

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	328
Land:	Armenien
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Nations in Transit 2021 – Armenia
Udgivet:	28. april 2021
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	7. december 2021

Document #2050436

Freedom House

Nations in Transit 2021 - Armenia

SEMI-CONSOLIDATED AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

33

/ 100

Democracy Percentage 32.74 / 100

Democracy Score 2.96 / 7

LAST YEAR'S DEMOCRACY PERCENTAGE & STATUS

33 / 100 Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regime

The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic.

Score changes in 2021

- National Democratic Governance rating declined from 2.50 to 2.25 to reflect the country's deepening crisis of governance, national security, and sovereignty triggered by a war with neighboring Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories.

As a result, Armenia's Democracy Score declined from 3.00 to 2.96.

Executive Summary

By Anonymous

The year 2020 was a period of both notable progress and profound challenges for Armenia. The My Step-led government, which was elected after the Velvet Revolution swept the long-ruling Republican Party (HHK) aside in 2018, began the year with a continuation of its ambitious reform agenda, including in the judiciary, anticorruption mechanisms, and education. Beginning in March, the COVID-19 pandemic strained governance, safety, and public health, and led the government to declare a state of emergency in order to limit the virus's spread. From late September, while the pandemic was ongoing, Armenia found itself drawn into a crisis of historic proportions as neighboring Azerbaijan launched a large-scale attack on the unrecognized but de facto independent Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (often called Nagorno-Karabakh internationally, or Artsakh in Armenia), which is inhabited and governed by ethnic Armenians.¹ Armenia has long aided the territory's defense.

Although the fighting almost fully took place outside the borders of Armenia, and while this report does not consider conditions in Nagorno-Karabakh, the impact of the war within the country was far-reaching and severe. On September 27, the authorities declared martial law, and although the country did not technically reach a state of full mobilization, the war dominated virtually every aspect of governance and civic life in the last months of the year.² The war in Nagorno-Karabakh occurred after a series of deadly clashes in July along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border that, following a period of relative stability between the countries, emphasized how quickly violence can ignite.³ After 44 days of heavy fighting in the territory of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, on November 9, Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan announced a Russia-brokered armistice between Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁴ In a joint statement signed by Pashinyan, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan, and Russian president Vladimir Putin, the parties agreed to a cessation of hostilities; the handover of much of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan, save for a “rump republic,” the status of which remains unresolved; the deployment of 1,960 Russian peacekeepers for a minimum of five years, in conjunction with the withdrawal of Armenian troops; and the easing of transport and commercial routes in the region, which is to include a corridor through Armenia to link Azerbaijan to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, an exclave. The statement also called for all prisoners of war and hostages to be returned, and for the resettlement of displaced persons and refugees in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding areas.⁵

The ceasefire agreement, which entailed major concessions on the parts of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, took most officials and the public by surprise and, amid the high tensions of the war, led to significant public anger and unrest in the days that followed. Moreover, Armenia’s military defeat and the terms of the statement sparked a political crisis, challenging trust in the government as well as the country’s security and sovereignty. A number of high-ranking officials resigned or were dismissed, and President Armen Sarkissian called for the resignation of the government and early elections.⁶ Taking advantage of a downtick in public confidence in the My Step government, extra-parliamentary opposition parties, fringe conservative groups, and members of the former HHK regime called for PM Pashinyan’s resignation and, by some indications, fomented public unrest.⁷ Although Pashinyan deflected calls to resign, he did concede in December to holding consultations with the opposition regarding snap elections.⁸ At year’s end, two of the most pressing postwar issues were prisoners of war (POWs) and the country’s border demarcation. Although the ceasefire agreement had called for the return of POWs and other captives, an unknown number of Armenian soldiers and civilians remained in Azerbaijani custody at year’s end, and reports of gross mistreatment and torture exacerbated public anger at the government’s failure to secure their return.⁹ The question of border demarcation along Syunik region in Armenia’s south—made necessary by cession of adjacent territory to Azerbaijan—also created new risks for national security and territorial integrity. The territorial transfer left some Armenian villages exposed to new Azerbaijani military positions and risked the future of a major highway that weaves across the de jure border.¹⁰

Even before the outbreak of war, national governance and policymaking were polarized in 2020. The My Step Alliance relied on its majority in the National Assembly to pass legislation, but a number of votes were harshly contested or boycotted by the two opposition parties in parliament, Prosperous Armenia and Bright Armenia. In May, a brawl broke out in the National Assembly after My Step deputy Sasun Mikayelyan punched Edmon Marukyan, chair of Bright Armenia, amid the latter’s speech disparaging another My Step deputy’s remarks about COVID-19 relief.¹¹ Parliamentary tensions were also high in June, after the National Security Service raided the home of Gagik Tsarukyan, head of Prosperous Armenia and one of the country’s wealthiest individuals, announcing a large-scale investigation into allegations of illegal commercial activities, vote buying, and tax evasion. The National Assembly voted to strip Tsarukyan of his parliamentary immunity in a session boycotted by the Prosperous Armenia and Bright Armenia parties.¹² The government also faced opposition outside the National Assembly from both the ousted HHK and its allies as well as fringe conservative groups, which sensationalized and often spread disinformation about policy proposals.¹³

Amid the rapid political changes of the past few years, the challenges posed by the pandemic, and the impact of the Armenia-Azerbaijan war, civil society organizations (CSOs) and independent media continued to be vital pillars of Armenia’s burgeoning democracy. During and after the war, civil society mobilization was remarkable. CSOs rushed to engage the international community, document human rights conditions, and meet unique societal needs created by the war, including for the tens of thousands of people who were displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh and sought shelter within Armenia or, following the armistice, needed resettlement. Operational conditions and the enabling environment for civil society have significantly improved in recent years, and CSOs have become an important check on the government. However, in 2020, progressive CSOs sustained attacks from fringe conservative groups that disseminated hate speech and disinformation about the organizations’ missions, painting the CSOs as “anti-Armenian” and jeopardizing their ability to operate and engage with the public.¹⁴ In November, following the announcement of the final ceasefire, rioters ransacked offices of the Open Society Foundation and the local RFE/RL service, Azatutyun.¹⁵ Although policymakers were open to and engaged with civil society input through most of 2020, the situation was more tenuous in November and December, in the aftermath of the war.

In March, as part of the state of emergency instituted to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus, authorities briefly restricted media from publishing any public health information that did not originate from official sources.¹⁶ In the face of domestic and international pressure, the government lifted the restriction shortly after its enactment.¹⁷ Domestic media were instrumental in covering the fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh and its impact in Armenia, often taking tremendous risks to report. There was also an influx of foreign media following the outbreak of the war, which were generally allowed to work without undue interference, although movement in border areas was at times restricted during periods of heavy fighting. The work of independent journalists was especially important as disinformation—from both internal and external sources—clouded the country’s information landscape, affecting public knowledge of issues ranging from the war, to COVID-19, to the work of CSOs.¹⁸

Against serious headwinds, the government made some progress on reform efforts in 2020, largely before the war. Judicial reform has been a top priority, and in 2020, the legislature resolved a crisis of legitimacy that had beleaguered the country’s Constitutional Court, which was widely seen as captured by the HHK. In June, the National Assembly approved a package of amendments¹⁹ that instituted a universal 12-year limit for all Constitutional Court judges, leading to the retirement and replacement of three of the court’s nine sitting members. The amendments were a step back from more extreme reform proposals.²⁰ In 2019, the government had come under domestic and international criticism for attempting to pressure the court’s chair and HHK affiliate, Hrayr Tovmasyan, to resign.²¹ In 2020, Tovmasyan retained a seat on the court but not his chairmanship and was facing criminal charges for abuse of office.²² The courts remain among the weakest and least trusted of Armenia’s institutions, and serious judicial reform at all levels is critical to future democratic progress.

The National Assembly took a number of steps to institutionalize corruption prevention. The Corruption Prevention Commission, created in late 2019 to oversee financial disclosures and conflicts of interest of high-ranking public officials, completed its first year of operations in 2020, enforcing disclosure rules and making disclosure information easily accessible to enforcement bodies, journalists, and the public. Lawmakers approved legislation to create a new Anticorruption Committee, which will have prosecutorial powers and is scheduled to begin operations in

2021.²³ Separately, a specialized Anticorruption Court is also scheduled to form in 2021.²⁴ Civil society and professional organizations were in consultations with the government about this and other measures throughout the year.

Domestic violence against women remained a serious issue, and stay-at-home orders amid the pandemic created obstacles for women seeking help. A 2017 domestic violence law, which emphasizes the preservation of families, offers an imperfect patchwork of protections for survivors.²⁵ Women are also underrepresented in national, regional, and local governance. In November, the only woman in PM Pashinyan’s cabinet, Zaruhi Batoyan, resigned from her position as minister of labor and social affairs.²⁶ Violence, harassment, and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and related communities in Armenian society also remained significant.²⁷ In a rare judicial victory in August, the Criminal Court of Appeal found that authorities had failed to properly investigate a violent attack against LGBT+ activists in Shurnukh.²⁸ Investigations and prosecutions of such cases are generally incomplete, and there are no effective legal protections against crimes based on sexual orientation or identity.

Even before the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war, the economic challenges for landlocked Armenia were significant. The country’s borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey (Azerbaijan’s ally) have long been closed, and the war further strained the country’s economy. Both the war and the armistice, highlighting the reach of regional powers Turkey and Russia, have exposed weaknesses in Armenia’s foreign relationships—particularly with the United States and the European Union—as well as the country’s own sovereignty.

The political crisis that followed the Second Karabakh War poses extraordinary challenges for democratic progress in 2021, including security risks along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, low public trust in the current government, economic strain, and the toll of the COVID-19 pandemic. As snap elections may take place in 2021, the prospect and direction of further reforms are uncertain, since they are dependent on the makeup of the future government and the reestablishment of public trust.

National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, 2.25 / effectiveness, and accountability of the legislative and executive branches. 7.00

- In its third year in power, the My Step Alliance continued to pursue its reform agenda announced in the wake of the 2018 Velvet Revolution. In February 2020, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan approved the formation of a commission for constitutional reform, tasking the body with leadership of discussions and development of changes to the constitution.²⁹ The commission included members of My Step and opposition parties, Armenia’s human rights ombudsman, legal scholars, and a representative each of the nongovernmental Union of Informed Citizens and the Armenian Bar Association.³⁰ However, the commission did not present a reform concept in 2020 as planned, largely due to delays caused by the war with neighboring Azerbaijan. In December, some commissioners expressed a desire to pause constitutional reform to allow the government to focus on the postwar crisis, leaving the commission’s future uncertain.³¹
- National politics were characterized by tensions throughout the year between the ruling My Step Alliance and the opposition—namely, the parliamentary parties Prosperous Armenia, led by oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan, and Bright Armenia, led by Edmon Marukyan, as well as forces loyal to the former ruling party, HHK, operating outside the parliament. In June, the National Security Service (NSS) raided the homes of Tsarukyan and several other Prosperous Armenia members, and announced an investigation into illegal commercial activities, vote buying, and tax evasion.³² Shortly after the raid, the National Assembly, upon request of the general prosecutor, voted to strip Tsarukyan of his parliamentary immunity; members from Tsarukyan’s Prosperous Armenia and Bright Armenia boycotted the vote in protest.³³
- The NSS requested judicial permission to hold Tsarukyan in pretrial detention and, after several appeals through the court system, arrested Tsarukyan on September 25.³⁴ Tsarukyan was released on bail a month after his arrest, during the height of the Nagorno-Karabakh war.³⁵ In November, Tsarukyan was detained along with other opposition party members for organizing an antigovernment rally—ostensibly because of wartime restrictions on mass gatherings—but all were released shortly thereafter.³⁶
- In March, the greatest priority of the national government became containment of the COVID-19 pandemic and the mitigation of its health, social, and economic impact. The government declared a state of emergency on March 16, approving legislation for the measure and establishing a centralized crisis management center.³⁷ Preventive actions included the closure of educational institutions, restrictions on public gatherings and travel, and a stay-at-home order, and the state of emergency was extended several times through the spring and summer.³⁸ While the state of emergency was lifted in early September, authorities maintained some policies—including social distancing and mask wearing—throughout the year.³⁹ Following the outbreak of war with Azerbaijan, COVID-19 cases spiked across the country. By year’s end, the total of recorded cases had surpassed 159,000, and 2,800 people had died of the novel coronavirus.⁴⁰
- On September 27, Azerbaijan’s Armed Forces, with support from Turkey, launched a large-scale attack on Nagorno-Karabakh, which Armenia’s leadership rushed to defend.⁴¹ The ensuing war—the deadliest outbreak of violence since the 1994 ceasefire—led to more than 3,000 military deaths.⁴² The war sparked a crisis in national governance, consuming the resources of the executive and legislative branches while stalling progress on several key processes, including electoral reform.
- Before the war, in July, there were clashes along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, mainly around the province of Tavush.⁴³ Border villages in Tavush regularly come under Azerbaijani fire, but the July clashes followed a

period of relative stability along the border and emphasized the tremendous risks that populations face in these areas.[44](#)

- Before the outbreak of COVID-19 in March and the war in September, the Caucasus Barometer survey reflected overwhelmingly positive public attitudes about Armenia’s political process and showed significant improvement in Armenians’ trust in the executive (71 percent responded that they “fully trust” or “rather trust” the government, compared with 20 percent in 2017) and the National Assembly (39 percent, compared with 12 percent in 2017).[45](#) However, public anger and distrust toward the government was significant in the last two months of the year following the announcement of the ceasefire in November. A February 2021 poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI), just 54 percent of respondents reported a “very favorable” or “somewhat favorable” attitude toward the executive.[46](#)
- Armenia’s military defeat led to deep discontent with PM Pashinyan and My Step legislators, with the harshest critics holding them responsible for the loss and calling for their resignation.[47](#) The immediate aftermath saw sporadic episodes of political violence (see “Civil Society”). The end of the war sparked widespread instability in national governance, with multiple defections from the My Step Alliance and high-profile resignations. Seventeen opposition groups, among them the HHK and its fringe political allies, mounted a campaign to install a transitional government headed by former prime minister Vazgen Manukyan, although public support for the initiative was unclear.[48](#) In December, Pashinyan announced that he would hold consultations about the possibility of snap elections in 2021.[49](#)
- Border demarcation between Armenia and Azerbaijan—along Syunik region in Armenia’s south—became a pressing national security challenge following territorial transfers. Both the wider public and civil society decried the government’s reticence about the border situation, which remained unsettled.[50](#) The demarcation process highlighted a number of uncertainties regarding Armenia’s sovereignty and Russia’s role therein. At year’s end, the identity and role of negotiators involved in the demarcation, as well as information about who would secure the border in the future, were still unclear.[51](#) Increased Russian military and political involvement, however, seemed nearly certain, and Russian troops were deployed to broader sections of Armenia’s southeast toward the end of 2020.[52](#)

Electoral Process 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process. **3.25 / 7.00**

- No elections took place in Armenia in 2020. In December, legislators passed long-awaited changes to the Law on Political Parties intended to increase transparency in party finances.[53](#) Among the changes were the prohibition of corporate donations, a lower cap on individual donations, and the conditioning of state funding of parties on their timely filing of financial statements and meeting a gender quota requirement by which representatives of one gender must not exceed 60 percent of a party’s governing council.[54](#) The law also entrusts the Corruption Prevention Commission (CPC) with oversight of party finances, shifting the responsibility from an oversight body within the Central Electoral Commission as a way to separate campaign regulation and election management. The Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR issued a joint opinion in March that was largely welcoming of the changes and offered further recommendations, including simplifying processes for party registration and administration.[55](#)
- Legislators also debated lowering the voting age from 18 to 16. No decision was reached during the year.[56](#)
- A significant part of democratic reform in Armenia entails building trust in the electoral process. Voter trust has been low in the past, as elections before 2018 were marred by evidence of fraud, vote buying, inappropriate use of administrative resources by incumbents, and other problems. In 2020, investigations into misconduct during past elections included the criminal case against Gagik Tsarukyan (see “National Democratic Governance”) and broader inquiries into the activities of Prosperous Armenia and the HHK.[57](#)
- The most recent Caucasus Barometer survey, published in 2020, showed remarkable improvement in attitudes toward the 2018 national elections as opposed to the 2017 vote: 63 percent of respondents perceived the 2018 election as “completely fair” and only 3 percent perceived it as “not at all fair,” compared with, respectively, 10 percent and 41 percent in response to the 2017 election.[58](#) In the February 2021 IRI poll, over half of respondents agreed with the need to hold snap parliamentary elections. When asked whom they would support in snap elections, 33 percent said they would support My Step, while a staggering 42 percent responded that they would not support any political party [59](#)
- The National Assembly held discussions and consultations about electoral code reform during the year, with a published draft expected in 2021.[60](#) The need for reform is even more acute with the possibility of an impending snap election. Among the reforms under discussion were changes to the current electoral thresholds, party list systems, electoral blocs, and gender quota.[61](#) According to deputy Hamazasp Danielyan, who serves on the Special Commission on Electoral Reform, one of the major questions ahead is whether the National Assembly must pass constitutional amendments in order to accommodate a new electoral code.[62](#) Constitutional amendments will require the My Step Alliance and the opposition to cooperate, as amendments need 88 votes to pass; resignations from the alliance following the trilateral ceasefire deal left My Step with 83 seats.[63](#)

Civil Society 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups. **4.50 / 7.00**

- In its Country Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society for Armenia, 2018–2020, the European Union (EU) noted significant improvements in the enabling environment, organizational capacity, and sectoral infrastructure of Armenian civil society as compared to the previous reporting period (2014–17).⁶⁴ The same report noted that financial sustainability remains the greatest operational challenge for civil society organizations (CSOs).
- In March, the National Assembly passed amendments to the Law on Public Organizations and the Law on Foundations, changing reporting standards for both. Among the changes is a requirement for all public organizations to issue annual reports; only a subset, including CSOs and foundations, had been subject to the requirement before. Civil society representatives were involved in the development of the legislation, and organizations found the final iteration of the amendments to strike a reasonable balance between disclosure and donor privacy.⁶⁵
- The right to assembly was curtailed during most of the year. The state of emergency declared in March in response to the COVID-19 pandemic included restrictions on public assembly and freedom of movement. The government lifted the state of emergency in August in favor of more moderate public health measures, mandating that participants in public gatherings maintain social distance and wear masks.⁶⁶ However, the outbreak of the Second Karabakh War and declaration of martial law led to a renewed ban on assembly in September, which remained in effect until December.⁶⁷
- Dozens of public gatherings nevertheless took place in 2020. The Helsinki Committee of Armenia, which monitored the right to assembly during the year, reported inconsistent enforcement of the restrictions by security forces—some gatherings were allowed to proceed, some received verbal warnings, and yet others were dispersed by force.⁶⁸ In November, when large demonstrations took place in the capital Yerevan after the announcement of the Russia-brokered ceasefire, police clashed with participants on multiple occasions in an attempt to dissipate the crowds.⁶⁹ Police also arrested dozens of individuals in November for violating the ban on gatherings.⁷⁰
- The November demonstrations were marked by intense public anger as well as calls for the resignation of PM Pashinyan. On a few occasions, gatherings turned into riots. Immediately after the announcement of the ceasefire, a large crowd trespassed into the National Assembly building and looted offices, and on the same evening, a group severely beat Ararat Mirzoyan, the president of the National Assembly, in public.⁷¹ The offices of Open Society Foundations–Armenia and RFE/RL were vandalized the following day.⁷²
- Beginning in September, civil society mobilized in response to the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, creating food banks, organizing delivery of medical supplies to hospitals, finding shelter and resources for the tens of thousands of people who fled Nagorno-Karabakh, and pushing for international resolution of the conflict.
- Some CSOs—particularly progressive groups working in the fields of democracy and human rights—faced hate speech, smear campaigns, and disinformation related to their funding and missions. For example, fringe nationalist groups increasingly targeted the Open Society Foundations–Armenia, accusing the grantmaking organization of undermining national security amid the Second Karabakh War, opposing “Armenian values,” and even of having sponsored the Velvet Revolution.⁷³ These disinformation campaigns, targeting public perceptions of CSOs as well as their relationships with democratic institutions, endanger not only the work of organizations but also their contributions to further democratic progress in the country.
- In August 2020, the Criminal Court of Appeal ruled that authorities had failed to properly investigate and prosecute a 2018 case in which a group of over 30 men attacked LGBT+ activists in the village of Shurnukh.⁷⁴ The organization Pink Armenia, a local defender of the human rights of LGBT+ people, was among the chief advocates of the victims’ rights to justice.⁷⁵
- In June, the National Assembly began discussing a draft of the New Standards for General Education, a set of sweeping regulations that will reform public schools.⁷⁶ The new standards would give schools greater flexibility in setting curricula, among other changes.⁷⁷ The draft of the legislation caused some controversy, with conservative critics accusing the Ministry of Education of stripping “national values” from the educational system.⁷⁸ The Armenian Apostolic Church also criticized the draft, which proposes incorporating the history of the church, currently taught as a separate subject, into a general history course and a new course called “Me and My Homeland.”⁷⁹ Members of far-right groups also criticized the New Standards for including guidelines for sex education, and used it as an opportunity to spread disinformation about the draft.⁸⁰

Independent Media 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media.

3.00 /
7.00

- Armenian media landscape remains highly polarized between pro- and antigovernment outlets, although the number of more centrist voices continues to grow online. Television and the internet are the country’s most popular sources of news and information. While TV stations are largely free from state control, they do not have full independence from their owners.
- In March, as part of the state of emergency declared amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the government temporarily restricted the ability of media to publish any information on the public health situation that did not originate from official sources.⁸¹ Journalists, media rights groups, and CSOs responded with stern criticism, and the government lifted the restriction in April.⁸²

- Violence against journalists has declined since 2018, although the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression reported in 2020 that legal harassment of journalists remained an issue.⁸³ Alarming, journalists even faced lawsuits for opinions expressed on social media, rather than in their reporting. In one such case, the news website News.am sued Sona Harutyunyan, a journalist for lin.am, for posting on Facebook that News.am had been purchased by former president Robert Kocharyan.⁸⁴
- In another case, Qnar Manukyan, editor of the daily *Zhoghovurd*, faced a criminal case for refusing to reveal her sources despite legal safeguards for confidentiality.⁸⁵ The case went through a series of appeals, and in May, the Court of Cassation ruled that the Special Investigation Service (SIS) and the prosecutor's office had acted wrongfully by pressuring Manukyan and attempting to reveal the identity of her sources.⁸⁶
- In June, despite the state of emergency limiting public protests, Prosperous Armenia organized a demonstration in front of the NSS offices. Police broke up the gathering with force, injuring five journalists in the process. Police later apologized for the incident and launched an internal investigation.⁸⁷ In another incident, in August, former police chief Vladimir Gasparyan threatened RFE/RL journalists with his car while they were reporting on allegedly illegally acquired homes on the shores of Lake Sevan.⁸⁸ Authorities opened a criminal case against Gasparyan over his treatment of the journalists.⁸⁹
- The last quarter of the year was a difficult period for media as the Second Karabakh War exposed journalists to great danger. While none were harmed on Armenian territory, a number of journalists were injured—at least two critically—due to Azerbaijani shelling or sniper fire while traveling to and from Armenia.⁹⁰ Under a set of October amendments related to martial law, journalists were also limited to reporting information about the war that came from official sources. The legislation also forbade public criticism of state actions related to the war,⁹¹ sparking outcry.⁹²
- Armenian media and the public grappled with a severe spike in disinformation in 2020, especially about COVID-19 and the war in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁹³ Alarming, disinformation originates from sources both domestic and external, and both state and nonstate. A small number of fact-checking and media literacy initiatives are active in the country, but little has been done by officials to understand or mitigate the impact of disinformation.
- In April, legislators approved amendments to the criminal code that outlaw public calls to (or justifications of) violence against individuals defined by gender, race, ethnic origin, religion, political views, and a number of other protected characteristics.⁹⁴ Local CSOs welcome the amendments while noting that legislators had ignored a number of their requests, among them the explicit inclusion of sexual identity and orientation among the protected characteristics.⁹⁵
- In July, the National Assembly passed a new Law on Audiovisual Media⁹⁶ despite protest from media watchdogs and journalists' associations. The legislation made various technical changes to broadcast regulation in Armenia.⁹⁷ Industry groups noted that legislators had ignored their repeated input about the legislation and had not sought expert consultations from international bodies.⁹⁸

Local Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

**Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, election, and capacity of local 2.25 /
governmental bodies; and the transparency and accountability of local authorities. 7.00**

- Under the current government, local governance in Armenia is not as politicized as in the past. Strengthening local governance and autonomy remains a priority of the government and has been a focus of local civil society as well. Local governments and communities need fiscal autonomy in order to be independent and to set priorities based on their needs rather than wait for central government subventions.
- The country's second- and third-largest cities, Gyumri and Vanadzor, respectively, are scheduled to hold elections in 2021. In July 2020, legislators amended the process for electing mayors and municipal councils, requiring elections in towns of more than 4,000 voters to be held through closed-list proportional representation.⁹⁹ The changes also eliminated a current bonus seat provision by which a party that receives 40–50 percent of council seats is awarded additional seats in order to reach a majority; required a 70/30 gender quota for electoral lists; and reduced the electoral threshold from 6 to 4 percent for parties and from 8 to 6 percent for party blocs.¹⁰⁰
- Although CSOs generally welcomed the changes, they noted a number of shortcomings. The Vanadzor Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, for example, noted that the legislation failed to ensure representation for minority communities, did not extend the gender quota to elected factions (as opposed to simply electoral lists), and did not address term limits for mayors, among other issues.¹⁰¹
- In the Vayots Dzor region, tensions continued among residents, environmental activists, local and national authorities, security forces, and Lydian Armenia, a subsidiary of an international company with plans to operate at the Amulsar gold mine. Decrying the potential of the mine to harm human health, agriculture, and waterways in the area, a group has blockaded the mine since 2018 to halt construction.¹⁰² In the summer of 2020, the group clashed with Lydian's private security personnel as well as police.¹⁰³ The protesters have received little support from national authorities, who face lobbying pressure from Lydian as well as the challenge of handling foreign investment.¹⁰⁴
- Following the Second Karabakh War in 2020, territorial transfers to Azerbaijan created a border and security crisis in Syunik region. After the First Karabakh War, which ended with Armenian forces occupying lands beyond Syunik and adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh, the de jure border did not function as a formal international boundary in practice. After Azerbaijan retook the areas adjacent to Syunik in 2020, a hasty and opaque process of demarcation followed, often without the meaningful involvement of local and regional

leaders.¹⁰⁵ This process has left a number of border villages exposed to new Azerbaijani military positions nearby and jeopardized an important roadway that crosses the border, creating major risks for local security. At year’s end, the security of the new border area was partly ensured by the presence of Russian troops.¹⁰⁶

Judicial Framework and Independence 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees of equality before the law, treatment of suspects and prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions. 2.50 / 7.00

- There is still anecdotal evidence that some judges remain loyal to the previous regime, and trust in the judicial system is low among the Armenian public. In the latest Caucasus Barometer survey, the courts remained among the least trusted institutions despite significant increases in trust toward other bodies.¹⁰⁷
- Reforming the judiciary has been a high priority for the My Step government, and minor progress was made in 2020. There was a constitutional referendum planned for April.¹⁰⁸ The referendum, focused on judicial reform, was later canceled due to the public health crisis, and the issue of judicial reform was put to a parliamentary vote instead.¹⁰⁹
- In June, the National Assembly unanimously approved a package of amendments aimed at reforming the Constitutional Court, which had faced a crisis of legitimacy since 2018, culminating in Constitutional Court Chair Hrayr Tovmasyan being charged with abuse of power in late December 2019.¹¹⁰ Tovmasyan, who has accused the government of pressuring him to resign, retained a seat on the court following the passage of amendments yet was nevertheless forced to step down as chair. In October, a new chair was elected from the court’s ranks.¹¹¹
- With the changes,¹¹² legislators aimed to simplify a web of overlapping term limits and retirement requirements stemming from past constitutional reforms, and instituted a universal 12-year limit for Constitutional Court judges. Three judges retired as a result of the changes. The constitutional reforms were in accordance with recommendations from the Venice Commission, which worked closely with the government through earlier drafts of the amendments.¹¹³
- In 2020, legal experts and CSOs maintained that an impartial and comprehensive vetting process for judges and law enforcement officials was key to judicial reform in Armenia, but no significant legislative headway was made by year’s end.¹¹⁴
- The criminal case against Robert Kocharyan continued in 2020. The former president was charged in 2018 with attempting to overthrow the constitutional order stemming from his involvement in a violent breakup of protesters that followed a 2008 election. Kocharyan’s case has tested the judicial system and government alike, raising questions about HHK-era judges’ ability to be impartial and the current authorities’ potential to influence the proceedings. Kocharyan was released from custody in June, and the case was ongoing at year’s end.¹¹⁵
- The police and the NSS answer directly to the office of the prime minister, but a new strategy and action plan for police reform—approved by legislators in April—could change that policy.¹¹⁶ The plan calls for the creation of a Ministry of Internal Affairs (previously abolished through a 2003 police reform), which would mean that police would report to the National Assembly instead of the prime minister. It also calls for a separate patrol service to oversee traffic as well as border patrol. Other provisions address the right of preliminary investigation, community policing, capacity building, enhancement of ethics and integrity, and changes to police education.¹¹⁷ The reform process began in 2020, with support from the U.S. Embassy in Armenia, and is to continue through 2022.¹¹⁸

Corruption 1.00-7.00 pts

Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption initiatives. 3.00 / 7.00

- The My Step Alliance government has prioritized anticorruption reform, and it published its Anti-Corruption Strategy¹¹⁹ and Action Plan 2019–2022 in 2019.¹²⁰ The strategy includes the creation of a specialized Anticorruption Committee and Anticorruption Court, and at year’s end, the parliament signaled that the committee would begin operations in early 2021.¹²¹ Civil society and professional organizations, including Transparency International, the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly, and the Armenian Lawyers’ Association, were in consultations with the government about the committee.¹²² The specialized anticorruption court is also scheduled to form in 2021.¹²³ The action plan also includes trainings for public and civil servants, improvements to income and asset declaration systems, the introduction of anticorruption compliance requirements in the private sector, and enhancements to e-governance tools.¹²⁴
- The Corruption Prevention Commission (CPC), created in November 2019 to replace the largely ineffective Commission on Ethics, completed its first year of operations in 2020 under the leadership of Haykuhi Harutyunyan, a legal expert and civic activist nominated by Bright Armenia. The commission actively cooperated with the Ministry of Justice and other bodies in investigating specific cases of corruption and undertook the enforcement of financial declarations and conflict-of-interest disclosures, which in the past had not been widely practiced by public officials.¹²⁵
- In April, legislators passed the Law on Forfeiture of Illegally Acquired Property, which widened and expedited prosecutors’ ability to investigate economic crimes.¹²⁶ Under the law, prosecutors can more easily request seizure of assets with evidence of illegal origin. If illegality is proven in court, the judiciary can uphold the seizure without further prosecution of the criminality of the defendant’s actions.¹²⁷ The law is aimed at rooting out and prosecuting illicit enrichment that was rampant under previous administrations. A

number of oligarchs and former public officials, when faced with criminal charges, have compensated the state or turned over assets in 2019 and 2020.¹²⁸

- High-profile investigations continued or were initiated in 2020. Among those undergoing criminal trial during the year were former president Serzh Sargsyan and several family members. Sargsyan is accused of embezzling \$1 million from a state fuel program in a case that also involves a former minister, deputy, and department head from the Ministry of Agriculture.¹²⁹ Gagik Khachatryan, former head of the State Revenue Committee and former finance minister, was indicted on a litany of charges that include embezzlement of public funds, abuse of power, suppressing competition, and tax evasion in 2019. His son and associates also faced corruption charges in 2020, with ongoing cases at year's end.¹³⁰
- Authorities also launched a number of new corruption investigations in 2020. In March, the State Revenue Committee charged Mikayel Minasyan, a former ambassador to Vatican City and son-in-law to former president Sargsyan, with illegal enrichment, money laundering, and falsification of asset declarations. His whereabouts were unknown, and the case, complicated by Minasyan's counterclaims,¹³¹ was ongoing at year's end.¹³² The largest new corruption case was brought against Prosperous Armenia leader Gagik Tsarukyan, who was arrested in September on charges that include vote buying and bribery¹³³ (see “National Democratic Governance”).

Footnotes

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ecoi.net summary:

Report on democratisation
(electoral process, civil society,
independent media, governance)
and rule of law (corruption) in 2020

Country:

Armenia

Source:

[Freedom House](#)

Original link:

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/nations-transit/2021>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

28 April 2021

Document ID:

2050436

Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum
Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

