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“The Status of Human Rights Defenders in Armenia”

Joint Submission by:

Human Rights House Members:

“Socioscope” Societal Research and Consultancy Center NGO

“Pink” Human Rights Defender NGO

“Women’s Resource Center” NGO

“Real World, Real People” NGO

PEN Armenia

With the support of the Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF) NGO in General Consultative Status with ECOSOC

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ARMENIA
Joint submission by a Group of Civil Society Organizations* to the UN
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I. Preface

1. This submission is a collaborative effort by a coalition of civil society organizations with significant expertise in monitoring, documenting, and reporting on human rights violations affecting human rights defenders in Armenia. The report addresses key areas including right to life, liberty and security of person, fundamental freedoms and the right to participate in public and political life, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), and is grounded in first-hand data collected and documented by the member organizations of Human Rights House Yerevan throughout their monitoring and rights protection activities. The preparation of this report was facilitated and coordinated by Human Rights House Yerevan, in partnership with the Human Rights House Foundation.

2. List of the organizations joining the report:

Human Rights House Yerevan members:

“Socioscope” Societal Research and Consultancy Center NGO www.socioscope.am

“Pink” human rights defender NGO www.pinkarmenia.org

“Women’s Resource Center” NGO www.womenofarmenia.org

“Real World, Real People” NGO www.realwrp.com

PEN Armenia <https://www.pen-international.org/centre-locations/pen-center-armenia>

With the support of the Human Rights House Foundation (HRRH) NGO in General Consultative Status with ECOSOC

I. The Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Armenia

3. In the last Universal Periodic Review in January 2020, Armenia accepted all recommendations pertaining to the protection of human rights defenders (HRDs) and journalists. These recommendations urged the government to enhance efforts in fostering a safe and supportive environment for civil society, human rights defenders, and journalists. They also emphasized the importance of ensuring that threats and attacks against HRDs and journalists are thoroughly investigated, protecting their freedoms of expression and the press, and implementing adequate measures to protect HRDs and civil society actors from harassment.
4. Following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, human rights defenders in Armenia primarily faced targeted attacks from both the former ruling authorities and the current opposition, who utilized mass media, including online platforms, under their influence to discredit and undermine them. This pattern persisted throughout the reporting period, reflecting a broader trend of hostility. Furthermore, the Armenian government has failed to provide public support for human rights defenders—a critical standard internationally recognized as a responsibility of states to uphold and protect those advocating for human rights.
5. Civil society organizations have been targeted exclusively by self-proclaimed radical opposition forces. These far-right forces continue to undermine the activities of civil society and human rights defenders in order to advance their political and economic interests, especially in the context of significant political and geopolitical developments. In public-political discussions, these forces are mainstreaming the thesis that the current authorities serve the interests of “outside forces” through “Soros offices” (Open Society Foundations). Moreover, the current authorities are presented as “foreign agents” influenced by the latter.
6. Civil society organizations and human rights defenders are presented as entities acting against national and state institutions, traditional and family values. Members and the leaders of the oppositional political factions at the National Assembly like “Hayastan” (tr: Armenia) faction stated that when coming to power, they will restrict the activities of non-governmental organizations by amending the RA Law on Non-Governmental Organizations and ban the activities in the case of “Soros offices”.
7. The announcement on November 9 ceasefire statement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia on the cessation of hostilities in Nagorno Karabakh sparked a wave of demonstrations and political crises across Armenia. In addition to attacking government and parliament buildings and severely beating the Speaker of the National Assembly, radical groups looted the offices of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Open Society Foundations, and numerous civil society and media organizations continue to receive threats. Efforts to portray these organizations as antagonists to Armenia’s national interests include a film made by the group *Veto* that calls CSOs “enemies of the people,” calls to shut down their offices, and attempts to launch criminal investigations against them. Complaints filed by the CSOs about the threats and incidents of harassment have been largely ignored by the prosecutor general’s office and

state investigative bodies.

II. Civil and political rights

Right to life, liberty and security of person

8. While the government generally respected the right to freedom of assembly, serious concerns persist regarding the disproportionate use of force by law enforcement against protesters, including incidents of police brutality toward both demonstrators and journalists, as well as arbitrary detention of individuals. Opposition groups organized numerous protests in the reporting period, calling for the resignation or overthrow of the Prime Minister and the ruling party. In many cases, police used excessive force and detained protesters without sufficient explanation or legal justification.
9. Despite the severity of these incidents, law-enforcement authorities have failed to prosecute any of the officers responsible for injuring dozens of anti-government protesters during the reporting period. In certain instances, the Armenian Investigative Committee defended these actions, characterizing them as necessary to prevent “mass disturbances.”
10. In addition to police violence, some protesters engaged in aggressive behavior, targeting citizens who did not share their political views. On multiple occasions, protesters resorted to violence to provoke confrontations with the police. During an anti-government rally, protesters assaulted Armen Martirosyan, director of Antares Publishing House, known for his pro-peace stance. Martirosyan, who happened to be near the protest site, was verbally harassed, and physical objects were thrown at him by the crowd. When he requested police protection, officers instructed him to leave the area quickly, at which point he was attacked from behind by the protesters.
11. These protest groups have continued to organize demonstrations, which not only undermine democratic principles but have also actively promoted violent rhetoric, including hate speech, dehumanizing language, and incitement to violence. Such rhetoric has frequently been accompanied by physical attacks on individuals who either disagreed with their views or refrained from participating in their protests.

Recommendations:

- Ensure law enforcement officers are held accountable for disproportionate use of force and violations of human rights during protests, by conducting thorough, independent investigations and prosecuting those responsible for police brutality.
- Strengthen oversight mechanisms within law enforcement agencies to prevent arbitrary detentions and ensure the protection of both demonstrators and bystanders during protests.

- Foster a balanced approach to managing assemblies by promoting de-escalation training for police officers and establishing clear protocols to protect the safety of protesters, journalists, and the general public.
- Combat hate speech and violent rhetoric, particularly by protest groups, by enforcing laws against incitement to violence and ensuring that such behavior is addressed swiftly and effectively.
- Promote and safeguard the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of assembly while ensuring that democratic principles are upheld, and that violence, whether by law enforcement or protest groups, is condemned and prosecuted.

Fundamental freedoms and the right to participate in public and political life

12. During the reporting period, both positive and negative trends in the areas of freedom of speech and media activities were observed in Armenia. Media outlets remained highly politically polarized. The majority of broadcast media and newspapers are owned by private individuals or groups, many of whom are reportedly connected to former authorities or parliamentary opposition parties. These outlets largely reflect the political preferences and financial interests of their owners. Throughout the year, current and former government officials, as well as opposition parties, continued to acquire additional media outlets, further intensifying media polarization.
13. Independent media outlets are few, and those that exist largely depend on financial support from politically unaffiliated international donors, as they face significant challenges in generating revenue from advertising and subscriptions. Broadcast media, particularly public television, continues to be a key source of news for much of the population. While some media watchdogs have reported that public television presents news and political debates with a progovernment bias, opposition voices have not been entirely excluded.
14. Social media users freely expressed opinions about the government and former authorities on various platforms. However, the criminalization of “grave insult,” which was in effect from July 2021 to June 2022, had a chilling effect on free expression. By April 2022, at least 802 cases had been opened under the law. After significant criticism from civil society and international groups, the government decriminalized “grave insult,” removing it from the criminal code.
15. In November 2023, Avetik Ishkhanyan, head of the Helsinki Committee of Armenia, was charged with “inciting violence” for a social media post where he called the Prime Minister a “traitor” and declared “death to traitors” in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Local rights advocates claim that the Investigative Committee has selectively prosecuted such cases to promote self-

censorship among critics of the government.

16. A joint investigation, released in May 2023, revealed that several journalists and civil society activists had been targeted with Pegasus spyware between October 2020 and December 2022. Researchers indicated that the surveillance appeared to be connected to the military situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and linked the perpetrators to the Azerbaijani government. Additionally, reports in 2021 and 2022 alleged that journalists, dissidents, and human rights defenders were targeted with Predator spyware, with suggestions that the Armenian government was involved in the surveillance.
17. In 2021, authorities imposed new restrictions on media freedom, including limitations on the movement of journalists in the parliament and in certain areas of Syunik Province.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that prosecutions related to incitement of violence and defamation are applied equally and fairly, without selective targeting of critics, to prevent the promotion of self-censorship and protect the integrity of free expression.
- Conduct thorough investigations into the use of spyware against journalists and civil society actors, hold accountable those responsible for unlawful surveillance, and adopt stronger legal safeguards to prevent future violations of privacy.

III. Human rights defenders facing particular risks

18. The patterns of harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders, as well as cases of continued denial of the right to an effective remedy are the problems that human rights defenders in particular risks face. NGO members also continued to report threats to their persons. Intimidation continued to come from online trolls, media outlets, malign news outlets, and nationalist groups, many of which were affiliated with the former government and, some local experts alleged, Russian actors. Especially targeted were those promoting human rights, women's and children's rights, and deeper law enforcement and judicial reforms.
19. Nationalist campaigns continue targeting human rights defenders. Such campaigns included filing criminal complaints against human rights defenders based on false statements regarding alleged crimes. The intent was to divert human rights defenders' energy and attention away from their legitimate work, and the spread of false statements had a considerable chilling effect on human rights defenders and their work.
20. On February 2024, there had been an attempted arson of the car, belonging to Daniel Ioannisyan – Program Coordinator at “Union of Informed

Citizens" NGO. According to Ioannisyan, this incident is connected with one of the investigations, carried out by Ioannisyan's organization on how the Minister of Internal Affairs of Nagorno Karabakh appropriated 20 state-owned vehicles. This arson attempt is particularly dangerous considering the fact that the car has been parked in the domicile of Daniel Ioannisyan, which can pose further possible threats not only to Ioannisyan himself, but to his family members too. An investigation was launched by the police, however, till the date of submitting this report the police did not find out the perpetrators and nobody was held responsible for this attack.

21. On 3 October 2020, based on a report by Narek Malyan, a former advisor to the Chief of Police of the Republic of Armenia, the National Security Service (NSS) launched a prosecution against human rights activist Sashik Sultanyan, founder of the Yezidi Center for Human Rights. He was charged under Article 226, part 2, clause 1 of the Criminal Code, which concerns incitement of national, racial, or religious hatred. The charges stemmed from an interview Sultanyan gave to "yezidinews.com" (Iraq) in May 2020, where he discussed violations of Yezidi rights in Armenia. Law enforcement interpreted his comments as inciting national enmity. However, international human rights organizations condemned the prosecution as an attack on legitimate, protected speech, and civil society groups warned it was part of a broader, targeted campaign against human rights organizations and Open Society Foundations-Armenia. By October 2022, Sultanyan had left the country, citing threats to his security. A court issued a warrant for his arrest, and the case was suspended.
22. The investigation into Sultanyan involved invasive surveillance measures, including wiretapping, searches of offices and homes, night-long interrogations, and the use of coercive tactics to extract testimony. Despite these efforts, the prosecution was unable to produce any substantive evidence against him. Human rights observers pointed out that the NSS had been monitoring Sultanyan even before his interview, based on suspicion that he had links to foreign special services, which was never proven. The case raised serious concerns about the misuse of state security powers against human rights defenders and had a chilling effect on Armenia's ethnic minorities. The continued prosecution throughout the year, even after Sultanyan fled, underscored the need for greater oversight of the NSS and highlighted the broader risks to democratic freedoms.
23. In another negative trend in the relations between the ruling party and civil society, during the campaign leading up to the Yerevan City Council elections, the mayor candidate and other candidates from the ruling Civil Contract party list resorted to verbal attacks and attempts to undermine the credibility of election observation missions run by CSOs in response to reports by those organizations on the misuse of administrative resources by Civil Contract. They questioned the

sources of CSOs' funding and accused them of manipulating the elections.

Recommendations:

- Carry out an independent prompt, effective and impartial investigation into attacks on human rights defenders and end the atmosphere of impunity against human rights defenders.
- Register and compile statistics of threats and attacks against human rights defenders, along with information relating to their investigation and rates of prosecution.

IV. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)

24. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) have become a growing concern in Armenia, posing a significant threat to journalists, environmental activists, and human rights defenders. These lawsuits, often initiated by powerful corporations and government officials, are designed to intimidate and silence those who speak out on critical issues such as environmental protection and corruption. The rise of SLAPPs highlights the misuse of legal mechanisms to suppress public participation and freedom of expression, thereby undermining democratic engagement.
25. Notable examples include the lawsuit filed by Yerevan Deputy Mayor Tigran Avinyan against the media outlet 168.am and journalist Davit Sargsyan, as well as cases targeting environmental activists who oppose controversial mining projects, such as the Amulsar gold mine. These legal actions not only drain the financial and emotional resources of the defendants but also create a chilling effect on others who might wish to speak out on matters of public concern.
26. The increase in SLAPP cases is further exacerbated by Armenia's polarized political and media landscape. Public officials and politically affiliated entities have increasingly used defamation and insult lawsuits as tools to target critics, with penalties for such cases significantly increased under amendments to Article 1087.1 of the Armenian Civil Code. For instance, mining companies like Lydian CJSC have used SLAPPs to stifle environmental activists, while women's rights defenders have also been targeted through misuse of disinformation claims. Civil society organizations, such as the Women's Resource Centre, report growing harassment against activists, particularly women, who challenge the status quo on sensitive issues like sexuality education. These cases often result in lengthy legal battles, causing defendants to lose valuable time, resources, and energy in defense of their legitimate work.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen judicial training on SLAPP cases to ensure that judges can recognize and dismiss these abusive lawsuits promptly.
- Ensure that public officials and political figures refrain from using the legal system to suppress criticism and engage in constructive dialogue with civil society.

