In practice, parliamentary processes tend to consolidate rather than constrain executive-driven political direction.

Within this context, the exercise of executive authority has evolved toward **a more centralized model.** While the Constitution defines the Government as a collegial body, interviews and institutional observations indicate that decision-making is increasingly concentrated within the office of the Prime Minister. This concentration is not codified in law but is reflected in governance practices, including coordination of policy priorities, management of institutional leadership, and oversight of key administrative decisions.

The role of the Prime Minister therefore extends beyond formal executive functions, encompassing a decisive influence over the broader functioning of the state apparatus. **Patterns of appointment and dismissal of senior officials are frequently cited in this regard.** Multiple interlocutors describe a system in which high-level personnel changes are closely linked to executive discretion, rather than emerging from autonomous institutional processes.

This dynamic became particularly visible in 2024, when several ministers and senior officials stepped down following **requests from the Prime Minister.**⁶ These developments contributed to a broader perception that institutional leadership is contingent upon political alignment, reinforcing the centrality of the executive in shaping the composition of key state bodies.

Beyond formal institutional arrangements, governance practices are also shaped by informal mechanisms operating alongside legal procedures. These include internal party coordination within the Civil Contract Party, reliance on personal and professional networks, and the use of discretionary authority in politically sensitive decisions. While such mechanisms are not codified, their cumulative

⁶ Civilnet. Pashinyan defends recent high-level dismissals. CIVILNET. (2024, November 22). <https://civilnet.am/en/news/806609>

effect is to reinforce a governance model characterized by centralization and limited dispersion of authority.

A particularly **illustrative example** of these informal dynamics is the case involving former ruling party member **Hovik Aghazaryan**. In public statements and media interviews, Aghazaryan alleged that he was subjected to political pressure and coercive tactics aimed at forcing his resignation from parliament, including threats related to the disclosure of sensitive personal information. He further claimed that private data obtained from his mobile phone, submitted to state investigative authorities following an unrelated parliamentary confrontation, was subsequently accessed by senior political figures within the ruling party and Prime Minister Pashinyan.⁷

According to these allegations, the dissemination of intimate or politically sensitive information was used as leverage in internal party disputes, ultimately contributing to his expulsion from the Civil Contract Party after he refused to resign. While official representatives provided alternative explanations, including claims related to party discipline and alleged breaches of internal confidentiality, the case has been widely discussed in public debate as an example of the politicization of sensitive information within governing structures.

Irrespective of the factual determination of individual claims, the broader significance of the case lies in its perceived implications. **It has raised concerns regarding the boundaries between political authority and law enforcement access to private data, as well as the potential use of state institutions or politically sensitive information in internal political disputes.** In this sense, the case is analytically relevant not as an isolated incident, but as part of a wider pattern of informal political practices that shape institutional behavior.

At the same time, **the broader political environment remains highly polarized.** Political competition is formally pluralistic but operates under asymmetrical conditions. Opposition actors face limited institutional leverage, while political contestation increasingly unfolds through adversarial framing and personalized political conflict. These dynamics contribute to an environment in which institutional checks and balances are weakened in practice, even if preserved in formal design.

Taken together, these developments indicate a governance model in which formal democratic institutions remain intact, but the exercise of power is concentrated through a dominant parliamentary majority, centralized executive authority, and informal mechanisms that reinforce political control. This configuration provides the analytical basis for assessing institutional functioning and legal practice in the following chapter.

⁷ Civilnet. Old practices back: the curious case of Hovik Aghazaryan. CIVILNET. (2024, December 13).<https://civilnet.am/en/news/809603>

- Institutional Balance and Independence

The constitutional framework of Armenia establishes a system of institutional checks and balances designed to safeguard the independence of key state bodies. In practice, however, the functioning of these mechanisms is closely shaped by the prevailing political configuration, particularly the role of the parliamentary majority in institutional appointments.

Appointment procedures for central institutions, including the **Constitutional Court, the Supreme Judicial Council, the Central Electoral Commission, and the Prosecutor General, assign a decisive role to the National Assembly**. While such arrangements are consistent with parliamentary systems, their practical implications depend on the level of political pluralism within the legislature. In the current context, the dominance of the Civil Contract Party means that these procedures are effectively determined by a single political force.

The implications of this dynamic are illustrated by a series of recent institutional developments. These cases are presented in detail as they are essential for understanding how formally compliant procedures may nonetheless affect perceptions of institutional independence.

The **Supreme Judicial Council (SJC)**, responsible for safeguarding judicial independence, is particularly significant in this regard. With half of its non-judge members elected by the National Assembly, parliamentary dominance translates directly into substantial influence over its composition.

The dismissal of former SJC Chairman Ruben Vardazaryan in 2022, followed by subsequent legal proceedings and later conviction in 2025 for obstruction of justice, has been widely debated. Although the conviction constitutes a separate judicial process, the sequence of events, including allegations of pressure and the lack of transparency surrounding disciplinary grounds, has contributed to sustained discussion among legal experts regarding institutional safeguards and accountability mechanisms.⁸

The appointment of **Karen Andreasyan as SJC Chair** further illustrates the intersection between political affiliation and institutional leadership. His prior role as a minister in Pashinyan's cabinet, were widely disputed in public discourse, **and his subsequent resignation in 2024,⁹ following a request from the Prime Minister** and alongside other coordinated departures, such as the Interior Minister **Vahe Ghazaryan**, Minister of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure **Gnel Sanosyan**, Chairman of the Investigative Committee **Argishti Kyaramyan**, Head of the Anti-Corruption Committee **Sasun Khachatryan**, Head of State Revenue Committee **Rustam Badasyan**, reinforced perceptions of executive influence over judicial governance structures.

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⁸ Civilnet. Vardazaryan dismissed as fallout from recording scandal grows. CIVILNET. (2022, June 24). <https://civilnet.am/en/news/666023>

⁹ Civilnet. Resignations in Armenia Spark Debate over Judicial Independence and Democratic Integrity. CIVILNET. (2024, November 26). <https://civilnet.am/en/news/806912>

¹⁰ Civilnet. Pashinyan defends recent high-level dismissals. CIVILNET. (2024, November 22). <https://civilnet.am/en/news/806609>

Similar patterns are evident in several high-level appointments. On 25 March 2026, **the National Assembly elected Vladimir Vardanyan as a judge of the Constitutional Court**, with only members of the ruling “Civil Contract” faction participating in the vote. The appointment drew significant criticism, as Vardanyan had been a sitting Member of Parliament and a prominent representative of the ruling party only days prior, including in his capacity as Chair of the Standing Committee on State and Legal Affairs.¹¹

Comparable issues arose in the case of the Central Electoral Commission. **The election of Vahagn Hovakimyan as Chair of the Central Electoral Commission in 2022**, raised questions regarding both procedure and impartiality. His own vote proved decisive in securing the required majority, 65 votes, while his formal withdrawal from the ruling Civil Contract faction occurred only four days prior to the vote, to comply with legal requirements of non-partisanship.

A similar trajectory can be observed in **the appointment of the Prosecutor General, Anna Vardapetyan**, who previously served as an Assistant to the Prime Minister. While such appointments may formally comply with legal requirements, they reinforce a broader perception that key institutions tasked with oversight and accountability are closely aligned with the executive.

Beyond formal appointments, concerns regarding institutional independence have also emerged in relation to law enforcement and investigative practices. **The case of Hovik Aghazaryan is again relevant in this context.** Allegations that sensitive personal data obtained through investigative procedures was subsequently accessed or circulated within political circles have raised broader questions about the separation between investigative bodies and political decision-making.

From an analytical perspective, the significance of this case lies in the institutional questions it raises - namely, the extent to which investigative and prosecutorial processes remain insulated from political influence, and whether safeguards surrounding personal data and due process are consistently upheld in politically sensitive contexts. Even in the absence of definitive legal conclusions on all allegations, the controversy contributes to broader perceptions regarding institutional autonomy.

Across these examples, a consistent pattern emerges. **Formal procedures are largely adhered to, yet they operate within a political environment in which a single parliamentary majority exercises decisive influence.** Informal practices, including executive discretion and political coordination, further shape institutional outcomes and perceptions of independence.

Considering together, these dynamics suggest a gradual reconfiguration of institutional relationships, in which the distinction between formal autonomy and practical alignment becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. While constitutional provisions for independence remain in place, the way institutions are constituted and operate reflects the broader concentration of political power identified in the preceding chapter.

¹¹ CIVILNET. Vladimir Vardanyan’s election and the ongoing politicization of Armenia’s judiciary. (2026, April 7). <https://civilnet.am/en/news/1011166>

CHAPTER 3 | RULE OF LAW & LEGAL INSTRUMENTS

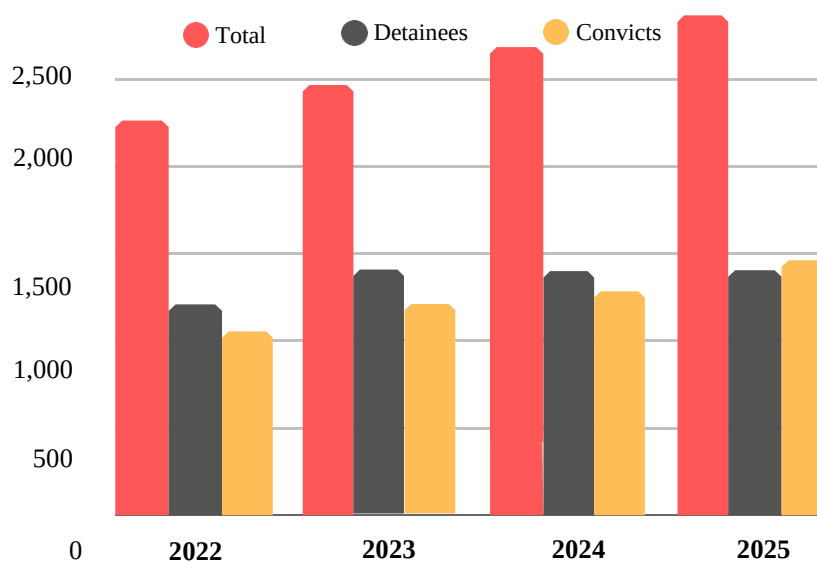
Within the broader framework of this assessment, the functioning of the rule of law in Armenia must be understood not only through the formal existence of legal guarantees, but **through the way legal instruments are applied in practice**. As outlined in the preceding chapters, the institutional configuration is characterized by a dominant parliamentary majority, a high degree of executive influence, and the operation of informal mechanisms that shape governance outcomes. These structural features form the context within which the legal system operates and are essential for assessing how judicial and prosecutorial powers are exercised.

The legal framework of the Republic of Armenia provides for a system grounded in constitutional guarantees, procedural safeguards, and adherence to international human rights standards. Legislative reforms adopted in recent years, most notably the **2021 Code of Criminal Procedure**, have introduced provisions aimed at strengthening due process and limiting the use of coercive measures. In particular, the reform expanded the range of preventive measures available to courts, including bail, house arrest, travel restrictions, and various forms of supervision, with the explicit intention of ensuring that deprivation of liberty prior to conviction remains an exceptional measure.

However, information gathered during the assessment indicates a persistent gap between the legal framework and its practical implementation. **Courts continue to rely extensively on pre-trial detention, and alternative measures introduced by the 2021 reform are applied infrequently**. This pattern has been consistently highlighted by interlocutors across the legal profession, civil society, and academic circles, who noted that detention remains the predominant preventive measure in criminal proceedings.

Statistical data illustrates both the **scale** and **consistency** of this trend:¹²

- 2022 | total prison population 2,265; convicted prisoners 1,055; detainees awaiting trials 1,210
- 2023 | total 2,469; convicts 1,152; detainees 1,317
- 2024 | total 2,686; convicts 1,285; detainees 1,401
- 2025 | total 2,869; convicts 1,463; detainees 1,406



¹² Civilnet. More Detainees than Convicts: Pretrial Detention in Armenia Still functions as Punishment. CIVILNET. (2025, August 26). <https://civilnet.am/en/news/970942>

As of the end of 2025, for the first time in the past five years, the number of convicted individuals slightly exceeded that of detainees awaiting trial.¹³ While this shift may suggest a marginal change in distribution, it does not alter the broader trend of extensive reliance on pre-trial detention over recent years.

This trend is particularly notable given that the 2021 reforms were specifically designed to reduce such reliance. In principle, courts are required to assess the necessity and proportionality of detention in each individual case and to consider alternative measures where appropriate. In practice, however, judicial decisions appear to be closely aligned with prosecutorial requests, and interlocutors consistently reported that detention is frequently ordered or extended without detailed consideration of less restrictive options.

The reasoning provided in judicial decisions has been identified as a key factor contributing to this pattern. According to information gathered during the assessment, court rulings on detention often rely on generalized justifications, particularly when referring to risks such as absconding or interference with the investigation.

These justifications are frequently presented in abstract terms, without specific reference to the circumstances of the individual case. This approach has also been repeatedly addressed in **the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights**, which has found violations in cases involving Armenia on the grounds that domestic courts relied on “**stereotyped formulae**” and failed to provide individualized reasoning.¹⁴

Between 2018 and 2022, the Court issued 19 judgments concerning such violations, indicating the presence of a recurring structural issue rather than isolated instances.¹⁵ The continued relevance of these findings suggests that, despite legislative reforms, the underlying practices of judicial reasoning have not undergone a corresponding transformation. The use of standardized formulations in judicial decisions reduces the effectiveness of procedural safeguards and contributes to the normalization of detention as a default measure. This, in turn, raises broader questions regarding the extent to which the principle of necessity, central to the lawful use of pre-trial detention, is consistently applied in practice.

Beyond issues related to detention and judicial reasoning, concerns have been raised regarding the application of substantive legal provisions, particularly in cases involving political or civic actors. Several interlocutors pointed to **the use of broadly defined criminal provisions**, including “**hooliganism**,”¹⁶ “**calls for violence**,”¹⁷ and “**calls for the overthrow of the constitutional**

¹³ Armenpress. Հայաստանում կալանավորների թիվը նվազում է. Կիրառականության ան նախադր. (2026, February 4). <https://armenpress.am/hy/article/1241252> [available in Armenian]

¹⁴ European Court of Human Rights | Case of Vardan Martirosyan v. Armenia (Application no. [13610/12](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#%22itemid%22:%22001-210404%22%7D)) <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#%22itemid%22:%22001-210404%22%7D>

¹⁵ The ECtHR judgments about the abuse of pre-trial detention measure. See article 53 of Vartan Martirosyan v. Armenia: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#%22itemid%22:%22001-210404%22%7D>

¹⁶ Article 297. Hooliganism | <https://www.arlis.am/hy/acts/153080>

¹⁷ Article 330. Public calls for violence, public justification or advocacy of violence, as well as the distribution of materials or objects for this purpose | <https://www.arlis.am/hy/acts/153080>

*order.*¹⁸ While these provisions exist in many legal systems, their formulation allows for a degree of interpretative flexibility, which may affect their consistent application.

According to legal experts, including representatives of civil society organizations, these provisions have been invoked in several cases involving public commentary, political expression, or participation in protest activity. For example, criminal proceedings have been initiated against political figures such as Samvel Karapetyan following public statements interpreted as calls for unconstitutional action. Similarly, bloggers and commentators have faced charges under provisions such as “hooliganism” in connection with criticism directed at public authorities.¹⁹

Anna Melikyan, a legal expert representing the NGO *Protection of Rights Without Borders*,²⁰ noted that certain provisions are increasingly used in cases involving online expression. According to her assessment, a significant number of cases currently pending before courts under the article commonly referred to as “*online hooliganism*” concern comments directed against the Prime Minister or members of the ruling party. She further indicated that provisions related to “*calls for violence*” have been used more frequently in recent years, particularly following the 2020 war and subsequent protest movements. Another provision, concerning “*calls for the overthrow of the constitutional order*,” has been applied primarily in cases involving opposition figures. In 2024, this provision was used, for the first time, in proceedings against Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, following his involvement in protest activities.

While each case must be assessed on its individual merits, the overall distribution of such cases has been cited by interlocutors as raising questions regarding the consistency of application. In this regard, the issue is not the existence of legal provisions, but the patterns that emerge in their practical use, particularly in politically sensitive contexts.

At the same time, a clear imbalance is observable **in the application of defamation laws**. While high-ranking officials have themselves engaged in public rhetoric that includes insults or disparaging statements toward individuals and groups, legal provisions are more frequently applied against those criticizing the Prime Minister or representatives of the ruling party, particularly through online expression. This pattern is reflected in litigation trends: **in 2025, 61 new lawsuits were filed on grounds of insult and/or defamation** under Article 1087.1 of the Civil Code (compared to 43 in 2024), with nearly half initiated by state bodies or officials, including senior political figures.²¹ Judicial outcomes further reinforce this imbalance. In 2025, multiple rulings against journalists and media outlets resulted in financial penalties and obligations to issue retractions, while cases filed by media actors against officials were overwhelmingly dismissed. In parallel, numerous incidents of

¹⁸ Article 422. Public calls for the seizure of power, the violation of territorial integrity, or the violent overthrow of the constitutional order | <https://www.arlis.am/hy/acts/153080>

¹⁹ Armenian Center for Political Rights | A “Crime” Without Law [2024-04-12 Crime without law Report \(English\).pdf - Google Drive](#)

²⁰ Protection of Rights Without Borders | <https://prwb.am/en/>

²¹ Civil Code of the Republic of Armenia | § 2.1.PROCEDURE FOR AND CONDITIONS OF COMPENSATION FOR INTANGIBLE DAMAGE (Title edited by HO-21-N of 19 May 2014) | Article 1087.1. Procedure for and conditions of compensation for the damage caused to honour, dignity or business reputation <https://www.arlis.am/hy/acts/205622>

intimidation, threats, and obstruction of journalistic activity were recorded, the majority involving state representatives.²²

Procedural safeguards designed to ensure the impartiality of judicial proceedings have also been the subject of scrutiny. **The allocation of cases to judges** is formally conducted through an automated system of random distribution, intended to guarantee neutrality and prevent undue influence. Several interlocutors reported that **a limited and identifiable group of judges appears to handle a disproportionate number of politically sensitive cases**. Among those most frequently cited were Masis Melkonyan, Mnatsakan Martirosyan, and Karen Farkhoyan. According to these accounts, these judges have been repeatedly assigned cases involving high-profile political or public interest matters and are perceived as consistently granting prosecutorial motions related to pre-trial detention, search warrants, and other restrictive measures. However, information gathered during consultations indicates that the practical functioning of this mechanism may differ from its formal design.

Concerns were also raised regarding the overall effectiveness of the case allocation system. While an automated distribution mechanism formally exists, interlocutors indicated that its operation does not consistently result in proportionate case assignment. In Yerevan, where approximately 30 judges serve within the relevant jurisdiction, cases would be expected to be distributed broadly across the bench. However, multiple examples were cited in which politically sensitive cases were assigned to a small subset of judges.

One example referenced during consultations concerned proceedings involving four bishops, including a series of pre-trial detention hearings. According to the information provided, these cases, comprising **at least six hearings, were assigned to only two judges**. Interlocutors noted that such concentration raises questions regarding the statistical likelihood of purely random allocation.

Although these observations could not be independently verified in all instances, they were raised consistently across consultations and were cited as affecting public confidence in the impartiality and transparency of judicial proceedings.

These concerns regarding legal practice are further situated within a broader environment in which political, civic, and religious actors operate. Information gathered during the assessment indicates that several individuals, including political figures, activists, and journalists, are currently subject to criminal proceedings or detention in connection with political or civic activity. Some accounts, including **statements** by members of parliament, suggest that **the number of individuals considered political detainees may exceed forty**, although this figure could not be independently verified.²³

²² Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression | Annual Report of CPFE on Situation with Freedom of Expression and Violations of Rights of Journalists and Media in Armenia-2025 <https://khosq.am/en/reports/annual-report-of-cpfe-on-situation-with-freedom-of-expression-and-violations-of-rights-of-journalists-and-media-in-armenia-2025/>

²³ Galstian, S., & Kaghzvantsian, S. Armenian opposition pushing for release of 'Political prisoners.' «Ազատ ելիտայի/Ազատութիւն» Ռադիոկայ. ան. (2025, November 19). <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33596581.html>

Within the broader assessment of the rule of law and the abuse of legal instruments in Armenia, **the functioning of law enforcement bodies and the application of coercive measures constitute a central area of analysis.** While the legal framework provides for the protection of fundamental rights, including freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, the implementation of these guarantees in practice has been subject to increasing scrutiny. Information gathered during consultations indicates that the use of force, the application of criminal provisions, and the expansion of state enforcement capacities must be assessed not only in terms of formal legality, but also considering the principles of necessity, proportionality, and accountability.

Concerns in this regard were consistently raised by interlocutors, including Rafael Ishkhanyan, Director of the *Armenian Center for Political Rights* and member of the OSCE/ODIHR Panel of Experts, who emphasized that the practical implementation of legal instruments reflects broader institutional dynamics. In particular, the application of law in contexts involving political sensitivity appears to follow patterns that merit closer examination.²⁴

A key issue relates to the conduct of law enforcement bodies during public assemblies. While the Law on Freedom of Assembly permits certain restrictions and authorizes police intervention under defined circumstances, these powers are subject to strict requirements of proportionality and must be exercised in a manner that minimizes interference with fundamental rights. However, documentation provided by civil society organizations points to repeated instances in which the use of force appears to exceed these thresholds.

Attention was drawn to the activities of a special purpose police unit commonly referred to as the **“Red Berets,”** operating under the Yerevan Police Department. According to detailed accounts presented during consultations, **this unit has been repeatedly involved in operations during peaceful assemblies,** since 2020, with a pattern of conduct characterized by the use of physical force, coercive dispersal methods, and obstruction of monitoring and reporting activities.

A specific incident cited in this regard occurred on 27 May 2024, during a protest in front of the office of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, involving **Ashot Simonyan,**²⁵ a member of parliament. According to multiple accounts, an initial verbal exchange between Simonyan and police officers escalated into a coordinated physical assault. **Approximately 30 officers reportedly surrounded the MP, subjected him to repeated blows, including punches and kicks, and used verbal abuse before forcibly placing him in a police vehicle.** These actions were described by interlocutors as raising serious concerns in relation to the prohibition of ill-treatment under domestic law and international human rights standards.²⁶

This incident is not presented in isolation, but forms part of a broader pattern documented across multiple events. **During the 2022 protests at the Yerablur military pantheon,** police forces, including the same “Red Berets” unit, reportedly dispersed a peaceful assembly involving relatives

²⁴ Armenian Center for Political Rights | <https://acpr.center/>

²⁵ ArmLur TV. Բերետակիրները դաժան ծեծի են ենթարկում Ա.հայ իրյ ու մ Արարաթյանայի ԿնոսԿմնիյ անին [Video]. YouTube. (2024, May 27). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioW08B8HGk0>

²⁶ Armenian Center for Political Rights | “Red Berets” against Human Rights <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jOBfVjFZiRo8xFVmjegwuPYEQXsOPa4O/view>

of fallen soldiers. **A total of 37 individuals were detained, with some subsequently reporting physical injuries.** According to information provided by the Human Rights Defender, complaints from detainees frequently referenced the use of disproportionate force and degrading treatment by officers identifiable as members of this unit.

Across these cases, a consistent concern relates to **the lack of effective accountability mechanisms.** While internal investigations have reportedly been initiated in certain instances, interlocutors indicated that police officers have not been held criminally liable in connection with the use of excessive force during assemblies. In at least one case, an officer was suspended following a high-profile incident, while in another, the criminal case was subsequently dismissed. Interlocutors also noted instances in which **officers associated with such operations were later promoted or publicly recognized,** which has been cited as contributing to a perception of institutional tolerance for the use of excessive force.²⁷

In parallel, developments related to the institutional expansion of law enforcement capacities have raised additional considerations. The establishment of a new unit within the police structure, commonly referred to as **the “Police Guard”**, has been presented by authorities as a measure aimed at enhancing internal security. While the creation of specialized units falls within the scope of state authority, interlocutors expressed concern that such expansion may increase the coercive capacity of law enforcement bodies in the absence of clearly articulated oversight mechanisms. In this regard, the issue is not the existence of such structures per se, but the safeguards governing their use and the mechanisms available to ensure accountability.

Further concerns relate to the selective or asymmetric application of legal measures in cases involving public officials and political actors. Interlocutors referred to cases involving opposition-affiliated mayors and local officials who have been subject to criminal proceedings. While the specific legal merits of each case fall outside the scope of this assessment, the pattern of prosecutions has been cited as raising questions regarding the uniform application of legal standards and the potential impact on local governance.

The **expansion of surveillance capacities** constitutes an additional dimension of the use of legal instruments. Recent **legislative amendments authorize the use of biometric technologies, including facial recognition systems, by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.** These measures enable the identification of individuals through state-operated surveillance infrastructure, including in the context of public gatherings. While such measures may serve legitimate security objectives, interlocutors raised concerns regarding their potential impact on the exercise of fundamental rights, particularly where safeguards governing their use are not clearly defined or publicly accessible.²⁸

²⁷ N. Pashinyan announced from the National Assembly podium: “I thank all the police officers who are currently performing their duties as defined by the legislation of the Republic of Armenia, and in the future, just like before, the most principled ones will receive a positive evaluation of their work.”

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vLjYN1c2IAHeCh1f3Nr1-ruFg3n06TwT/view>

²⁸ Armenia: New legal amendments expand biometric surveillance by police. (n.d.). CSOMETER.

<https://csometer.info/updates/armenia-new-legal-amendments-expand-biometric-surveillance-police>

In particular, **the potential use of biometric surveillance in the context of public assemblies** was identified as a factor that may affect individual behavior and discourage participation.²⁹ The issue raised in this regard concerns not only the legality of such measures, but also their proportionality and the extent to which adequate oversight mechanisms are in place to prevent misuse.

Additional concerns were raised regarding the use of administrative and regulatory mechanisms in ways that may interfere with civic activity. Interlocutors referred to cases in which individuals who had participated in protest movements were subsequently summoned for military training or reserve service. Under the applicable legal framework, reservists may be called up multiple times per year, which raises concerns regarding the uneven application of these provisions, since the selection process allows for a degree of administrative discretion.

In this context, reference was made to public statements by **Andranik Kocharyan**,³⁰ Chair of the National Assembly Standing Committee on Defense and Security and member of the ruling Civil Contract party, who reportedly called on law enforcement bodies, including the police and the National Security Service, to transfer data regarding detained protesters to the Ministry of Defense, suggesting that such individuals may be avoiding mandatory training or service obligations. Similarly, **Vahagn Alexanyan** publicly stated that individuals participating in protests could be subject to conscription-related procedures, referring to prior instances in which participants of protest movements were summoned to military training camps. In televised remarks, he further indicated that such measures had been implemented in earlier cases, describing them as an operational response coordinated with relevant authorities.³¹

Additional references were made to similar rhetoric in the public domain. During the protest wave of May 2024, a publication on the website of **Haykakan Zhamanak**, a newspaper founded by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and owned by members of his family, included a statement calling on law enforcement authorities to take protest participants to the border, expressing the expectation that those involved in demonstrations would avoid military training obligations. While not issued by a state official, the publication was cited by interlocutors as contributing to a broader pattern of public

²⁹Armenian Center for Political Rights | “Big Brother in Armenia” Report on new law authorizing remote biometric surveillance by the Ministry of the Internal Affairs

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Tbz3Am0PYMhAFxhbjLT737vBeX5P_ztT/view

³⁰ **Andranik Kocharyan**, an MP from the ruling Civil Contract party and Chairman of the Standing Committee on Defense and Security, had called on the police and the NSS to transfer the data of the detained protestors to the Ministry of Defense, “assuming” that they were “of the type to evade three-month training camps and mandatory military service.” <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31836031.html> (in Armenian)

³¹ Civil Contract party MP **Vahagn Aleksanyan**, mocking protesters, said on Public TV: “Some healthy, strong young men are suddenly coming out of their spy dens, basements, the underground... By the way, I congratulate them, they have won a ticket to the military commission [...] At the moment, if I’m not mistaken, they have about 8 hours to pack their things, because from 9 in the morning, [they’ll be sent to military training camps]... We can’t afford the luxury of not sending this resource with great spirit to the front line.” Then, V. Aleksanyan recalled A. Kocharyan’s statement from a few months earlier and confirmed that the order had been carried out: “Just now, I was talking to Mr. Andranik Kocharyan, the chairman of our Defense Committee, who had already spoken to the Military Commissariat. These spirited, strong young men will receive their notices tomorrow morning and will leave for the front line [...] Last time, there was a similar incident, you may remember, in the National Assembly at the initiative of Mr. Kocharyan, after which some of the participants of the mighty “Resistance” protest were taken to the front line... Not some, but a significant number of them.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XFM0EhlwkoutUptph> (in Armenian)

messaging in which participation in protests is associated with potential conscription-related consequences.³²

During the September 2022 hostilities, martial law was not declared, therefore the applicable legal mechanism for summoning individuals to service remained the framework governing reserve training obligations. Within this context, the combination of administrative discretion, documented practices, and public statements by political actors was consistently cited by interlocutors as raising concerns regarding the potential use of such mechanisms in a manner that may affect individuals engaged in the exercise of their right to peaceful assembly. Emphasis was placed on the absence of explicit safeguards within the existing legal framework to prevent the use of conscription-related measures in a discriminatory or selective manner.³³

Taken together, the practices outlined in this section indicate that, while the legal framework governing law enforcement, criminal liability, and public order in Armenia is formally aligned and compliant with established norms, its implementation raises concerns. These relate to the proportionality of the use of force, the consistency in the application of criminal provisions, the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms, and the safeguards governing the exercise of state power. These developments illustrate the extent to which legal instruments may be applied in ways that reflect broader institutional and political dynamics.

The key analytical issue is therefore not the absence of legal frameworks, but the degree to which their application remains consistent with the principles of necessity, proportionality, equality before the law, and effective accountability.

³² Author of the published post called on law enforcement officers to take the protesters to the border, stating that he hoped that: “the young people who are ‘saving’ the homeland with Rob’s [Robert Kocharyan] priest [Archbishop Galstanyan] will not evade training camps due to [expletive] flu.” <https://armtimes.com/hy/article/286806> (in Armenian)

³³ Armenian Center for Political Rights | **TRAINING CAMPS** discrimination “prescribed by law” https://drive.google.com/file/d/1i8KBKEtG34ZmeYWU2CIWL1dGdFdQfL_p/view

CHAPTER 4 | CIVIC SPACE & POLITICAL DISSENT

A. Introduction and Analytical Framework

This chapter focuses on the interaction between formal legal guarantees, institutional practice, and political discourse in shaping both the scope and the practical accessibility of fundamental freedoms. Attention is given to how dissent, whether expressed through political opposition, civil society activity, or public criticism, is regulated, interpreted, and, in certain instances, constrained.

The analytical starting point is a distinction between the existence of formal legal protections and their effective realization in practice. Armenia's constitutional and legislative framework provides for a broad catalogue of rights consistent with international democratic standards, including protections for freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, association, and political participation. However, as repeatedly emphasized in international human rights jurisprudence, **the mere existence of such guarantees does not ensure a democratic environment. What is decisive is how these guarantees are implemented, interpreted, and enforced in practice.**

The assessment is grounded in Armenia's binding international obligations and political commitments. Under the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**, Armenia is required to guarantee, inter alia, **the right to freedom of expression** (Article 19), **the right of peaceful assembly** (Article 21), **the right to freedom of association** (Article 22), and **the right to participate in public affairs** (Article 25). These provisions establish not only negative obligations, prohibiting unjustified interference, but also positive obligations on the State to create an enabling environment in which these rights can be exercised effectively.³⁴

Parallel obligations arise under the **European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)**, which forms an integral part of Armenia's legal order. **Article 10** protects freedom of expression, including political speech and criticism of public authorities; **Article 11** safeguards the rights to peaceful assembly and association; and **Article 3** of Protocol No. 1 guarantees the right to free elections, encompassing the broader conditions necessary for meaningful electoral participation. Additional provisions, including **Article 6** (right to a fair trial), **Article 5** (right to liberty and security), and **Article 3** (prohibition of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment), are also relevant insofar as they relate to the treatment of individuals engaged in political or civic activity.³⁵

The jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights provides authoritative guidance on the interpretation of these rights. In *Handyside v. the United Kingdom* (1976), the Court articulated the foundational principle that freedom of expression constitutes one of the essential foundations of a

³⁴ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, adopted 16 December 1966, by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

³⁵ European Convention on Human Rights / The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom/ <https://www.echr.coe.int/european-convention-on-human-rights>

democratic society, applicable not only to information or ideas that are favorably received, but also to those that “**offend, shock or disturb.**” This principle is particularly salient in electoral contexts, where robust and, at times, confrontational political debate is inherent to democratic competition.³⁶

Freedom of expression ... is applicable not only to 'information' or 'ideas' that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population.

—Paragraph 49 of the judgment

Subsequent case law has further clarified the heightened level of protection afforded to political expression:

- In *Lingens v. Austria* (1986), the Court emphasized that the limits of acceptable criticism are wider regarding politicians than private individuals, reflecting their role in public life.³⁷
- In *Castells v. Spain* (1992), the Court underscored that interference with the freedom of expression of opposition figures calls for the closest scrutiny, given their essential function in ensuring democratic accountability.³⁸

Across these judgments, the Court has consistently applied a strict test requiring that any restriction on fundamental freedoms be prescribed by law, pursue a legitimate aim, and be necessary in a democratic society, meaning proportionate and supported by a pressing social need.

In parallel, Armenia’s commitments as a Participating State of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), particularly under the **1990 Copenhagen Document**³⁹, establish a comprehensive framework for assessing the quality of democratic processes. Participating States have undertaken to ensure pluralistic political competition, equal opportunity for political actors, freedom from intimidation, and conditions enabling voters to form their opinions freely. These commitments extend beyond the formal conduct of elections to encompass the broader political and civic environment in which electoral processes unfold.

Within this normative framework, the concept of civic space is understood as the aggregate of legal, institutional, and societal conditions that enable individuals and groups to exercise their fundamental freedoms. This includes not only the absence of undue restrictions, but also the presence of safeguards against arbitrary or discriminatory application of the law. Civic space is therefore not a

³⁶European Court for Human Rights | **CASE OF HANDYSIDE v. THE UNITED KINGDOM** (Application no. [5493/72](#)) [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-57499%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-57499%22]})

³⁷ European Court for Human Rights | **CASE OF LINGENS v. AUSTRIA** (Application no. [9815/82](#)) [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-57523%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-57523%22]})

³⁸ European Court for Human Rights | **CASE OF CASTELLS v. SPAIN** (Application no. [11798/85](#)) [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-57772%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-57772%22]})

³⁹ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights | Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE <https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/elections/14304>

static or purely legal construct; it is shaped dynamically through the interaction of state institutions, political actors, media systems, and public discourse.

The analysis in this chapter proceeds along three interrelated dimensions.

- I. First, it examines **the information environment**, with a focus on how media structures, regulatory practices, and political communication shape the visibility of different viewpoints. The ability of citizens to access diverse and independent sources of information is a core component of democratic participation. Limitations in this sphere, whether arising from structural imbalances, indirect pressures, or narrative dominance, may affect not only the expression of dissenting views but also their reach and influence.
- II. Second, the chapter **considers the application of legal and administrative measures that affect the operational space for dissent**. This includes the use of criminal law provisions, administrative sanctions, and regulatory mechanisms in response to political expression, public assembly, or civic activism. Attention is paid to issues of selectivity, proportionality, and procedural safeguards, as these factors are critical in determining whether such measures are compatible with international standards.
- III. Third, the analysis **addresses the role of political discourse in framing dissent**. The way state officials and political leaders characterize criticism, protest, or opposition activity has a direct impact on the perceived legitimacy of such expressions. The increasing tendency to frame dissent through a security or stability lens may contribute to a shift in public perception, whereby certain forms of political participation are implicitly or explicitly delegitimized. While states have a legitimate interest in maintaining public order and security, the invocation of such concerns must not undermine the core democratic principle that dissent is a normal and necessary component of political life.

Taken together, these dimensions reflect a broader analytical approach that views restrictions on civic space not solely as the result of formal legal change, but as the product of interconnected practices and narratives. This approach is consistent with evolving international monitoring methodologies, which increasingly recognize that democratic backsliding may occur through gradual and indirect processes rather than abrupt or overt violations.

In the Armenian context, the pre-election period provides a particularly relevant lens through which to assess these dynamics. Electoral processes inherently place increased pressure on civic space, as political competition intensifies and the stakes of public discourse rise. It is therefore essential to evaluate not only whether formal rights remain in place, but also whether the overall environment enables their full and equal exercise.

The following sections build on this framework to provide a detailed examination of the information environment, the use of legal and administrative measures, and the role of political discourse in shaping the boundaries of dissent in Armenia in the period under review.

B. Information Environment and Media Pluralism

A central feature of the Armenian media landscape is its pronounced political polarization, which is closely tied to ownership structures. Media pluralism exists in a formal sense, there is a diversity of outlets, viewpoints, and platforms, but in substantive terms, the environment is fragmented along political lines, with major outlets reflecting the interests of their affiliated actors.

Several influential media organizations are directly linked to political elites or individuals with clear partisan affiliations. The newspaper *Haykakan Zhamanak*,⁴⁰ for example, is associated with Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, while platforms such as *Civic.am*,⁴¹ *Freeneews*,⁴² and *Araratnews*⁴³ are widely perceived as aligned with the ruling *Civil Contract* party. At the same time, opposition and former ruling elites maintain their own media channels: *5th Channel*⁴⁴ is linked to former President *Robert Kocharyan*, and *Kentron TV*⁴⁵ is affiliated with *Gagik Tsarukyan*. Additional outlets are associated with *Mikayel Minasyan*, son-in-law of the third president *Serzh Sargsyan*, further illustrating the entrenched relationship between media ownership and political influence.

This ownership configuration contributes to a segmented information space in which audiences are often exposed to internally consistent but politically aligned narratives. Rather than facilitating deliberative pluralism, where competing viewpoints are presented and critically examined, **media consumption tends to reinforce pre-existing political preferences.** As a result, the role of media as a platform for balanced public debate is diminished, and the broader information environment becomes more susceptible to polarization-driven distortions.

Economic dependency further compounds these structural vulnerabilities. Many outlets operate in a constrained advertising market and rely on funding streams that are either directly political or indirectly influenced by political actors. This financial fragility increases susceptibility to both overt and subtle forms of pressure, including editorial influence, preferential access to information, or selective allocation of state advertising. In such conditions, editorial independence may be compromised not through formal censorship but through structural incentives that shape reporting priorities and tone.

- Legal Framework and Defamation Regime

The legal environment governing media activity constitutes another critical dimension of the information ecosystem. Although defamation has been decriminalized in Armenia, civil liability remains a significant regulatory mechanism, and recent legislative amendments have substantially increased the financial stakes involved.

⁴⁰ Haykakan Zhamanak /The Armenian Times/ | <https://armtimes.com/hy>

⁴¹ Civic.am | <https://civic.am/>

⁴² Freeneews | <https://freeneews.am/>

⁴³ Araratnews | <https://araratnews.am/>

⁴⁴ 5th Channel | <https://www.5tv.am/>

⁴⁵ Kentron TV | <https://www.kentron.tv/>

The increase in maximum compensation for defamation, from 1 million to 6 million AMD, raises questions regarding proportionality under Article 10 ECHR.⁴⁶ The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has repeatedly emphasized that sanctions in defamation cases must be proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued and should not be of such a magnitude as to deter the exercise of freedom of expression. In *Cumpănă and Mazăre v. Romania*⁴⁷ (2004), the Court explicitly warned that excessive penalties may produce a chilling effect, discouraging not only the individuals directly concerned but also the broader journalistic community from engaging in critical reporting.

In the Armenian context, interlocutors consistently pointed to the deterrent effect of these increased penalties, particularly for smaller or independent outlets with limited financial resources. The risk of substantial monetary liability incentivizes caution in reporting, especially on issues involving political or economic elites. Investigative journalism, by its nature reliant on exposing wrongdoing or controversial practices, appears particularly affected.

Concerns were also raised regarding **the selective use of civil litigation**. Representatives of ruling authorities have reportedly initiated defamation proceedings against media outlets and journalists critical of government policies or actions. At the same time, cases involving pro-government actors are often perceived to be dismissed at early stages or not pursued with the same rigor. While each case must be assessed on its individual merits, the perceived asymmetry in enforcement contributes to a broader climate of legal uncertainty and undermines confidence in the equal application of the law.

Beyond the formal structure of defamation law, its application in practice appears to intersect with broader patterns of political contestation. Civil litigation is increasingly viewed by media actors not only as a mechanism for protecting reputation but also as a strategic tool that can be used to exert pressure on critical voices.

The **Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression**⁴⁸ in its annual report has documented multiple instances in which public officials have pursued legal action against opposition-leaning or investigative media. These cases often involve claims for significant financial compensation, which, regardless of their eventual outcome, impose substantial legal and financial burdens on defendants. The cumulative effect of such litigation may extend beyond individual cases, contributing to an environment in which self-censorship becomes a rational and, in some instances, necessary strategy for institutional survival.

At the same time, the apparent lack of equivalent legal exposure for pro-government media actors reinforces perceptions of imbalance. This asymmetry does not necessarily require explicit coordination; it may arise from a combination of prosecutorial discretion, judicial interpretation, and

⁴⁶ European Convention on Human Rights | https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG

⁴⁷ European Court of Human Rights | CASE OF CUMPĂNĂ AND MAZĂRE v. ROMANIA (Application no. 33348/96) | <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/tur#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-67816%22%5D%7D>

⁴⁸ Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression | Annual Report of CPFE on Situation with Freedom of Expression and Violations of Rights of Journalists and Media in Armenia-2025 <https://khosq.am/en/reports/annual-report-of-cpfe-on-situation-with-freedom-of-expression-and-violations-of-rights-of-journalists-and-media-in-armenia-2025/>

broader political context. Nevertheless, its impact on the perceived fairness of the legal environment is significant.

- Pressure on Media Actors and Journalists

The operational environment for journalists in Armenia is also shaped by reported instances of pressure, encompassing legal, administrative, and, in certain cases, physical measures. While such incidents vary in nature and severity, their cumulative effect contributes to a climate in which critical reporting may entail heightened risk.

Several cases highlight these dynamics. Opposition-leaning outlets, including **168.am**⁴⁹ (editor-in-chief Satik Seyranyan), **Aravot**⁵⁰ (editor-in-chief Aram Abrahamyan), **Hraparak**⁵¹ (editor-in-chief Armine Ohanyan) have reportedly faced increased scrutiny, including criminal proceedings and other forms of legal challenges, as well as public criticism by political actors. Journalists from these outlets described an environment in which professional activity is subject to intensified monitoring and potential sanction.

Incidents within the National Assembly further illustrate tensions between media and public authorities. Journalists **Sona Grigoryan** and **Knar Manukyan** reportedly were forcibly removed from parliamentary premises following questioning of Hayk Konjoryan, head of the Civil Contract Faction, regarding alleged corruption. Subsequent legal proceedings initiated on defamation grounds reinforce concerns regarding the use of legal mechanisms in response to journalistic inquiry.

The case of **blogger Hayk Yegyan**, known as “Ayvazovsky,” also raises important issues. Charged with aggravated hooliganism under Article 297 of the Criminal Code for allegedly insulting Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in online content. He was initially placed in pre-trial detention before being subjected to house arrest and travel restrictions. According to his legal representative, the charges stem from expressive conduct rather than actions constituting a genuine disturbance of public order.

This case is particularly significant considering **prior jurisprudence of the Constitutional Court of Armenia, which has affirmed that insult, in itself, should not give rise to criminal liability.**⁵² The apparent reliance on broadly interpreted “hooliganism” provisions in such contexts raises concerns regarding legal certainty and the potential circumvention of decriminalization reforms. Statements by Justice Minister Srбуhi Galyan emphasizing the applicability of criminal law to certain forms of online expression further underscore the evolving and, at times, ambiguous boundaries between protected speech and sanctionable conduct.

⁴⁹ 168.am | <https://168.am/>

⁵⁰ Aravot newspaper | <https://www.aravot.am/>

⁵¹ Hraparak newspaper | <https://hraparak.am/am>

⁵² Bulghadarian, N., & Khulian, A. Armenia’s top court upholds criminalization of insults. «Ազատության հայկական ծառի տուն» (2022, April 29). <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31827364.html>

C. Legal Instruments and the Regulation of Dissent

The legal framework of Armenia provides formal guarantees for fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, assembly, and religion, in line with international standards. However, information gathered during consultations indicates that the application of legal instruments in practice raises several concerns, particularly in relation to the regulation of dissent, political expression, and civic participation in the pre-electoral environment.

A central issue relates to the increasing reliance on broadly formulated criminal law provisions in cases involving political actors, journalists, activists, and other dissenting voices. Provisions concerning *hooliganism, hate speech and incitement, and public order offenses* were repeatedly cited as being framed in general terms, allowing for wide interpretative discretion in their application.⁵³

Under international human rights law, the principle of legal certainty, as enshrined in **Article 7 ECHR and Article 15 ICCPR**, requires that criminal norms be sufficiently precise and foreseeable. The general logic of the jurisprudence establishes that individuals must be able to reasonably foresee the legal consequences of their actions.

Where legal provisions are broadly defined, their application may risk becoming inconsistent or selective, particularly in politically sensitive contexts. Interlocutors indicated that a significant proportion of cases initiated under such provisions, estimated at between 90 and 95 percent, originate from complaints submitted by representatives of the ruling political majority. While these figures could not be independently verified, their consistency across sources contributes to a perception of uneven enforcement of criminal law, raising concerns regarding the neutrality and predictability of the legal framework.

Cases point to concerns regarding detention practices and treatment in custody, engaging core protections under **Article 5 ECHR (right to liberty) and Article 3 ECHR (prohibition of torture and ill-treatment)**. The case of **Samvel Vardanyan** was cited as illustrative. Following his arrest after an altercation with a member of parliament, he was reportedly subjected to physical abuse while in custody, including treatment by unidentified masked individuals. Evidence referenced includes video recordings and photographic documentation, as well as the subsequent identification of the location where the alleged abuse took place.

Concerns regarding the intersection of criminal law and dissent are further reflected in the arrest of **Aleksandr Kochubaev**, a lawyer involved in high-profile cases. He was detained following a social media post criticizing the treatment of clergy and charged under provisions related to defamation of judicial actors. The case attracted international attention, **including criticism from the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders**⁵⁴, who characterized the prosecution as the

⁵³ Armenian Center for Political Rights. “Hate Speech” laws as a tool of political persecution (Ad hoc Report) | ACPR. ACPR — Armenian Center for Political Rights. (2026, June 3). <https://acpr.center/publications/report-hate-speech-laws/>

⁵⁴ Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur for human rights defenders | Facebook. (n.d.). <https://www.facebook.com/MaryLawlorHRDs/posts/pfbid02NpdTv7Ho5FqGYQ9Nix6UwGDAP9sUfh8cf8kqCRQ8ovVpQg1pMpfDdoJZ8KTevn97l?rdid=pbXb5ZAMNairPbsz#>

criminalization of legitimate expression. The targeting of legal professionals in such contexts may have broader implications for the right to a fair trial and access to independent legal representation.⁵⁵

Concerns were also raised regarding the application of severe charges, including terrorism-related provisions, in cases involving youth activists and politically affiliated groups. The case⁵⁶ of **Andranik Chamichyan**, reportedly under the age of 18 at the time of detention, was frequently cited. Charges of preparing a terrorist act were reportedly based primarily on the possession of equipment associated with airsoft activities. Interlocutors questioned the absence of evidence demonstrating intent or operational capacity, as well as the proportionality of applying such charges. The ECtHR has cautioned against the overbroad application of anti-terrorism legislation, particularly where it risks encompassing non-violent political activity.⁵⁷

- State-Church Relations and Freedom of Religion

Interlocutors consistently reported a **deterioration in relations between state authorities and the Armenian Apostolic Church**, accompanied by legal proceedings, judicial interventions, and public discourse affecting senior clergy and church governance. Freedom of religion under Article 9 ECHR includes the right of religious communities to self-governance and institutional autonomy. Several criminal proceedings involving members of the clergy were initiated or remained ongoing. These include proceedings against **Catholicos Garegin II** and several bishops.^{58 59}

The underlying case concerns the removal of **Bishop Gevorg (Arman) Saroyan** from his position as Primate of the Masis Diocese by the Catholicos. Following the dismissal, the bishop challenged the decision in court. An interim ruling by a first instance court ordered his **temporary reinstatement**, reportedly based on legal reasoning treating the relationship as analogous to employment.

Subsequently, **criminal proceedings were initiated against members of the Church leadership, including the Catholicos and several bishops, in connection with the alleged failure to comply with this judicial decision**. Travel restrictions were imposed on church leaders, including the Catholicos, which prevented their participation in an international ecclesiastical assembly.

In line with ECtHR jurisprudence, freedom of religion includes the **right of religious communities to autonomy in internal governance**, including decisions concerning the appointment and

⁵⁵ Armenian Center for Political Rights | Statement on Arbitrary Detention of Lawyer Aleksandr Kochubayev https://drive.google.com/file/d/1TFH7HD3D5V7EXz_EQiG1juR4WePiTm5-/view

⁵⁶ Radio Liberty /in Armenian/ 18-ամյա արաշխակական Արդանիկ Չամիչյանը ձերբակալվեց | <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/amyadashnaktsakan-andranik-chamichyany-kalanavorvets/33471573.html>

⁵⁷ European Court of Human Rights | CASE OF GÖZEL AND ÖZER v. TURKEY, 2010 <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22%3A%5B%22001-99781%22%5D%7D>

⁵⁸ Armenian Center for Political Rights | Urgent Report on the ongoing Interference with the autonomy of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church https://drive.google.com/file/d/1b_vl_gGgIUz5Y1fic_ivQj03i_g_9sLo/view

⁵⁹ Armenian Center for Political Rights | Statement on Criminal Charges against Catholicos of All Armenians https://drive.google.com/file/d/1H_01lx2ezSWU37Qg3HOeE2CfHfMNgiz/view

dismissal of clergy.⁶⁰ The State is required to maintain neutrality and impartiality in its relations with religious organizations.⁶¹

The arrest and prosecution of **archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan** was widely referenced. He was detained on 25 June 2025, one day prior to a public statement by the Prime Minister concerning the removal of the Catholicos. **He was charged, together with seventeen individuals, with organizing “terrorist activities and attempting to seize power.”** The charges followed his leadership role in the “*Tavush for Homeland*” (later renamed as “*Holy/Sacred Struggle*”) protest movement, which opposed the border delimitation process and called for political change. According to the Investigative Committee, more than ninety searches were conducted, and materials including firearms and ammunition were recovered. Defense representatives disputed this characterization, stating that items found included non-lethal equipment such as smoke devices commonly used in protests, and that the movement’s activities were limited to peaceful civil disobedience.

Galstanyan’s case was followed by the arrest of *Primate of the Shirak Diocese Archbishop Mikael Ajapahyan* on 27 June 2025, following an attempt by law enforcement to detain him at the Mother See of Etchmiadzin, which led to resistance from clergy and supporters. He later surrendered voluntarily. The charges relate to public statements made in 2023 that were interpreted as calling for the overthrow of the government. Interlocutors noted that **these statements had previously been assessed by prosecutorial authorities as not warranting criminal charges**. In 2025, following the escalation of tensions between the state and the Church, the case was reopened, and a court subsequently sentenced him to imprisonment after what interlocutors described as a rapid judicial process.

Additional cases include that of **Bishop Mkrtich Proshian**, Primate of the Aragatsotn diocese, who was detained in October 2025 along with several other clergy members. The case is linked to allegations that a priest had been pressured to participate in anti-government protests in 2021. Interlocutors emphasized that the proceedings took place within the broader context of tensions between the Church and state authorities.

The case of **Archbishop Arshak Khachatrian**, Head of the Chancellery of the Mother See, was also referenced. He was arrested in December 2025 and charged under provisions related to illegal drug distribution, in connection with an alleged incident dating back to 2018. According to investigative authorities, the case concerns the alleged placement of marijuana in an individual’s belongings within the Chancellery premises. The Archbishop has denied the allegations and publicly stated that he had been subjected to prior pressure by state authorities. Notably, the case was revived several years after the alleged events.

Interlocutors also referred to the **arrest of the Catholicos’ relatives**, including his brother Gevorg Nersisian and his son, in connection with alleged interference in a local electoral campaign in the Vagharshapat community. The charges relate to alleged obstruction of campaign activities. According to interlocutors, the case was initiated following a complaint by a political actor and has

⁶⁰ European Court of Human Rights | CASE OF HASAN AND CHAUSH v. BULGARIA (Application no. 30985/96) <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22%3A%5B%22001-58921%22%5D%7D>

⁶¹ European Court of Human Rights | Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia and Others v. Moldova - 45701/99 <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22%3A%5B%22002-5486%22%5D%7D>

been perceived by some stakeholders as linked to the broader confrontation between state authorities and the Church.

In addition to criminal proceedings, other judicial decisions affecting ecclesiastical governance were instrumental to understand the overall dynamic. For instance, two defrocked priests (Stepan Asatryan and Aramayis Takhmazyan), successfully challenged in court their removal. The court ordered the Church to ensure their continued tenure without obstruction.

The developments described above have been widely contextualized as part of a broader political confrontation between state authorities and the Armenian Apostolic Church, rather than as isolated legal cases. The current escalation is frequently traced to **the address delivered by Catholicos Garegin II⁶²** in Bern on 27 May 2025, in which he publicly **characterized developments in Nagorno-Karabakh as ethnic cleansing and criticized ongoing proceedings against former Artsakh leadership**, calling for the immediate release of all Armenian prisoners held in Baku.

Following this address, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and associates intensified public criticism of the Church leadership, including through highly personalized and, at times, derogatory statements on social media, accompanied by **repeated calls for the Catholicos' resignation and proposals to establish mechanisms for appointing a new church head**. These actions extended beyond rhetoric, including:⁶³

- i. the Prime Minister's public participation in religious services conducted by defrocked clergy,
- ii. reported attempts of his supporters to forcibly enter the Mother See of Etchmiadzin,
- iii. the inclusion of provisions related to "reform" of the Church in the ruling party's electoral platform, and
- iv. legislative initiatives by MPs from the ruling party to cease or 'nationalize' the church property, reinforcing perceptions of institutional pressure.

- Criminal Prosecution and the Use of "Hooliganism" Provisions⁶⁴

The use of criminal law in relation to media actors and commentators emerges as a recurring concern, particularly in cases involving broadly defined offences such as *"hooliganism."* The prosecution of

⁶² Address of His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians at the Armenian Heritage Conference | <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/address-of-his-holiness-karekin-ii-supreme-patriarch-and-catholicos-of-all-armenians-at-the-armenian-heritage-conference>

⁶³ Report on the Unlawful Campaign Initiated by the Prime Minister of Armenia against the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church and the Persecution by the Authorities | report has been prepared by an independent group of lawyers https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RAcbGSNWPyUeBdTByEkwXi8elr4Maucr/view?usp=drive_link

⁶⁴ Armenian Center for Political Rights | A "Crime" without a Law <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Kf5Nv1-DelgtvUWaaHbaXsuOgAMx3V9N/view>

Vazgen Saghatelyan and **Narek Samsonyan**, podcasters and political commentators for AntiFake platform, illustrates the potential implications of this approach.⁶⁵

Saghatelyan and Samsonyan, hosts of the *Imnemnimi* podcast, were arrested in March 2024 and again in November 2025, facing charges of aggravated hooliganism based on language used during political commentary. The charges relate to the use of insulting expressions directed at Alen Simonyan (President of the National Assembly) who had himself previously used similar language in reference to the podcasters.

The application of hooliganism provisions in this context raises substantial legal questions. According to established *case law* of the Court of Cassation (e.g., case No. ԱՎԴ/0014/01/11), hooliganism requires an “**overtly disrespectful attitude toward society**,” a threshold that appears difficult to reconcile with targeted political speech, even when expressed in the coarse or offensive terms. Moreover, Armenian law provides specific protection against insult only for judges and the Human Rights Defender, and only in relation to their official duties.⁶⁶

The seizure of equipment used by journalists during law enforcement operations further amplifies concerns. Given the nature of the alleged offence, the necessity and proportionality of such measures are not readily apparent and may indicate an intention to disrupt the operational capacity of the platform.

The broader implication of these cases lies in the potential re-criminalization of insult through alternative legal provisions, effectively undermining previous reforms. The European Court of Human Rights has emphasized that freedom of expression extends not only to journalists but also to bloggers and other participants in public debate, who perform a “public watchdog” function. The use of criminal sanctions in this domain therefore requires particularly careful scrutiny.

- Further Arrests of Government Critics

During IODA’s second fact-finding mission, participants documented several new instances of arrests of government critics, in several cases on vague, speech-based offenses under the penal code.

- On March 29, 2026, Prime Minister Pashinyan visited Saint Anna church in Yerevan during a crowded service. Plainclothed security personnel pushed worshipers aside to make room for the Prime Minister, which led to a verbal dispute escalating into a physical scuffle.⁶⁷ Security forces detained and criminally charged 18-year-old twin brothers Davit Minasyan and Mikayel Minasyan, as well as Gevorg Gevorgyan. Davit Minasyan was charged with “*hooliganism*” and “*interference with the lawful service or political activity of an official*,” Mikael Minasyan was charged for assisting him, and Gevorgyan with organizing the entire episode. Later that day, police searched the Minasyans’ apartment, but according to defense

⁶⁵ Armenian Center for Political Rights | Statement on the New Political Persecution of AntiFake.am Team
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1b-kuEpHJui1heNOgi5yHz0mtpvfn9-H5/view>

⁶⁶ See the decision of the RA Court of Cassation in criminal case No. ԱՎԴ/0014/01/11, paragraph 17 |
https://datalex.am:443/?app=AppCaseSearch&case_id=13229323905400918

⁶⁷ ԲԻԿ/ ACPR. Վիդեոյով իր Անաստեղծեցու մ (29 մարտի 2026թ.) [Video]. YouTube. (2026, April 2).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKCFmAWdBxE>

counsel, no incriminating evidence was found. Significantly, the Minasyan brothers and Gevorgyan did not know each other. Judge Mnatsakan Martirosyan,⁶⁸ long blamed for politically motivated decisions, released Mikael and Gevorg on March 31 on bail of 5 million AMD (US \$13,585) each, along with a travel ban, but on April 1 ordered Davit held in pre-trial detention for two months. Due to his deteriorating health condition, security forces transferred him to a medical facility multiple times. The judge released him on April 14, subject to travel ban, while the investigation remains ongoing.⁶⁹

- On May 12, 2026, security forces arrested blogger Artak Avetisyan in Yerevan and charged him initially with hate speech but subsequently with hooliganism after he called Prime Minister Pashinyan a “traitor” during a live broadcast. He remains in custody.
- On May 16, 2026, Armen Hovhannisyan, a resident of Artashat, reportedly died by suicide while in police custody in a Yerevan psychiatric facility. Security forces had detained him on suspicion of tearing down a Civil Contract election poster and accused him of obstructing campaigning but had not formally charged him. Following signs of psychological distress, authorities transferred him to a psychiatric institution under police supervision, where he later reportedly died by hanging. Authorities subsequently announced a criminal investigation into the incident but to date have announced no findings.
- On May 18, 2026, security forces arrested Artsakh refugee and activist Artur Osipyan following a heated public verbal confrontation with Prime Minister Pashinyan. A judge ordered him held in pre-trial detention for two months. The prosecutor charged him with inciting violence, hooliganism, and obstruction of campaigning, citing also a Facebook post in which Osipyan allegedly threatened the Prime Minister and called for violence against him.⁷⁰ Since his arrest, Osipyan has been on hunger strike. A number of civil society organizations issued public statements in support of him, condemning what they described as an evidently unlawful, unfounded, and politically motivated criminal prosecution and deprivation of liberty initiated against him.⁷¹

Although international human rights law requires the protection of political speech, lawyers and opposition representatives stressed that Armenia’s Penal Code contains two provisions Article 329 (incitement of hatred, discrimination, or hostility)⁷² and Article 330 (public calls to or justification of violence)⁷³ that have been applied almost exclusively to shield high-ranking officials from

⁶⁸ Bulghadarian, N. Controversial Armenian judge promoted. Radio Liberty/Azatutyun. (2023, January 31).

<https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32248096.html>

⁶⁹ Armenian Center for Political Rights | Statement on Detention and Charges against the Student Davit Minasyan

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/15CYGt0abCQGgFPEWtaY7tQfsxH7NGmCR/view>

⁷⁰ PanARMENIAN.Net. Detention motion filed against Arthur Osipyan. (n.d.).

<https://panarmenian.net/eng/news/333418>

⁷¹ Protection of Rights without Borders | (2026, May 24). STATEMEN Regarding the Unlawful and Selective Prosecution of Artur Osipyan <https://prwb.am/en/2026/05/20/statement-4/>

⁷² Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia | Article 329. Public Speech Instigating or Propagating Hatred, Discrimination, Intolerance or Hostility, as well as Disseminating Materials or Objects for That Purpose.

[https://legislationline.org/sites/default/files/2023-](https://legislationline.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/Criminal%20Code%20of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Armenia%20%282022%29%20%28English%29.pdf)

[12/Criminal%20Code%20of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Armenia%20%282022%29%20%28English%29.pdf](https://legislationline.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/Criminal%20Code%20of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Armenia%20%282022%29%20%28English%29.pdf)

⁷³ Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia | Article 330. Public Calls for Violence, Publicly Justifying or Advocating Violence, as well as Disseminating Materials or Objects for That Purpose.

[https://legislationline.org/sites/default/files/2023-](https://legislationline.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/Criminal%20Code%20of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Armenia%20%282022%29%20%28English%29.pdf)

[12/Criminal%20Code%20of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Armenia%20%282022%29%20%28English%29.pdf](https://legislationline.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/Criminal%20Code%20of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Armenia%20%282022%29%20%28English%29.pdf)

criticism. A Court of Cassation precedent issued on April 23, 2026, entrenched this distorted interpretation, transforming these provisions into a systemic human rights problem.⁷⁴

Selective and expansive use of vague, speech-based offenses such as “hooliganism” or “calling for the overthrow of the government” risks chilling legitimate political expression, distorting electoral competition, and eroding public trust in the impartiality of state institutions. These practices stand in clear tension with OSCE commitments, including the 1990 Copenhagen Document, which guarantees freedom of expression, association, and equality before the law as essential conditions for genuine democratic elections.

The European Court of Human Rights has consistently developed a strong doctrinal protection for political expression under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, particularly in cases involving criminal sanctions for speech. **A central principle in this jurisprudence is that the limits of permissible criticism are wider regarding the Government than in relation to a private citizen, or even a politician.** According to the Court, in a democratic society based on the rule of law, political ideas which challenge the existing order and whose realization is advocated by peaceful means must be afforded a proper opportunity of expression. In the context of cases concerning expression alleged to stir up, promote or justify violence, hatred or intolerance, **the Court has considered that the legitimate aim of “prevention of disorder” may not be invoked unless it has been demonstrated that the impugned statements were capable of leading or actually led to disorder – for instance in the form of public disturbances – and that in acting to suppress them, the relevant authorities had that in mind.**⁷⁵

In Armenia, the entrenched application of Articles 329 and 330 illustrates how vague legal standards can become instruments of political control, raising systemic questions about compliance with international human rights obligations and OSCE commitments. These prosecutions have direct implications for the overall integrity of the electoral process, as they constrain open debate, limit inclusiveness, and weaken the conditions necessary for free and fair competition.

- Constraints on Political Pluralism and Civil Society Space

A recurring concern relates to the fragmentation of the civil society sector.

One segment of civil society organizations is perceived as either broadly supportive of, or reluctant to openly challenge, the authorities on politically sensitive issues. In parallel, a smaller group of organizations continues to engage in independent monitoring and critical assessment of developments related to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. However, these actors reportedly face **reputational pressure**, including public narratives that portray them as politically biased or affiliated with foreign, particularly Russian, interests.

⁷⁴ Armenian Center for Political Rights. “Hate Speech” laws as a tool of political persecution (Ad hoc Report) | ACPR. ACPR — Armenian Center for Political Rights. (2026, June 3). <https://acpr.center/publications/report-hate-speech-laws/>

⁷⁵ ECHR-KS | Article 10 ECHR - Freedom of expression - ECHR-KS - Knowledge Sharing. ECHR-KS. (n.d.). https://ks.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr-ks/guide_art_10_eng

Such labeling practices were highlighted as having a delegitimizing effect on dissent, contributing to a narrowing of space for independent civic engagement. Participants noted that organizations raising concerns about law enforcement practices, governance, or political accountability risk being framed not as legitimate stakeholders in democratic oversight, but as actors pursuing external agendas. This dynamic may discourage participation, weaken horizontal solidarity within civil society, and contribute to self-censorship, particularly among smaller or less institutionally resilient organizations.

The same structural dynamics appear to extend into the political sphere, where participants identified significant barriers to the emergence of new political forces. While formal legal provisions do not prohibit political participation, the broader environment, characterized by reputational labeling, polarized discourse, and limited access to balanced public debate, was described as constraining in practice.

Interlocutors emphasized that newly emerging actors are frequently subjected to discursive categorization, including allegations of alignment with foreign geopolitical interests. Such narratives may undermine public trust in new initiatives at an early stage, thereby limiting their capacity to consolidate support or engage in meaningful political competition. In this context, the distinction between legitimate political contestation and externally influenced activity may become blurred in public discourse, to the detriment of democratic pluralism.

The case of **Samvel Karapetyan** was frequently cited as illustrative of both the possibilities and constraints affecting new political entrants. For decades largely absent from active politics, Karapetyan became more visibly engaged following public statements in support of the Armenian Apostolic Church, including remarks made in an interview with News.am on 17 June wherein he said: *“if the politicians fail, then we will participate in our own way in all of this”*.⁷⁶

Subsequently, **Karapetyan faced criminal charges of incitement to seize power for this statement, alongside additional financial crime allegations**, all of which he has denied. Following his detention, authorities undertook a series of actions affecting his business interests, including inspections, raids, and discussions of possible nationalization, while maintaining that these measures were unrelated to his political positioning. Observers, however, pointed to the temporal proximity of these actions to his political statements as contributing to perceptions of selective enforcement.

In the weeks following his detention, Karapetyan announced plans to establish a *“fundamentally new political force,”* which evolved into the movement **“Our Way”** and later the **“Strong Armenia”** electoral bloc. Despite this development, participants noted that his emergence remains exceptional, rather than indicative of a broader opening of the political field. His profile, as a well-established business figure with substantial financial resources and public visibility, distinguishes him from typical new entrants, who may lack comparable resilience to political or reputational pressures. Currently, **“Strong Armenia”** is one of the leading oppositional forces.

⁷⁶ Alphanews. We will also participate in all this in our own way: Samvel Karapetyan. (2025, June 17). <https://alphanews.am/en/if-politicians-fail-we-will-intervene-in-our-own-way-samvel-karapetyan/>

D. Political Discourse and Securitization

- Securitization as a Response to Post-Conflict Vulnerability

The increasing securitization of political discourse in Armenia cannot be understood in isolation from the country's broader post-conflict and geopolitical condition. The aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, including the 2020 war, the September 2022 escalations, and the 2023 forced displacement and ethnic cleansing of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, has produced a persistent sense of insecurity within both the political elite and society at large.

In such contexts, securitization often emerges as a political logic through which governing actors seek to consolidate legitimacy. By framing themselves as guarantors of stability in an uncertain regional environment, the political leadership can justify both policy choices and discursive strategies that prioritize security over pluralism. In Armenia, this has translated into a gradual shift whereby political competition is increasingly embedded within a narrative of existential threat.

However, while the security concerns are grounded in real geopolitical risks, the extension of security logic into domestic political contestation represents a qualitative transformation. Rather than remaining confined to foreign policy or defense, the language of threat has come to structure internal political debate.

A key feature of this transformation is the emergence of a **binary political framework**, in which electoral competition is framed as a choice between mutually exclusive and existentially charged outcomes. At the domestic level, **the discourse surrounding external threats has increasingly merged with internal political narratives**. Over recent years, the ruling Civil Contract party has consistently positioned itself as the primary guarantor of Armenia's sovereignty, while portraying a broad range of political opponents and critics as actors aligned with foreign interests. **This dynamic has contributed to the progressive securitization of political debate, in which political disagreement is reframed as a matter of national security.**

In this context, recent statements by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan suggesting that **renewed war with Azerbaijan would be inevitable in the event of the ruling party's electoral defeat**, and similar narratives effectively raise the stakes of the electoral process, framing the outcome not as a matter of democratic choice, but as a question of national survival. At the same time, the invocation of external threats has been used to justify domestic actions, including the increased use of legal and law enforcement mechanisms against political and societal actors.⁷⁷ For example, during tensions with the Armenian Apostolic Church, official narratives have framed internal dissent in terms of external interference, thereby blurring the distinction between legitimate political opposition and security threats, effectively transforming electoral competition into a **referendum on national survival**.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Regional Center for Democracy and Security | The risks of Pashinyan's fear-mongering tactics ahead of Armenia's elections <https://www.rcds.am/en/the-risks-of-pashinyans-fear-mongering-tactics-ahead-of-armenias-elections.html>

⁷⁸ Regional Center for Democracy and Security | The risks of Pashinyan's fear-mongering tactics ahead of Armenia's elections <https://www.rcds.am/en/the-risks-of-pashinyans-fear-mongering-tactics-ahead-of-armenias-elections.html>

This framing is reinforced through repeated references to a so-called *“three-headed war party,”* which consolidates diverse opposition forces under a single, security-coded label. Actors associated with this framing include established political figures such as Robert Kocharyan, as well as newer entrants including Samvel Karapetyan.⁷⁹

The analytical significance of this narrative lies in its homogenizing effect: **it reduces ideological diversity within the opposition and reframes political disagreement as a shared threat.** This simplifies not only the political landscape but also constrains the emergence of alternative policy platforms by attaching security costs to dissent.

Public and policy discussions in Armenia are increasingly dominated by the issue of so-called **hybrid threats**, particularly in the form of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). The “hybrid threat” does not correspond to a legal norm. It is a political concept which is intentionally vague. The Council of the European Union noted that: *“while definitions of hybrid threats and campaigns may vary, they need to remain flexible in order to allow for proper responses to the evolving nature of those threats.”*⁸⁰ A significant share of engagement by international partners is currently directed toward supporting Armenia in countering such threats, most often attributed to external actors, in particular the Russian Federation. **The current level of focus on this issue risks crowding out attention to equally pressing domestic challenges.** In practice, many actors, including civil society organizations, media platforms, and international stakeholders, appear increasingly preoccupied with potential external interference, while systemic concerns related to the rule of law, misuse of administrative resources, and the integrity of domestic institutions receive comparatively limited scrutiny.⁸¹

Several civil society groups expressed concern about a Russian government plot to bribe and pressure migrant Armenian voters living in Russia to travel to Armenia to vote for the “Strong Armenia” party, which the ruling party accuses of being backed by the Russian government.⁸² Armenia’s Foreign Intelligence Service first warned of such a plot on March 10, 2026, claiming that Russia’s Federal Security Service was **pressuring Armenian businessmen to pay 80,000 Armenian voters to travel to Armenia** to support Strong Armenia.⁸³

On 2 June 2026, Armenia’s Minister of Economy and Deputy Chairman of the Civil Contract party, Gevorg Papoyan, responded to reports concerning the anticipated arrival of “100,000 voters from Russia” by **stating that 30,000–40,000 of those 100,000 people that stay in Armenia could be**

⁷⁹ Myth Detector | Choice between War and Peace: Strategic Rhetoric ahead of Armenia’s Parliamentary Elections https://mythdetector.com/en/ahead-of-armenias-parliamentary-elections/?fbclid=IwDGRjCARCuo9jbGNrBFxSbmV4dG4DYWVtAjExAHNydGMGYXBwX2IkDDM1MDY4NTUzMTcyOAABHigtYp01FETHG3BXpasSfArCqk65I96lIKbNqzzFKX7sA9kDKY3aXeEhMJG_aem_yakYypt5yW6Vw1LmQ_cDEg

⁸⁰ Decision (CFSP) 2024/2643 of 8 October 2024 concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia’s destabilising activities <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2024/2643/oj/eng>

⁸¹ Regional Center for Democracy and Security | Foreign interference is real, but not Armenia’s only election risk <https://www.rcds.am/en/foreign-interference-is-real-but-not-armenias-only-election-risk.html>

⁸² Barseghyan, A. Pashinyan accuses Karapetyan and others of being ‘foreign agents.’ OC Media. (2026, April 20). <https://oc-media.org/pashinyan-accuses-karapetyan-and-others-of-being-foreign-agents/>

⁸³ Armenpress. Intelligence service warns of foreign meddling targeting Armenians abroad ahead of general elections. (2026, March 10) <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1244229>

sent to military training camps for one or two months before returning to Russia.⁸⁴ On 3 June 2026, Deputy Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, Taron Chakhoyan, made a similar statement, asserting that **Armenian citizens arriving from Russia to vote in exchange for alleged electoral bribes “should be enrolled” in 25-day training camps and warning that those evading such service could face criminal liability.**⁸⁵

On 4 June 2026, further concerns emerged following the circulation of video footage by Radio Aurora reportedly showing **Military Police officers conducting passport checks at border crossing points and issuing notices to male Armenian citizens under the age of 55 arriving from Russia**, requiring them to participate in 25-day military training camps.⁸⁶

These developments should be viewed within the broader context of previously documented concerns regarding the politicization of military training camps and their alleged use as a coercive or punitive mechanism. As noted in earlier sections of this report, concerns had already been raised that training camps were selectively used against individuals participating in anti-government protests or civic mobilization efforts.⁸⁷ Against this background, the public linkage made by senior officials between electoral participation, alleged political affiliation, and compulsory military service further reinforced concerns regarding the potential misuse of reservist mobilization mechanisms for political purposes.

It is important to note, that military training camps constitute a form of compulsory military service under Armenian law and may involve assignment to combat duty. **Linking reservist mobilization to allegations of electoral bribery or political affiliation creates perception that compulsory military obligations are being applied selectively or punitively against perceived opposition supporters.**⁸⁸

At the same time, the issue of foreign influence in Armenia’s political sphere extends beyond covert interference or allegations of hostile external involvement. **Public political endorsements of the ruling authorities by external actors have also become increasingly visible.** Representatives and stakeholders associated with the United States, the European Union, Turkey, and Azerbaijan have

⁸⁴ G. Papoyan’s official Facebook page 100 հազար մարդու 30-40 հազարին վարժական հավաքներին կուղարկենք, հեղինակ՝ Կարապետ (02.06.2026). <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1409586251190286> (in Armenian) “I’m very happy about that because, first, our polling shows that most of those people will vote for us; and second, we need those people because training camps are currently being conducted - one-month ones, yes, and it would be very good if, say, 30,000–40,000 of those 100,000 people stayed here - we would send them to training camps. They would participate in training camps for a month or two and then return to Kaluga.1 So what? What’s the problem?”

⁸⁵ T. Chakhoyan’s official Facebook page, Ռուսաստանից ընտրական առօրյա ժամանակները կներգրավվեն 25-օրյա վարժական հավաքներին, (03.06.2026). <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1009201751524104> (in Armenian) “Those arriving from Russia to vote for Kaluga Samo in exchange for electoral bribes will be enrolled in 25-day training camps. Since yesterday, some strange discussions have started about whether these people should be enrolled in 25- day training camps or not. The answer is unequivocally yes - they should be enrolled. ... And all those who evade the 25-day training camps will naturally be subject to criminal liability. Have a nice day.”

⁸⁶ Radio Aurora | The Military Police of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Armenia delivers notices at the border (04.06.2026) <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1917022498953899> (in Armenian)

⁸⁷ Armenian Center for Political Rights | Training Camps: Discrimination “Prescribed by law” | ACPR/ԲՅԿ(2024, December 9). <https://acpr.center/publications/report-military/>

⁸⁸ Armenian Center for Political Rights | Urgent statement: Armenian authorities are using military service as punishment | ACPR/ԲՅԿ(2026, June 4). <https://acpr.center/publications/statement-military-service-punishment/>

publicly expressed support for Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and his political course. While such statements are often framed as diplomatic engagement or expressions of strategic partnership, in the context of a highly polarized pre-electoral environment they also contribute to perceptions that certain international actors are politically invested in the continuation of the current government. This, in turn, **risks undermining perceptions of neutrality in international engagement and mediation.**

U.S. and European officials have also weighed in on the election in Armenia, publicly endorsing Prime Minister Pashinyan. Most recently, on May 28, **President Donald Trump** issued a tweet strongly endorsing him.⁸⁹ Likewise, during the EPC Summit in Yerevan, earlier in May, **French President Emmanuel Macron** openly acknowledged and defended his political support for Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, stating during a press conference that he “undertakes this support” and openly backs Pashinyan and his political course.⁹⁰

These dynamics suggest that “*foreign influence*” increasingly operates not as a consistently applied legal or normative category, but as a politically contingent and discursive label. Its application appears selective: engagement between the ruling authorities and external actors, whether from the EU, the United States, or other geopolitical partners, is generally framed as legitimate diplomacy, strategic diversification, or democratic partnership. By contrast, similar forms of engagement involving opposition actors, particularly when linked to Russia, are more readily framed as evidence of malign influence or external interference.

This asymmetry has implications that extend beyond reputational politics. It reshapes the boundaries of legitimate political participation by normalizing some foreign alignments while stigmatizing others. In a pre-electoral context, where perceptions of legitimacy, sovereignty, and external backing significantly influence public trust and voter behavior, such unequal framing can alter the broader conditions of political competition itself.

⁸⁹ Nikol Pashinyan on X: “Thank you, President @realDonaldTrump for the high appreciation and friendly words ☺❤AMUS☺ <https://t.co/sn0BMEnKhi>” / X. (n.d.). X (Formerly Twitter). <https://x.com/NikolPashinyan/status/2059833168933306750?s=20>

⁹⁰ Armenpress. Macron rejects interference claims, defends support for Pashinyan. (2026, May 5). <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1249361>

CHAPTER 5 | ELECTORAL ENVIRONMENT

The integrity of elections must be assessed not only through the technical conduct of voting, but also through the broader environment in which political actors compete and citizens form their preferences. In line with commitments undertaken within the framework of the OSCE, as well as obligations stemming from *Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*⁹¹ and *Article 3 of Protocol No. 1 to the European Convention on Human Rights*,⁹² electoral processes must ensure genuine political pluralism, equality of opportunity, and conditions free from undue influence. *The Venice Commission's Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters*⁹³ further emphasizes that these principles extend to campaign conditions, access to media, and the use of public resources.

In the Armenian context, the electoral environment ahead of the 7 June 2026 parliamentary elections raises interconnected concerns related to the stability and application of the legal framework, the emergence of an uneven campaign environment, the use of administrative and financial resources, imbalances in media coverage, constraints affecting electoral oversight, and broader pressures on political competition. While each of these factors may be formally grounded in law or administrative practice, their cumulative effect warrants careful scrutiny in light of international standards.

- Electoral Code Amendments

A key point of concern lies in **recent amendments to the Electoral Code adopted near the electoral period**. On 24 January 2026, amendments were introduced regulating domestic election observation, including stricter requirements on political neutrality and funding transparency. These amendments provide **full discretion to Central Electoral Commission (CEC) to assess the neutrality of observation missions and their members after their accreditation**, and any political activity by members months prior to their accreditation will not be considered. Moreover, the CEC can deny or revoke the accreditation of organizations campaigning for or against election participants.⁹⁴

Although such provisions may appear aligned with good governance principles, the process of their adoption raises significant concerns. **The amendments were passed through expedited procedures, without meaningful consultation with opposition parties, civil society organizations, or international partners.** In such contexts, the risk is not only the substance of the

⁹¹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, adopted 16 December 1966, by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

⁹² European Convention on Human Rights / The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom/ <https://www.echr.coe.int/european-convention-on-human-rights>

⁹³ Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters | [Code conduite PREMS 026115 GBR.pdf](#)

⁹⁴ Barseghyan, A. (2026, February 3). Armenia adopts law banning election monitors who 'fail to maintain political neutrality.' OC Media. <https://oc-media.org/armenia-adopts-law-banning-election-monitors-who-fail-to-maintain-political-neutrality/>

law but its potential application. Provisions framed in general terms may be selectively enforced, thereby constraining independent observation efforts while allowing more compliant, pro-government monitoring structures to operate without restriction.

Concerns are further compounded by amendments adopted in a first reading on 7 April 2026, **restricting the naming of electoral blocs, prohibiting the use of personal names or similar identifiers**. The proposal, **adopted exclusively by the ruling majority**, has been presented as a technical clarification, however, its timing and political context have led to widespread perceptions that it targets specific political actors, notably the “Strong Armenia with Samvel Karapetyan” bloc.

Such perceptions are particularly problematic considering the *Venice Commission’s stability principle, which provides that fundamental elements of electoral law should not be amended less than one year before an election*. Legal predictability is not merely a procedural requirement; it is essential to ensuring that electoral competition is conducted on a level playing field. Changes introduced in close temporal proximity to elections, especially without consensus, risk undermining trust in the neutrality of the legal framework.⁹⁵

In addition to formal amendments, **structural gaps** in the Electoral Code further affect campaign equality. Notably, the regulation of campaign activities is tied to the formal announcement of elections, creating a period prior to this moment during which political actors may engage in activities that are, in substance, electoral campaigning but are not subject to legal restrictions. This loophole has enabled the emergence of early and informal campaigning practices. In the current electoral cycle, representatives of the ruling party have undertaken extensive regional visits, public meetings, and outreach activities framed as intra-party or administrative engagements. However, their content, messaging, and public presentation closely resemble electoral campaigning. This dynamic allows incumbents to benefit from prolonged visibility, continuous access to voters, and the use of administrative networks, thereby creating asymmetries that disadvantage opposition actors.

- Electoral Campaign Financing

Recent amendments to the Electoral Code introduced a revised framework for political finance that will be applied for the first time in the upcoming parliamentary elections. While these changes formally aim to standardize financial flows and introduce clearer limits, their practical implementation raises several concerns regarding transparency, timing, and effective oversight.

Under the new provisions, political financing is structured around a dual system distinguishing between party funds and campaign funds.

⁹⁵ The Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters (CDL-AD (2002) 023rev, item II.2.B) states: “*The fundamental elements of electoral law, in particular the electoral system proper, membership of electoral commissions and the drawing of constituency boundaries, should not be open to amendment less than one year before an election, or should be written in the constitution or at a level higher than ordinary law.*” https://www.venice.coe.int/images/SITE%20IMAGES/Publications/Code_conduite_PREMS%20026115%20GBR.pdf

- i. The law establishes that only individuals may contribute to party funds, **with an annual donation limit set at 10 million AMD per individual across all parties.**
- ii. Political parties, in turn, may transfer resources from their party funds into dedicated campaign funds, which must be established specifically for the official campaign period.
- iii. Campaign expenditures are capped at **800 million AMD during this period**, while the **overall annual budget of a political party may not exceed 1 billion AMD.** Parties are further required to declare both monetary and in-kind contributions and to submit annual financial reports by February of the following year.

Oversight of party finances falls under the mandate of the **Corruption Prevention Commission (CPC)**, while financial activity during the official campaign period is subject to enhanced scrutiny, including reporting by banks and audit services every three days. On paper, this framework introduces several elements consistent with international standards, particularly about spending limits and periodic reporting obligations.⁹⁶

However, despite these formal safeguards, regulatory gaps and ambiguities significantly affect the transparency and effectiveness of the system, particularly in the pre-electoral context. A central issue lies in the temporal scope of financial regulation. **The official campaign period is set to begin on 8 May 2026, yet the Electoral Code does not prohibit campaign-related activities prior to this date.** As a result, political actors may engage in extensive campaign-like activities, such as regional visits, public outreach, and organized political messaging, outside the formally regulated period.

Crucially, expenditures associated with such pre-campaign activities are not subject to the campaign spending ceiling of 800 million AMD and are instead reported only retrospectively in their annual party financial declarations. This creates a significant gap in transparency at a critical stage of the electoral process. Voters, observers, and oversight bodies are effectively deprived of real-time access to information regarding financial flows that may directly influence electoral competition. Moreover, the absence of clear rules on whether such early expenditures should be counted toward campaign limits introduces ambiguity that may be exploited in practice.

Additional concerns arise from the lack of clarity surrounding the treatment **of in-kind (material) contributions.** While parties are required to declare such contributions, the methodology for their valuation and reporting remains insufficiently defined. This creates potential space for underreporting or inconsistent disclosure, particularly in cases where non-monetary support, such as services, goods, or logistical assistance, may play a significant role in campaign activities.

Furthermore, although the framework formally restricts contributions to individuals, the regulation of indirect or concealed contributions from legal entities remains insufficiently developed. In the absence of robust enforcement mechanisms, this raises concerns about the potential circumvention of existing prohibitions.

Institutional coordination gaps further complicate the oversight landscape. When questioned regarding potential early campaigning and the financing of such activities, particularly in cases involving extensive regional outreach by ruling party representatives, **the Central Electoral Commission (CEC)** indicated that its mandate applies strictly to the official campaign period and

⁹⁶ Corruption Prevention Commission | <https://cpcarmenia.am/en/>

deferred responsibility to **the Corruption Prevention Commission (CPC)**. At the same time, the legal framework provides that expenditures related to political agitation for electoral purposes should be reported through campaign funds. This divergence between formal legal requirements and institutional practice creates uncertainty regarding enforcement and accountability.

Taken together, these factors point to a structural limitation within the current campaign finance framework. While the introduction of formal limits and reporting requirements represents a step toward regulation, the absence of effective controls over pre-campaign spending, combined with delayed disclosure and regulatory ambiguities, undermines the principle of transparency. In practical terms, this creates conditions in which significant financial activity may take place outside the scope of real-time oversight, thereby affecting the equality of opportunity between political actors and limiting the ability of stakeholders to assess the fairness of the electoral process during its most critical phases.

- Use of Administrative Resources

These asymmetries are reinforced by broader concerns regarding the **use of state and administrative resources**. Multiple interlocutors have described a pattern in which the boundary between state institutions and ruling party activities becomes increasingly blurred. In particular:

- **Civil servants** are reportedly encouraged, whether formally or informally, to participate in activities aligned with ruling political actors, raising concerns about the neutrality of the public administration.
- **Public infrastructure and institutional platforms** are used in ways that may support political messaging associated with the ruling party.
- **Law enforcement bodies**, while formally tasked with ensuring public order, have in certain instances been perceived as assuming a dual role, including acting as instruments of pressure or deterrence vis-à-vis political opponents.

The perception that state institutions are not operating with full neutrality is sufficient to undermine public confidence and distort conditions for political competition.

International standards concerning democratic elections require state authorities to ensure the neutral, impartial, and non-discriminatory use of administrative resources throughout the entire electoral process, including the pre-campaign and early campaign periods. **Public institutions, financial resources, state-funded programs, and public-sector employees should not be used in a manner that advantages or disadvantages any political party or candidate.** Within the framework of OSCE commitments and broader European electoral standards, even the perception that state resources are being mobilized for partisan purposes may undermine public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process and the principle of equal opportunity among contestants.

Concern was expressed regarding the involvement of educational institutions and public-sector employees in campaign-related activities. These concerns were raised repeatedly during regional meetings and align with observations documented by the Akanates/Eyewitness Observer Mission during recent electoral processes. Under Article 23(1) of the Electoral Code of the Republic

of Armenia, employees of educational and preschool institutions are prohibited from organizing or conducting campaign activities while exercising their official duties or acting in their official capacity.⁹⁷

Nevertheless, observers documented several incidents suggesting the organized involvement of school administrations, teachers, students, and other public-sector employees in activities associated with the campaign of the ruling Civil Contract party.

- For example, on 13 May, during a campaign event in the Aparan community attended by the Prime Minister, several school principals and teachers from Aparan and surrounding settlements reportedly participated in a coordinated manner during working hours. According to observer reports, students were removed from classes upon instruction of school administrations to greet the Prime Minister and participate in a campaign event. Children were reportedly provided with flags and instructed in advance regarding dress code and appearance. In the village of Tsaghkashen, students were allegedly excused from classes and provided with T-shirts bearing symbols associated with the ruling party's political campaign.^{98 99}
- Similarly, on 21 May, during a campaign event in Verin Artashat in Ararat Province, representatives of several educational and cultural institutions reportedly participated in activities connected to the ruling party campaign. According to observer accounts, classes at the Verin Artashat secondary school ended earlier than scheduled to facilitate student participation in the event attended by the Prime Minister. Teachers and school administrators were also reportedly present. Employees of the Artashat Charles Aznavour Cultural Center, including senior staff and instructors, were likewise alleged to have organized and involved children participating in cultural programs in the event.¹⁰⁰ The Akanates/Eyewitness Observer Mission subsequently filed administrative complaints requesting accountability under Article 40.8 of the Code of Administrative Offences concerning unlawful participation in electoral campaigning by persons prohibited from conducting campaign activities.¹⁰¹
- Concerns were also raised regarding the involvement of higher and vocational education institutions. On May 15, Arman Tatoyan, leader of the “Wings of Unity” party, published an audio recording of Lusine Grigoryan, a lecturer at Armavir Regional State College and a member of the “Civil Contract” faction of the Armavir Council of Elders, ordering the college students to participate in a “Civil Contract” campaign event and saying she had been

⁹⁷Eyewitness Observer Mission | *Reference on National Assembly elections*. (n.d.). Transparency.am.

<https://transparency.am/en/publication/428>

⁹⁸ Teachers, schoolchildren in Armenia's Aparan attend ruling party's election campaign during class time. (2026, May 13). *Armenia News*. <https://news.am/en/video/1034979>

⁹⁹ *Eyewitness Diary N12*. . . - «Ականատես» դիտորդական առաքելություն | Facebook. (n.d.).

<https://www.facebook.com/akanatesditord/posts/pfbid02AAyHuNsEiHntUESdvp4AoeExkSBEMJzELJged8vwkhjGHey32LmbTrPXmzgpkNeCl>

¹⁰⁰ *Eyewitness Diary N19* - «Ականատես» դիտորդական առաքելություն | Facebook. (n.d.).

<https://www.facebook.com/akanatesditord/posts/pfbid02j1pAnJxHLNPJSCwhjg4vLZ3LoeLRsjx2wqWM4M8uZusHQRFP2dfgvKkM6xBMGFEl>

¹⁰¹ Factor.am. (n.d.). Artashat House of Culture organized a special welcoming ceremony for Pashinyan. VIDEO.

factor.am. <https://factor.am/1020989.html>

ordered to organize it. Although the Ministry of Education subsequently stated that the initiative had been undertaken by an individual librarian without the knowledge of the institution's director, and disciplinary measures were reportedly imposed, the incident nevertheless contributed to broader perceptions regarding the vulnerability of students and educational personnel to political pressure during electoral periods. A criminal complaint regarding the incident was later submitted to the Prosecutor's Office; however, at the time of writing, no publicly available information regarding the outcome of the proceedings had been identified.¹⁰²

Broader concerns were also raised regarding **the apparent use of material, financial, and human resources connected to local self-government bodies and public institutions in support of campaign activities associated with the ruling Civil Contract party.** Eyewitness observer mission, in their interim report, documented numerous incidents across multiple regions involving the participation of municipal employees, school administrators, teachers, employees of cultural institutions, and other public-sector personnel in campaign events during working hours or while acting in their official capacities.

Reported incidents included the use of municipal staff to distribute campaign materials, the participation of community leaders and deputy mayors in campaign activities during working hours, the use of official vehicles with state registration plates for campaign-related activities, and the involvement of educational and cultural institutions in mobilizing attendance for political events. In several reported cases, campaign activities were allegedly accompanied by references to the provision of municipal services, local development projects, or other administrative matters falling within the authority of local government bodies, thereby contributing to concerns regarding the conflation of public administration and partisan campaigning.

Particularly concerning were allegations indicating that public-sector employees and citizens in economically or professionally vulnerable positions felt unable to openly express political preferences or engage in opposition activities due to fear of adverse consequences. Multiple reports described situations in which individuals declined participation in opposition-linked electoral processes, withdrew from campaign-related activities, or refused to provide premises for opposition campaign offices due to concerns regarding employment security, institutional retaliation, or broader administrative repercussions.

For example, opposition representatives in Kapan reported that three individuals who had initially agreed to serve as precinct electoral commission members for the opposition "Armenia Alliance" later withdrew, allegedly out of fear of losing employment in public institutions, including schools, medical institutions, and educational establishments. In Artashat, opposition representatives reported difficulties in renting campaign offices, claiming that property owners withdrew from previously agreed arrangements after expressing fears that family members employed in the public sector could face negative consequences.

¹⁰²Aravot.am. "Students were forced to participate in the Civil Contract campaign. Will Makunts, Papikyan and Arayik Harutyunyan be arrested?" Tatoyan published according." (2026, May 15). <https://www.aravot.am/2026/05/15/1557176/>

Reports were also received concerning the collection of voter-related information by employees of district administrative offices in various districts of Yerevan. According to interlocutors, municipal employees visit residential buildings to gather information concerning residents' presence in the country, actual place of residence, and intended voting preferences. During such visits in Malatia-Sebastia, Arabkir and Kentron administrative districts, municipal workers also gave campaign materials from "Civil Contract" party. Such practices would constitute a particularly problematic form of administrative interference, given the inherent imbalance of power between public officials and citizens and **the potentially coercive nature of political inquiries conducted by representatives of local authorities.**

These concerns were further reinforced during interviews conducted by the IODA delegation, during the second fact-finding mission, with representatives of opposition parties and local stakeholders across multiple regions of the country. Interlocutors provided numerous and detailed accounts describing practices similar in nature to those documented by domestic observer organizations, suggesting that such incidents were not perceived as isolated occurrences but rather as manifestations of broader patterns observable across different localities during the campaign period.

Opposition party representatives repeatedly alleged that tax authorities, law enforcement agencies, and other state-controlled institutions were used, directly or indirectly, as instruments of pressure against opposition-affiliated individuals, business owners, local community leaders, and public-sector employees. According to these accounts, persons perceived as supporting opposition candidates or parties were subjected to various forms of intimidation intended to discourage political engagement and limit visible support for opposition activities.

Allegations described by interlocutors included threatened or selective inspections by tax authorities, warnings regarding possible criminal or administrative proceedings, pressure linked to public-sector employment, and other forms of institutional interference. Several interlocutors further claimed that business owners and municipal employees were informally advised to distance themselves from opposition actors to avoid adverse consequences affecting their professional or economic activities. While IODA could not independently verify individual allegations or establish legal responsibility in specific cases, the consistency, frequency, and geographic spread of these claims contributed to a broader perception among stakeholders that institutional mechanisms may, in certain instances, be used in ways that create unequal conditions for political competition.

The interim report by Eyewitness/Akanates also detailed several cases in which political actors, private employers and business owners allegedly used workplace leverage to mobilize employees for campaign activities or influence their political participation. Reported incidents included the organized transportation of employees to rallies, pressure to attend campaign events, and alleged threats related to employment status or promises of financial incentives tied to electoral support. These allegations involved companies and political actors associated with multiple parties, including "Civil Contract," "Prosperous Armenia," "Strong Armenia," and "For the Republic." Domestic observer organizations have referred several cases to law enforcement authorities.

Importantly, a recurring theme throughout interviews was the widespread absence of trust in the independence and effectiveness of investigative and oversight bodies responsible for addressing electoral complaints and abuses of administrative resources. Multiple interlocutors stated that individuals often refrain from formally reporting incidents due to fears of retaliation, reputational

consequences, or burdensome and ineffective investigative procedures. As one interlocutor noted, individuals who submit complaints frequently become themselves the subject of prolonged scrutiny, repeated questioning, or extensive procedural reviews that consume significant time and resources while rarely leading to meaningful accountability or remedial action.

This perceived absence of effective institutional protection contributes to a climate of fear, self-censorship, and political caution, particularly among public-sector employees, locally influential individuals, and economically vulnerable groups. In such an environment, the underreporting of alleged abuses itself becomes an important indicator of diminished public confidence in the impartiality of state institutions and available remedies. Even where allegations cannot be conclusively substantiated, the persistence and consistency of such perceptions across regions remain significant from the standpoint of international electoral standards, as they may adversely affect public trust, political pluralism, and the effective exercise of political rights.

Concrete examples from recent electoral processes further illustrate these dynamics and point to patterns that extend beyond isolated incidents. In the lead-up to the **2025 municipal elections in Vagharshapat**, the administrative merger of the nearby Khoy municipality effectively altered the composition of the electorate. According to interlocutors, this change benefited a candidate representing the ruling Civil Contract party, who had previously served as mayor of Khoy. Similar patterns were observed in **the 2024 municipal elections in Gyumri** and other localities, where administrative decisions were perceived to intersect with electoral considerations. These cases highlight the extent to which institutional mechanisms may be used, intentionally or otherwise, in ways that influence electoral outcomes.

At the same time, several interlocutors emphasized that the distortion of electoral processes is not limited to pre-election administrative measures, but has, over several years, extended into the post-electoral phase, particularly at the municipal level. **It was noted that in municipalities where opposition candidates have succeeded in elections, a recurring pattern has emerged whereby electoral outcomes are subsequently contested, resisted, or effectively neutralized.** This has reportedly included a combination of legal challenges, political boycotts, and institutional measures, through which, in a few cases, control has ultimately shifted back to actors aligned with the ruling authorities.

In this context, multiple cases were cited in which opposition-affiliated elected officials were removed, prosecuted, or otherwise prevented from exercising their mandates:

- In **Vanadzor**, former mayor Mamikon Aslanyan was arrested following his electoral victory in 2021 and remained in detention for an extended period of approximately 2.5 years.
- In **Gyumri**, criminal proceedings were initiated against elected mayor Vardan Ghukasyan shortly after the 2025 elections, raising concerns regarding the timing and potential impact of such measures on the exercise of his mandate.
- Broader references were also made to cases in **Goris** and **Vardenis**, where opposition victories were reportedly followed by institutional or legal interventions affecting elected representatives.

While the circumstances of individual cases may differ and require careful legal assessment, their cumulative effect contributes to a perception that electoral victories by opposition actors do not consistently translate into the effective exercise of political authority.

Taken together, these developments suggest that electoral competition may, in certain instances, be shaped not only by pre-electoral conditions but also by post-electoral dynamics, including the use of legal and institutional mechanisms that affect the durability of electoral outcomes. Such patterns, particularly when viewed cumulatively, raise concerns regarding the effective realization of voters' choices and the broader principle of genuine political competition.

The use of financial and material resources in the pre-electoral period represents an additional layer of concern. Reports indicate that social assistance measures, including **pension increases**¹⁰³, have been introduced or prominently emphasized shortly before elections, despite not being provisioned in the state budget adopted in December 2025. While governments retain the authority to implement social policies, the timing and targeting of such measures, particularly when directed at socio-economically vulnerable groups, raise legitimate concerns about their potential use as indirect electoral incentives. Within the framework of international standards, the use of public funds in a manner that may influence voter behavior is inconsistent with the principle of free and genuine elections.

Equally significant are findings related to **discretionary bonus schemes** within public administration. **Between 2021 and 2025, employees of Armenia's provincial administrations received bonuses exceeding AMD 4.3 billion.** However, transparency remains limited due to incomplete data and the refusal of some administrations to disclose detailed figures. Available information is typically confined to annual declarations that do not distinguish between base salaries and bonuses and are published only in the subsequent year (e.g., 2025 data due by May 2026). This lack of transparency is particularly problematic in the pre-electoral context, as it prevents timely scrutiny of financial flows that may have political implications. The scale, opacity, and timing of these payments raise concerns regarding their potential role in reinforcing administrative loyalty during electoral periods.¹⁰⁴

Attention was drawn to a public initiative announced by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on 16 May concerning the restoration, under certain conditions, of driving licenses previously revoked from citizens without requiring re-examination after one year.¹⁰⁵ The proposal was first presented during a public meeting with individuals deprived of driving licenses and was subsequently submitted for public approval through a poll conducted on the Prime Minister's personal Facebook page. According to publicly available information, approximately 22,000 users participated in the online vote, with a majority (~75%) supporting the proposal. Interlocutors and observers questioned both the timing and procedural framing of the initiative. Concerns were raised **that a**

¹⁰³ By government decision, pensions will increase from April 1. (2026, March 5). Press Releases - Updates - the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia. <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2026/03/05/Cabinet-meeting/>

¹⁰⁴ Official data rebuff: Millions in bonuses to Armenia's provincial governors and staffers. (2026, April 6). Hetq.am. <https://www.hetq.am/en/article/180686>

¹⁰⁵ CIVILNET. Armenia's government backs driving license amnesty bill. (2026, May 27). <https://civilnet.am/en/news/1012075>

matter involving public safety and regulatory policy was effectively transformed into a politically charged public campaign initiative during an electoral period, without prior institutional discussion, regulatory assessment, or publicly presented legal justification.

- Media Environment and Digital Ecosystem

Media conditions constitute a central component of the electoral environment and are directly linked to the principle of equality of opportunity, as emphasized in OSCE/ODIHR commitments and *the Venice Commission's Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters*.¹⁰⁶ Equal access to information, media pluralism, and balanced political coverage are essential preconditions for voters to make informed electoral choices free from undue influence. In the Armenian context, concerns regarding the media environment during the pre-electoral period relate not only to the conduct of traditional broadcasters, but increasingly to the fragmented and weakly regulated digital information sphere, where political messaging, disinformation, and coordinated influence operations interact in ways that significantly shape public discourse.

The legal framework governing audiovisual media formally guarantees freedom of expression and pluralism. *The Law on Audiovisual Media*, requires public broadcasters to ensure impartiality, objectivity, and balanced presentation of issues of public interest, particularly during election periods.¹⁰⁷ Public media outlets carry heightened responsibilities in this regard due to their nationwide reach, public financing, and perceived institutional legitimacy. However, monitoring conducted during the pre-electoral period indicates persistent concerns regarding imbalance in political coverage and the blurring of boundaries between institutional reporting and political messaging favorable to incumbent authorities.

Monitoring data from the Public Television First News channel's YouTube platform between 9 and 29 March 2026 **reveal significant imbalances in political coverage**.¹⁰⁸ Out of 140 analyzed publications relating to political processes, 56 contained campaign-related content. Of these, 42 publications included direct campaign elements overwhelmingly associated with the ruling Civil Contract party, while an additional 14 contained indirect campaign messaging that similarly favored ruling party representatives and narratives. Coverage of opposition actors was considerably more limited and, in many instances, framed predominantly through critical or counter-campaign narratives. The tone and structure of reporting frequently positioned opposition actors within discourses of political destabilization, geopolitical risk, or alleged foreign affiliation.

Although quantitative imbalance alone does not necessarily constitute a violation of media freedom standards, **the cumulative effect of disproportionate visibility, favorable framing, and limited**

¹⁰⁶ According to the Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, equality of opportunity must be guaranteed for parties and candidates alike, in particular about: i. the election campaign; ii. Coverage by media, especially the publicly owned media;

iii. Public funding of parties and campaigns.

https://www.venice.coe.int/images/SITE%20IMAGES/Publications/Code_conduite_PREMS%20026115%20GBR.pdf

¹⁰⁷ LAW OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA ON AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA | Article 11. Audiovisual programmes during election (referendum) campaign <https://www.arlis.am/en/acts/196476>

¹⁰⁸ Helsinki Citizen's Assembly Vanadzor | Study of Public Television's "First News" YouTube Channel <https://hcav.am/en/study-07-04-26/>

pluralistic representation raises concerns regarding equality of opportunity in the media sphere. These concerns become particularly significant when viewed alongside broader incumbency advantages, including the extensive visibility of state officials in public communication, the use of administrative resources, and the prolonged pre-campaign environment preceding the official electoral period.

The distinction between governmental communication and political campaigning also appeared increasingly blurred during the observation period. Public announcements relating to state projects, infrastructure development, security matters, and foreign policy achievements were frequently communicated through formats and narratives closely aligned with ruling party messaging. While such practices are not uncommon in electoral contexts, they may nonetheless contribute to unequal campaign conditions where **incumbents benefit from continuous public visibility outside formally regulated campaign mechanisms.**

At the same time, the evolving digital information ecosystem has substantially transformed the nature of electoral communication and media influence. **Political debate increasingly unfolds across social media platforms, Telegram channels, online news portals, YouTube programs, and anonymous digital networks that operate outside the traditional regulatory framework applicable to broadcasters.** This transformation has expanded opportunities for political participation and pluralism but has simultaneously created significant vulnerabilities related to information integrity, transparency, and accountability.

Institutional responses to these developments remain limited. The Central Electoral Commission (CEC), whose primary mandate concerns the administration of elections and oversight of the formal campaign period, operates within a legal framework that has only recently undergone amendment and remains largely untested in practice. While the CEC plays a central procedural role in electoral administration, its authority regarding online information integrity remains significantly constrained both legally and institutionally.

According to the CEC Secretary, disinformation and manipulated online content represent growing concerns during the pre-electoral period, particularly in relation to content generated or amplified through artificial intelligence technologies. However, **the CEC does not possess either a comprehensive legal mandate or sufficient technical capacity to systematically monitor, regulate, remove, or counter misleading political content circulating online.** Its intervention powers are largely limited to instances where disinformation directly targets the credibility of the Commission itself or undermines confidence in electoral procedures. Broader forms of political disinformation affecting candidates, parties, or public debate generally fall outside its competence.

The absence of a comprehensive regulatory framework governing digital campaigning further complicates the situation. Key areas of concern include:

- the lack of clear legal provisions regulating online political advertising;
- insufficient transparency regarding financing and expenditures associated with digital campaigning;

- limited disclosure obligations concerning sponsored political content on social media platforms;
- the absence of effective oversight mechanisms for algorithmic targeting practices;
- the lack of specific safeguards addressing AI-generated or AI-manipulated political materials;
- uncertainty regarding institutional responsibilities for monitoring and responding to coordinated online disinformation campaigns.

In response to some of these challenges, the CEC has initiated discussions with Meta Platforms concerning paid political advertising and the identification of sponsored political content on social media. Additionally, an EU-supported digital monitoring system, **Georata**, has been made available to certain state institutions for the purpose of identifying online disinformation trends and monitoring coordinated digital activity. Nevertheless, coordination among relevant institutions appears limited, and the extent to which such tools are integrated into a coherent oversight, accountability, or electoral integrity framework remains unclear.

The increasingly polarized media environment has been accompanied by the expansion of coordinated information manipulation practices within the digital sphere. **During the pre-electoral period, political discourse is heavily shaped by competing allegations of foreign influence, hidden political sponsorship, voter manipulation, and coordinated propaganda efforts.** These dynamics unfolded across a fragmented digital ecosystem consisting of social media platforms, Telegram channels, online media outlets, anonymous pages, and coordinated amplification networks that frequently operate beyond effective regulatory oversight.

A recurring feature of the information environment is the circulation of alleged leaks, purported strategic documents, and unverifiable materials attributed to either Armenian or foreign actors.¹⁰⁹ Media reports and online publications referenced documents allegedly originating from Russian or Armenian sources that purportedly detailed propaganda strategies, coordinated information operations, and political risk assessments concerning both government and opposition actors. Although the authenticity of many such materials remained disputed or impossible to independently verify, their circulation nevertheless contributed to shaping public discourse and reinforcing perceptions of political conspiracy, external interference, and institutional distrust.

The digital information space also became increasingly saturated with manipulative and misleading content targeting both ruling and opposition political actors. Such content appears in multiple forms and is disseminated through coordinated social media activity, anonymous Telegram channels, online advertising, and affiliated digital media platforms. Observation and reporting during the pre-electoral period indicated the circulation of:

- fabricated or selectively edited audio recordings purporting to capture private conversations between political actors;
- manipulated or misleading video materials presented without context;

¹⁰⁹ Stepanyan, S., & CivilNetCheck. "Urgent: please verify." How coordinated disinformation networks are trying to penetrate Armenia's media space. CIVILNET. (2026, May 19) <https://civilnet.am/en/news/1011917>

- coordinated dissemination of unverifiable leaks and alleged insider materials;
- digitally altered visual materials designed to misrepresent political statements or events;
- suspected AI-generated or AI-manipulated audio and video content;
- anonymous online advertisements promoting fear-based political narratives;
- coordinated messaging campaigns portraying political opponents as existential security threats.

Particularly notable is the growing use of artificial intelligence technologies and synthetic media techniques within political communication. Reports indicated the circulation of manipulated audio materials imitating the voices of political figures, as well as altered video content designed to falsely depict statements, meetings, or political positions. Such materials were often disseminated rapidly across Telegram channels, Facebook pages, TikTok videos, and YouTube platforms before meaningful verification or fact-checking could occur.^{110 111 112}

Observers also reported the use of celebrity likenesses, recognizable public personalities, and cultural figures in manipulated or misleading materials intended to create implied political endorsements or discredit rival political actors. In some instances, edited or fabricated audiovisual materials were designed to simulate support for specific political narratives, while in others public figures were falsely portrayed as criticizing or endorsing political parties.

A particularly prominent feature of online campaigning involved fear-based narratives relating to renewed armed conflict and national security. Numerous online advertisements, videos, and coordinated messaging campaigns framed political competition through so-called “war party” narratives. Both ruling party and opposition actors were portrayed by competing information networks as forces that would allegedly lead the country either toward renewed war, geopolitical isolation, surrender of national interests, or destabilization. These narratives frequently relied on emotionally charged messaging, selective presentation of security-related information, and manipulative visual symbolism aimed at mobilizing fear and political polarization rather than facilitating substantive policy debate.

Although many of these materials were publicly contested, removed, or subsequently debunked, their rapid dissemination nonetheless contributed to confusion, distrust, and informational instability within the electorate. The speed and scale of online circulation often exceeded the capacity of journalists, civil society organizations, fact-checking initiatives, and state institutions to provide timely verification. As a result, misleading or manipulated content frequently remained influential even after its authenticity had been questioned.

Concerns regarding coordinated amplification and inauthentic online behavior were further reinforced by investigative reporting conducted during the observation period. An investigation

¹¹⁰ Lazaryan, N., & CivilNetCheck. Fake Interviews with AI citizens: How Facebook Pages Try to Fool Voters. CIVILNET. (2026, May 26). <https://civilnet.am/en/news/1011946>

¹¹¹ Grigoryan, A., & CivilNetCheck. Russia’s “Matryoshka” is spreading deepfakes that contain calls to kill Pashinyan. CIVILNET. (2026, May 30). <https://civilnet.am/en/news/1012122>

¹¹² Grigoryan, A., Lazaryan, N., & CivilNetCheck. Reactivated narrative: how a false claim about Pashinyan’s grandfather was systematically spread. CIVILNET. (2026, May 21). <https://civilnet.am/en/news/1011894>

published by **CivilNetCheck**¹¹³ identified potential links between Taron Chakhoyan, deputy chief of staff to the prime minister, and a network of online platforms engaged in synchronized political messaging. According to the investigation, archived domain registration data associated Chakhoyan with **MediaNews.site**,¹¹⁴ a platform that reportedly amplified content originating from accounts exhibiting characteristics associated with coordinated or inauthentic online behavior.

According to the findings, social media posts critical of opposition figures were rapidly republished and amplified across aligned platforms shortly after their original publication, even when initial engagement levels were minimal. The recurrence of identical or closely synchronized messaging patterns across multiple outlets suggested the possible existence of coordinated amplification mechanisms rather than organic public discourse. Although the individual concerned denied involvement, the investigation highlighted broader systemic concerns regarding the use of anonymous networks, opaque digital infrastructures, and coordinated dissemination practices in shaping political narratives online. The use of anonymous or pseudonymous accounts, combined with rapid algorithmic amplification, complicates efforts to distinguish authentic public sentiment from orchestrated influence operations. Such practices may artificially shape perceptions of public opinion, increase political polarization, and undermine trust in the authenticity of online political participation.

Additional concerns relate to **the circulation of confidential investigative materials through media outlets perceived as closely aligned with the authorities**, including *Civic.am*, *Araratnews*, and *Freenews*. The case of opposition activist and coordinator of the Hayaqve Initiative, Avetik Chalabyan, was frequently referenced by interlocutors as illustrative of these dynamics. During the investigative phase of his case, recordings allegedly obtained through surveillance were leaked and disseminated through anonymous online platforms and affiliated media channels.

Despite concerns regarding the origin, authenticity, legality, and chain of custody of these materials, they were subsequently referenced within legal proceedings. Courts reportedly acknowledged the limited transparency surrounding the publishing platforms but nonetheless accepted arguments that the recordings constituted materials originating from “**media sources**,” thereby permitting their evidentiary use. This practice raises broader concerns regarding procedural safeguards, evidentiary standards, respect for privacy rights, and the potential normalization of irregular information flows between digital media ecosystems and judicial processes.

These patterns indicate, that the digital information environment has become a central arena of electoral competition in Armenia. The convergence of political polarization, weak regulation of online campaigning, coordinated amplification networks, synthetic media technologies, and widespread distrust in information sources creates conditions that negatively affect informed voter choice, equality of opportunity, and public confidence in democratic processes.

¹¹³CIVILNET. Armenian PM aide named in alleged media manipulation scheme, CivilNetCheck found. (2026, April 27). <https://civilnet.am/en/news/1011522>

¹¹⁴ MediaNews.site | <https://medianews.site/>

- Political Competition in the Electoral Context

While the legal architecture provides for multiparty competition, a range of developments in the pre-electoral period raise concerns regarding the extent to which political actors can participate on an equal footing.

Most opposition interlocutors, including representatives of regional campaign offices, emphasized that the overall environment is one of complete surveillance. They expressed the belief that their conversations are wiretapped and their offices bugged, creating a pervasive sense of monitoring and intimidation. This perception of constant surveillance compounds the impact of ongoing investigations and prosecutions, reinforcing the view that opposition actors operate under sustained pressure and lack the conditions to campaign freely.

In this regard, particular attention has been drawn to developments affecting opposition parliamentary actors. It was noted that **a significant proportion of members affiliated with the “Armenia” parliamentary faction are currently subject to investigative procedures, with 10 out of 28 members reportedly under scrutiny.** Among those cited are *Seyran Ohanyan, Artsvik Minasyan, and Ishkhan Saghatelyan*, primarily in connection with allegations of corruption or illicit enrichment. In parallel, *Arthur Sargsyan* has been charged in relation to alleged coup activities and remains in detention as a member of the *“Sacred/Holy Struggle” movement*, while *Levon Kocharyan* was charged during protest actions on charges of resisting police, in circumstances where allegations of excessive use of force by law enforcement were also raised. While the legal merits of individual cases fall outside the scope of this assessment, the concentration and timing of such proceedings contribute to a broader perception of sustained pressure on opposition actors.

Concerns are further heightened by developments affecting other opposition forces, including *“Strong Armenia,”* which is considered one of the leading opposition blocs in the upcoming elections. Reports indicate that senior members of this political force are subject to intensified scrutiny, including arrests and criminal charges. In recent weeks, anti-corruption authorities **detained** more than 40 individuals associated with the party **on suspicion of electoral bribery and violations of restrictions on charitable activities during the electoral period.**^{115 116} At the same time, **the pre-trial house arrest of Samvel Karapetyan**, has been **extended** for an additional three months, effectively preventing his in-person participation in the campaigning.¹¹⁷ The cumulative effect of these measures, particularly in the pre-electoral context, raises concerns regarding the ability of opposition actors to effectively organize, campaign, and compete.

One of the recent cases follows the opening of a high-profile investigation involving opposition politician **Andranik Tevanyan**, leader of the Mother Armenia movement and a candidate in **Prosperous Armenia’s** list for the upcoming parliamentary elections. Armenian authorities announced what was described as the country’s **first major post-independence investigation into**

¹¹⁵ Reuters. Armenia detains pro-Russian opposition figures ahead of June elections. Reuters. (2026, April 16).

<https://www.reuters.com/world/armenia-detains-pro-russian-opposition-figures-ahead-june-elections-2026-04-16/>

¹¹⁶ Bulghadarian, N., & Kaghvantsian, S. Dozens more oppositionists arrested ahead of Armenian elections. «Ազատ Եվրոպա/Ազատության ռադիո» Ռադիոկայ սև. (2026, June 4). <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33772776.html>

¹¹⁷ Bulghadarian, N. Karapetian’s house arrest extended. «Ազատ Եվրոպա/Ազատության ռադիո» Ռադիոկայ սև. (2026, April 17). <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33734693.html>

alleged Russian-backed espionage and treason involving an opposition political figure. According to the Investigative Committee, Tevanyan is accused of having been recruited by foreign intelligence services in 2024 and of transferring information containing state secrets in exchange for financial compensation amounting to approximately USD 622,000.¹¹⁸

Authorities further alleged that Tevanyan acted under the direction of a representative linked to a so-called “*Russia Caucasus*” geopolitical center and **had transferred information concerning closed parliamentary hearings conducted during a classified session of parliament in April 2024.**¹¹⁹ Following the initiation of criminal proceedings, law enforcement authorities conducted searches at the offices of the Mother Armenia party, Tevanyan’s residence, and the home of opposition MP Martun Grigoryan, who is also in the electoral list of Prosperous Armenia.^{120 121}

Tevanyan rejected the allegations, describing the case as politically motivated, fabricated, and aimed at obstructing the opposition’s election campaign. He further argued **that the accusations lacked factual basis, stating publicly that he had resigned his parliamentary mandate in 2023 and therefore could not have participated in the classified parliamentary session referenced by investigators.**

Given the seriousness of allegations relating to espionage, foreign intelligence cooperation, and disclosure of state secrets, any such investigation necessarily falls within the competence of law enforcement authorities. However, the fact that the alleged acts date back to 2024, while proceedings were only initiated in May 2026, coinciding with the pre-electoral period, raises questions about timing and prosecutorial discretion. The decision to pursue such sensitive charges against a prominent opposition candidate affiliated with a major electoral bloc at this juncture is likely to intensify political polarization and reinforce competing narratives about the politicization of investigative institutions.

Beyond individual cases, interlocutors also expressed concern that certain political forces could face more far-reaching restrictions, including the possibility of exclusion or prohibition from the electoral process, potentially under allegations of foreign influence. In this context, reference was made to the prior political affiliation with the ruling party of the current Chair of the Central Electoral Commission, which, in the view of some stakeholders, may affect perceptions of institutional neutrality, particularly in politically sensitive decisions.

These developments must also be understood in conjunction with patterns observed at the municipal level, where opposition victories have, in several instances, been followed by legal or institutional interventions affecting elected officials, as it was mentioned in this chapter. Such cases contribute

¹¹⁸ Barseghyan, A. Armenia launches what appears to be first-ever investigation of Russian-backed espionage. OC Media. (2026, May 22). <https://oc-media.org/armenia-launches-what-appears-to-be-first-ever-investigation-of-russian-backed-espionage/>

¹¹⁹ INVESTIGATIVE COMMITTEE OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA. Criminal proceeding initiated on state treason and espionage. (n.d.). <https://www.investigative.am/en/news/37120?ref=oc-media.org>

¹²⁰ Armenpress. NSS raids “Mother Armenia” party office amid treason allegations against chairman - Updated. (2026, May 22). <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1250919%20%D5%80?ref=oc-media.org>

¹²¹ Mirror-Spectator, A. Armenian opposition leaders’ homes, offices raided ahead of elections. The Armenian Mirror-Spectator. (2026, May 26). <https://mirrorspectator.com/2026/05/26/armenian-opposition-leaders-homes-offices-raided-ahead-of-elections/>

to a perception that electoral outcomes do not consistently translate into the effective exercise of political authority, thereby affecting confidence in the overall competitiveness of the system.

At the same time, **the broader political climate in which electoral competition unfolds has become increasingly polarized.** Of particular concern is the normalization of exclusionary and dehumanizing rhetoric in political discourse. The securitization of domestic discourse is further intensified by Armenia's ongoing geopolitical realignment. Since 2020, the country has gradually distanced itself from Russian-led security structures while deepening engagement with Western partners. This shift has transformed foreign policy from a background condition into a central axis of electoral competition.

Opposition actors have capitalized on this transition by questioning the sustainability of the current peace process and advocating alternative alignments. For example, former President **Robert Kocharyan** has emphasized the need for renewed strategic ties with Russia, while **Samvel Karapetyan** has criticized the government's geopolitical positioning as destabilizing.^{122 123 124}

In response, the ruling authorities have framed such positions as not merely alternative policy proposals, but as threats to national security, thereby reinforcing the securitized logic of political debate.

Perhaps the most consequential element of the current discourse is **the centrality of war narratives.** Statements suggesting that electoral outcomes may directly determine the likelihood of renewed conflict represent a significant escalation in political rhetoric.

Unlike analogous narratives in other contexts, where hypothetical external threats are invoked, Armenia's case is distinct in that the risk of war is both recent and tangible. This lends credibility to security concerns but also amplifies their political impact. **When voters are repeatedly told that a particular electoral outcome may lead to war, the boundary between informed choice and fear-driven decision-making becomes increasingly blurred.**

Public statements referring to oppositional forces in derogatory terms, including characterizations such as *"three-headed war party,"*¹²⁵ reflect a deterioration in the standards of democratic

¹²² Civilnet. (2025, May 19). Kocharyan: Armenia Must Restore Strategic Partnership with Russia. CIVILNET. <https://civilnet.am/en/news/951367>

¹²³ Robert Kocharyan Calls for Legally Enforceable Peace Guarantees, Criticizes Reliance on Leaders, And Highlights Armenia's Economic Vulnerabilities. (2026, May 12). Caucasus Watch. <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/robert-kocharyan-calls-for-legally-enforceable-peace-guarantees-criticizes-reliance-on-leaders-and-highlights-armenias-economic-vulnerabilities.html>

¹²⁴ Panorama.am. (2026, April 7). Samvel Karapetyan warns against voting for Pashinyan. <https://www.panorama.am/en/news/2026/04/07/Samvel-Karapetyan/3156107>

¹²⁵ The Prime Minister's closing speech at the discussion of the report on the implementation of the Government Program for 2025 in the National Assembly | <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2026/04/17/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/#:~:text=Now%20everything%20is%20clear%20with%20Dashnaksutyun%2C%20the,the%20Republican%20Party%2C%20as%20you%20may%20remember%2C>

communication. Such language points to a concerning trajectory in which political alternatives are increasingly delegitimized, and the space for genuine democratic competition is narrowed.

From a legal perspective, this raises concerns under *Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, which requires that elections reflect the free will of the electorate. While states are not prohibited from discussing security risks, **the systematic framing of elections as existential choices risks constraining voter autonomy and undermining the conditions for genuine democratic competition.**

In addition to security framing, concerns arise from the use of polarizing and, at times, **dehumanizing rhetoric in public discourse.** Statements targeting political opponents, as well as vulnerable groups such as ***forcibly displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh***, have contributed to a deterioration in the tone of political communication.

Reports of officials, **including PM Pashinyan**, referring to displaced individuals in derogatory terms, such as ***“ungrateful”*** or ***“runaways,”*** illustrate how securitized and polarized narratives may extend beyond elite competition into broader societal discourse, stigmatizing any sort of dissent, thus reinforcing divisions within society and discouraging open participation in political life. This not only undermines social cohesion but also contradicts OSCE commitments to inclusive and respectful democratic processes.¹²⁶

Prime Minister Pashinyan’s aggressive and abrasive interactions with voters, documented in videos, emerged repeatedly as a factor contributing to a climate of intimidation against government critics.¹²⁷ Much of his violent rhetoric has targeted refugees from Artsakh, drawing on popular resentment at the costs of the war to Armenian citizens.

- On March 22, 2026, during a campaign event in the Yerevan metro, PM Pashinyan approached a refugee woman from Nagorno-Karabakh, Armine Mosiyan, and her child, offering them a pin featuring the map of the Republic of Armenia. After Mosiyan refused and explained her reasons, Pashinyan continued arguing with her despite her repeated requests to be left alone. PM Pashinyan raised his voice, pointing his finger at her, and stated that billions earned by Armenian citizens had been spent on sustaining Nagorno-Karabakh, calling the woman and other Artsakh refugees ***“runaways.”*** PM Pashinyan subsequently issued a partial apology.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, pro-government media outlets continued targeting Mosiyan after the incident, further amplifying concerns about hostility toward displaced Artsakh Armenians.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Regional Center for Democracy and Security | Pashinyan and the Instrumentalization of Hate Speech Against NK Refugees <https://www.rcds.am/en/pashinyan-and-the-instrumentalization-of-hate-speech-against-nk-refugees.html>

¹²⁷ Radio Liberty. "I'll kill Rob too, and the Kaluga guy too." A dispute between a citizen and the prime minister [Video]. YouTube. (2026, May 18). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ftewsSPAKg>

¹²⁸ Newsarmenia.am. I apologize to the Karabakh woman, her child and invite you to a new meeting. Pashinyan. Novosti-Armenia. (2026, March 22). <https://newsarmenia.am/am/news/armenia/neroghutyun-em-khndrum-gharabaghtsi-knojits-nra-pogrikits-ev-hravirum-nor-handipman-pashinyan/>

¹²⁹ Regional Center for Democracy and Security | Pashinyan and the instrumentalization of hate speech against NK Refugees - RCDS. RCDS - Regional Center for Democracy and Security (2026, May 20). <https://rcds.am/pashinyan-and-the-instrumentalization-of-hate-speech-against-nk-refugees>

- At a May 18 Civil Contract rally in Yerevan's Arabkir district, obstetrician-gynecologist Arpine Soghoyan approached PM Pashinyan, criticized his policies and noted that her brother, Col. Hrant Papikyan, a military officer/medic, remains missing in action in Artsakh. PM Pashinyan responded by shouting at her, associating her with the opposition. As she attempted to leave, PM Pashinyan then grabbed her hand and pulled her back, demanding that she listen to him, while his supporters shouted, prevented her from speaking. Later that day, responding to public criticism, PM Pashinyan stated: ***“I did not threaten the woman. I threatened Robik [Robert Kocharyan], and I am threatening him now as well. I am saying I will finish him off — I will.”***¹³⁰
- On May 18, during another contentious exchange, PM Pashinyan responded to criticism from Artur Osipyan (who was subsequently arrested, as noted above) with a tirade directed at displaced Artsakh Armenians, referring to Artsakh political figures and refugees as “bastards” and “scumbags,” while suggesting they had no place in Yerevan unless they adopted “the mentality of Armenian citizens.”¹³¹ Video footage showed Pashinyan saying to Osipyan:

*Get lost, you fool. Let the pseudo-elites of Karabakh get out of here and leave. Who are these people? Get out entirely. You smashed your head into the wall — you should have gone and died in place of our children, you thieving animals. They came talking about the Karabakh issue. If the Karabakh issue mattered, you should have gone and died. Why are you alive? Why are you alive, you scum? Why didn't you die? Why is Shahramanyan alive? Why are your so-called National Assembly members alive?*¹³²

Concerns regarding the broader climate of intimidation were further reinforced by several incidents of violence targeting opposition supporters during the campaign period. On 3 June 2026, supporters of two major opposition alliances, Strong Armenia and Armenia Alliance, were physically assaulted in separate incidents involving individuals affiliated with the ruling Civil Contract party.¹³³

According to video footage circulated in the media shows Strong Armenia campaign activists being confronted in a village south of Yerevan by several individuals allegedly led by Arsen Harutiunian, a local council member affiliated with the ruling party. The footage reportedly showed one opposition supporter being physically assaulted, while another supporter, a pregnant woman, could be heard pleading with the attackers to stop hitting her. Representatives of Strong Armenia stated

¹³⁰ NEWS AM. “I will take off your masks; I will step on the appropriate place.” Pashinyan lost his temper and started shouting [Video]. YouTube. (2026, May 18). <https://youtu.be/F4nlzwqfrsM?t=207>

¹³¹ NEWS AM. “Oh, you scumbag, why are you alive, you should have gone and died.” Pashinyan started insulting [Video]. YouTube. (2026, May 18) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuPJdTJUtgY>

¹³² The Armenian Report. “Why are you alive?”: Pashinyan explodes at Artsakh Armenian during heated election campaign clash in Yerevan. (2026, May 18). <https://www.thearmenianreport.com/post/why-are-you-alive-pashinyan-explodes-at-artsakh-armenian-during-heated-election-campaign-clash-i>

¹³³ Saribekian, G., & Bedevian, A. “No one prosecuted for assaults on Armenian opposition supporters.” «Ազատ Եվրոսյան/Ազատութեան ռադիո» Ռադիոկայան. (2026, June 3). <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33771992.html>

that their campaign activities had been deliberately obstructed and characterized the incident as politically motivated violence targeting opposition activists.¹³⁴

Later the same day, a supporter of the Armenia alliance was reportedly beaten in the town of Artik by a group of local Civil Contract activists. According to the victim, the confrontation escalated after a verbal exchange with one individual affiliated with the ruling party, after which additional men allegedly emerged from a nearby Civil Contract office and joined the assault. The incident drew additional attention given that the victim had previously publicly criticized Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan during a visit to Artik in March 2026.¹³⁵

Although Investigative Committee announced the initiation of criminal proceedings related to assault, hooliganism, and obstruction of campaign activities, opposition representatives criticized law-enforcement authorities for failing to take immediate visible action against the alleged perpetrators.¹³⁶

In line with international standards, *including General Comment No. 25* of the UN Human Rights Committee, the effective exercise of electoral rights requires an environment in which voters can form opinions independently, free from coercion, pressure, or manipulation. When stigmatizing rhetoric is coupled with acts of physical violence, such as assaults on candidates, intimidation of activists, or disruptions of campaign events, the impact extends beyond immediate harm, instilling fear and discouraging participation.¹³⁷ Combined with institutional and legal pressures, this climate constrains political engagement not only through formal restrictions but also through the pervasive psychological effects of insecurity, thereby undermining genuine electoral competition.

Importantly, the convergence of political rhetoric, institutional actions, and enforcement measures during the electoral period contributes to a broader perception of consolidation of control over the political field. Even in the absence of explicit legal prohibitions, such an environment may discourage participation, limit the viability of opposition campaigns, and undermine confidence in the fairness of the electoral process. Political competition in a democratic system is premised on contestation among legitimate actors; when dissenting views are framed as illegitimate or unworthy of representation, the foundations of pluralism are weakened.

From an analytical perspective, the Armenian case underscores the importance of assessing electoral integrity beyond procedural compliance.

While elections may be conducted in accordance with formal rules, **the substantive conditions under which political actors compete, and voters make their choices, are equally**

¹³⁴ NEWS AM. Civil Contract members beat women of "Strong Armenia" [Video]. YouTube. (2026, June 3).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFFeYE-vzIo>

¹³⁵ Hraparak TV. In Artik, Civil Contract members beat Robert Kocharyan's supporter [Video]. YouTube. (2026, June3).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42YUjgXBYYQ>

¹³⁶ Saribekian, G., & Bedevian, A. "No one prosecuted for assaults on Armenian opposition supporters." «Ազատ Եվրոպա/Ազատության ռադիո» Ռադիոկայ. ան. (2026, June 3). <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33771992.html>

¹³⁷ General Comment No. 25: The right to participate in public affairs, voting rights and the right of equal access to public service (Art. 25). 12/07/96. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.7, General Comment No. 25. (General Comments) <https://www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/general%20comment%2025.pdf>

determinative. The interaction between legal proceedings, administrative practices, media dynamics, financial structures, and political discourse creates a cumulative effect that may result in structural inequality within the electoral field.

Ensuring alignment with the international commitments therefore requires not only adherence to procedural standards but also the preservation of an enabling political environment. This includes safeguarding the neutrality of state institutions, preventing the selective application of legal measures, ensuring equal access to political participation, and maintaining a standard of public discourse that respects the dignity and agency of all voters.

Absent such conditions, the capacity of elections to reflect the free expression of the will of the people remains subject to legitimate concern, even where formal electoral procedures are observed.