

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	395
Land:	Armenien
Kilde:	Freedom World
Titel:	Freedom on the Net 2024 – Armenia
Udgivet:	16. oktober 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	7. november 2024



FREEDOM ON THE NET 2024

Armenia

FREE

74
/100

A. <u>Obstacles to Access</u>	20 /25
B. <u>Limits on Content</u>	29 /35
C. <u>Violations of User Rights</u>	25 /40

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

72 /100 **Free**

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free). See the research methodology and report acknowledgements.



Key Developments, June 1, 2023 - May 31, 2024

Armenia's online environment remains open, improving during the coverage period because the government did not block websites or social media platforms. However, the government did detain people over online speech critical of the government, and individuals in the country have frequently been targeted with spyware.

- During the reporting period, there were no reported blockings of websites or social media platforms, in contrast to previous coverage periods (see A3 and B1).
- In March 2024, Vazgen Saghatelyan and Narek Samsonyan, the hosts of a podcast critical of the government, were detained on charges of hooliganism and sentenced to two months of pre-trial detention after they released an episode insulting Prime Minister Pashinyan (see C3).
- In December 2023, the government implemented the Concept and Action Plan of the Struggle against Disinformation 2024-2026, which aims to bolster the capacity of the government and the private sector in this field, and further promote media literacy (see B5).
- In January 2024, the hacking group Anonymous Russia initiated distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks against several websites, including those of the Armenian government, banks, and telecommunications service providers (see C8).

Political Overview

Armenia experienced a significant transition following mass antigovernment protests and elections in 2018 that forced out an entrenched political elite. The government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has pledged to deal with long-standing problems including systemic corruption, opaque policymaking, a flawed electoral system, and weak rule of law. The country has been seriously affected by military pressure from Azerbaijan. In September 2023, nearly the entire ethnic Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, which had enjoyed de facto

independence from Azerbaijan since 1994, was forcibly displaced to Armenia after the Azerbaijani military defeated local defense forces and took full control of the territory

A. Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections?

5/6

Internet access is widespread in the capital, Yerevan, and is expanding throughout the country. The reliability and speed of internet connections across Armenia have generally improved in recent years. Public Wi-Fi is readily available in Yerevan but more limited in other cities.

According to the most recent data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Armenia had a fixed-line broadband penetration rate of 18.5 percent and a mobile broadband penetration rate of 103 percent in 2023. **1** The ITU also reported that 77 percent of individuals had access to the internet. **2** Fourth-generation-plus (4G+) technology for mobile networks covers 100 percent of settlements, according to the 2020 data from Armenia's Public Services Regulatory Commission (PSRC). **3** In April 2023, Viva-MTS, a mobile service provider, announced the launch of a fifth-generation (5G) network in Yerevan, but at the end of the coverage period the network was only available in the city center. **4** In May 2023, the PSRC stated that Telecom Armenia and MTS Armenia had secured the tenders to operate radio frequencies for the provision of 5G mobile broadband in the country. The licenses state that within two years, the providers will launch 5G networks in Yerevan, Gyumri, and Vanadzor. **5** According to the PSRC, at the end of 2023, 5G networks were already partially functional in Yerevan and Gyumri. **6**

According to data published by Ookla's Speedtest Global Index in May 2024, the median speed of a fixed-line broadband connection was 56.8 megabits per second (Mbps), while the median speed of a mobile internet connection was 27.6 Mbps.

Four internet service providers (ISPs) maintain the fiber-optic cable backbone networks that connect to the global internet via neighboring Georgia. There is also a limited fiber-optic connection through Iran, which mostly serves as a backup. ⁸ In 2019, the Armenian ISP Ucom signed a memorandum of understanding with ISPs in Iran and Qatar to build an internet transit link between the Persian Gulf states and Europe through Armenia. ⁹

The limited number of internet connections to and from Armenia present challenges in ensuring uninterrupted internet access, and unintentional damage to these connections has affected access in the past. ¹⁰ For example, for two days in January 2024, Armenia experienced problems with internet connections. ISPs reported that incoming cables outside the country had been damaged. ¹¹

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons?	2/3
---	-----

In general, internet connections are affordable in Armenia. According to the 2023 data from the ITU, a monthly fixed-line broadband subscription of 5 gigabytes (GB) per month costs 3.28 percent of gross national income (GNI) per capita. On the other hand, mobile packages offering at least 2 GB of data per month cost 0.82 percent of GNI per capita. ¹² According to World Bank data from 2023, the country's GNI per capita is \$22,240. ¹³ Many lower-income households cannot afford high-speed fixed-line or mobile connections.

There is a minor disparity in access between residents of large population centers and people living in more rural areas. By 2021, 100 percent of settlements had access to broadband internet service, and 62.7 percent had access to fixed-line broadband connections, an increase from 2020. ¹⁴ The quality of service may be limited outside of cities due to a lack of competition between providers. As of January 2021, all 1,003 settlements in Armenia were covered by 4G+ mobile networks. ¹⁵

A3 0-6 pts

Score Change: The score improved from 5 to 6 because social media platforms were not blocked during the coverage period.

Internet shutdowns are not common in Armenia. Though blocking of social media platforms did not occur during this coverage period, in the past users have reported social media blocking during conflicts between the Armenian and Azerbaijani militaries. For instance, in September 2022, during border clashes in which Azerbaijani forces attacked Armenian territory, users found TikTok inaccessible, ¹⁶ and the disruptions continued for a week or more depending on the provider. Previously, in October 2020, state-owned media outlet Armenpress had reported that TikTok was inaccessible to some users four days after the outbreak of the armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. ¹⁷ Problems with loading the platform and posting content persisted for several weeks in that case.

The government and the PSRC, which regulates the telecommunications industry, do not interfere with the planning of network topology. Private companies plan and develop their own networks independently.

The internet service providers' exchange traffic is routed through an internet exchange point (IXP) operated by the ARMIX Foundation, a nonprofit organization (see A5). However, under the Law on Electronic Communication, the government is empowered to assume "responsibility for the operation and management of any or all electronic communications networks or services" during a state of emergency. ¹⁸

In December 2022, the government introduced draft legislation that would allow state authorities to restrict access to the internet, either in certain parts of the country or across the entire country, when martial law is in effect. The draft would also empower the government to block social media platforms under such circumstances (see C1). The legislation has not progressed further as of the end of the coverage period. ¹⁹

The telecommunications market is fairly diverse, with three mobile service providers and more than 200 ISPs. ²⁰ There are no significant constraints on entering the market. In 2013, amendments to the Law on Electronic Communication removed the requirement that ISPs obtain a license, instead requiring that they notify the PSRC before providing services or operating a telecommunications network. ²¹

According to the PSRC, there were 200 ISPs in Armenia at the end of 2023. ²² However, three providers control a significant portion of the fixed-line broadband market. In the first quarter of 2024, Ucom reported 110,728 subscribers, ²³ TEAM.Telecom (formerly known as Beeline) reported 95,696 subscribers, ²⁴ and Ovio (formerly known as GNC Alfa) reported 66,541 subscribers. ²⁵

At the end of 2023, Viva (formerly known as Viva-MTS) was the largest mobile service provider, controlling 56.9 percent of the market, followed by TEAM.Telecom and Ucom. ²⁶ In March 2023, Viva-MTS applied to the PSRC with a request to sell the company. In November 2023, the PSRC approved the sale of 100 percent of Viva-MTS's shares to Cyprus-based Fedilco Group Limited. The shares were previously owned by Aramayo Investments Limited, a Cyprus-based subsidiary of Russia's MTS group. ²⁷ In January 2024, Fedilco Group Limited announced that it will give the Armenian government 20 percent of MTS Armenia's shares at no cost. ²⁸

In January 2022, GNC Alfa, one of the largest Armenian ISPs and a subsidiary of Russia's Rostelecom, was acquired by Electric Networks of Armenia (ENA). The company set up Molitro Holdings, an offshore holding company registered in Cyprus, to manage the shares of GNC Alfa. ²⁹ Company was rebranded to Ovio in 2024.

Public access points such as cafes, libraries, schools, and community centers must be licensed if they offer internet service for a fee; free internet access points are exempt. ³⁰

The PSRC operates relatively transparently, and its decisions affecting the telecommunications sector are generally fair. However, the commission's conduct—particularly with respect to public utilities like gas and water—has been marred by corruption in the past. **31** PSRC rulings are made during open meetings, in which the public can participate. **32** The regulator must submit an annual report to the National Assembly, but lawmakers cannot intervene in its decisions.

The PSRC is assigned responsibility for regulating the telecommunications sector under the Law on Electronic Communication. **33** Its authority, mechanisms for commissioners' appointments, and budgeting principles are defined in the Law on the Public Services Regulatory Commission. **34** One of the weakest elements of the telecommunications regulatory framework is the absence of term limits for PSRC members. The commissioners are appointed by the president based on recommendations from the prime minister that are subject to parliamentary approval. Once appointed, commissioners can be dismissed only if they are convicted of a crime, fail to perform their professional duties, or violate other rules, such as those that prohibit obtaining shares of companies regulated by the PSRC.

Though industry self-regulation remains underdeveloped, three well-established nonprofit organizations have helped shape Armenia's information and communication technology (ICT) sector. The oldest is the national chapter of the Internet Society (ISOC Armenia), which maintains the registry of country-level domain names according to the best practices recommended by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the US-based nonprofit that manages global domain name systems.

B. Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?	6/6
--	-----

Score Change: The score improved from 5 to 6 because websites containing content protected under international human rights standards were not blocked during the coverage period.

In general, content protected by international human rights standards is not blocked, though certain websites were blocked in previous coverage periods. Prior to the 2020 military conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, blocking had typically been limited to locally hosted content that was found to contravene laws on pornography, and it was implemented by deregistering websites using the .am or .**hwj** country code top-level domains. **35**

In December 2022, based on an order from the National Security Service (NSS), a hosting provider blocked the domain name and website Przdnt.am, which a Russian theater troupe was using to promote their play, *Lay Down, Mr. President*. The website featured a timer that counted down the time until ticket sales opened. After the site was blocked, the play's organizers migrated their content to the Przdnt.com domain. As of the end of the coverage period, there were no restrictions on the new domain. **36**

In September 2022, as the Azerbaijani military attacked Armenian territory, users reported problems accessing TikTok (see A3), **37** but neither the government nor the ISPs commented on the apparent blocking. Users had previously reported disruptions in access to TikTok in October 2020, during the fighting between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. In the same period, Azerbaijani media outlets and government resources with .az and .tr country codes were inaccessible, and obstacles to access persisted for months after the November 2020 cease-fire. **38**

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?

3/4

The government does not frequently demand that users remove content, though it has done so in the past. In 2020, the government enacted emergency measures that empowered authorities to ban or delete content related to the COVID-19 pandemic **39** and, later in the year, to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. **40**

In 2023, Meta did not restrict access to any content based on requests from the Armenian government. **41** Google received 6 content removal requests concerning 121 items from the Armenian government, all of which were related to content on YouTube. The company complied with 68.6 percent of the removal requests. **42** X has not released a transparency report on content removal in Armenia since the end of 2021. **43**

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, or an independent appeals process?

3/4

Historically, the government has rarely restricted content, though it did impose some restrictions during the military conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The law permits the filtering of internet content only under a narrow set of circumstances, and decisions to block content require a court order. **44** Courts can issue orders to block illegal content, including child sexual abuse images and material that violates intellectual-property rights. **45** Blocking can be challenged in court by content owners, who may claim compensation if a judge finds a blocking order to be illegal or unnecessary. Appeals of content-blocking decisions can also be filed at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). The government is, however, legally empowered to limit mass media, including online mass media, during states of emergency. **46**

ISPs and content hosts are shielded from liability for illegal content stored on or transmitted through their systems without their prior knowledge. **47**

In December 2023, the government introduced a legislative package that would amend several laws related to online casinos, lotteries, and gambling sites. According to the changes proposed by the Ministry of Finance, ISPs should block gambling platforms that are not licensed in Armenia. Under the law, a special commission created by the prime minister would determine which gambling websites are to be blocked. **48**

Community standards for social media platforms, **49** particularly Facebook, are nontransparent for Armenian users. Facebook has banned the accounts of several Armenian opinion leaders and media outlets for violating its terms of service. According to rights activists, the decisions lacked transparency, **50** and some of those banned have been accused of hate speech without evidence to support the claims. **51**

In March 2023, the Facebook Oversight Board announced that it would review a case involving a video that allegedly depicted Azerbaijani soldiers beating captured Armenian soldiers. Meta originally found the post to be in violation of its Coordinating Harm and Promoting Crime Policy but allowed the content to remain on the platform with a “warning label” on the grounds that it could be important for “human rights groups and independent investigators.” **52** In June 2023, the Oversight Board upheld this decision. **53**

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship?	3/4
--	------------

Online journalists, commentators, and ordinary internet users do not engage in widespread self-censorship. According to the 2023 Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE), produced by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), some online journalists are wary about covering certain taboo issues. **54**

Armenia’s relationship with Azerbaijan and its military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh remain sensitive topics. In the past when the government has declared martial law, Armenian officials have instructed citizens to refrain from discussing the situation in the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh during moments of tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan and penalized them for breaching these constraints. **55**

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest?

2 / 4

The online information landscape in Armenia is polarized, subject to political pressure, and rife with disinformation. At certain online outlets, journalists are not allowed to deviate from the editorial policies of their employers, who in some cases are linked to political parties or forces. The wife of Prime Minister Pashinyan, Anna Hakobyan, has drawn controversy for her role as the editor-in-chief of the *Armenian Times*. **56**

Disinformation about or related to the February 2022 full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine has spread online since its beginning. For example, Russian state-backed media, Russian government officials, and some Armenian political parties have claimed that US-run laboratories in Armenia are producing biological weapons, mirroring a disinformation narrative about similar facilities in Ukraine.

57

Russian actors have also engaged in other disinformation campaigns targeting Armenia. For instance, Meta's Adversarial Threat Report for the second quarter of 2024 identified a network of inauthentic Facebook and Instagram accounts, which were later removed, that promoted narratives in support of Russia and critical of Prime Minister Pashinyan. The accounts directed individuals to fake websites meant to resemble local Armenian news sites and operated on YouTube, Telegram, and TikTok. **58**

In May 2024, the media outlet CivilNet reported that progovernment Facebook pages, including the Facebook page of a media outlet run by Pashinyan's chief of staff, spread false stories stating that Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, the leader of May 2024 protests against the Pashinyan government and the transfer of Tavush border villages to Azerbaijan, was an agent of the Kremlin. **59**

A June 2021 report from Freedom House noted that the twin crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020 had "exacerbated" disinformation problems in the country. **60** A March 2021 study by the Media

Initiatives Center cited “media affiliated with the previous regime, ideological groups, and Russian websites” as some of the main sources of disinformation in Armenia. **61**

Far-right political groups in Armenia also spread a significant number of dis- and misinformation narratives online through an ecosystem comprising social media accounts and friendly websites. **62**

In December 2023, the government adopted the Concept and Action Plan of the Struggle against Disinformation 2024-2026, which was drafted by the Freedom of Information Center of Armenia in cooperation with the Information and Public Relations and Information Center. The Concept focuses on three strategic dimensions, including bolstering the capacity of state bodies to address disinformation, building the capacity of the private sector and improving coordination between these actors and the government, and general awareness raising around media freedom and media literacy. **63** However, a November 2023 report from Freedom House noted concerns with the Concept, including the need for the Armenian government to establish a clear definition of disinformation, ensure separate government authorities are responsible for identifying and combatting disinformation, and further engage with other stakeholders in society. **64**

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users’ ability to publish content online?

3/3

Since the 2018 Velvet Revolution, media outlets and other users have not faced arbitrary economic or regulatory constraints that would significantly affect their ability to publish online. In fact, economic and other liberalization that followed the Velvet Revolution helped drive growth in the digital media sector.

In April 2024, the Standing Committee on Science, Education, Culture, Diaspora, Youth and Sport of the National Assembly introduced amendments to the Law on Mass Media and the Civil Code that outline a self-regulation system for media outlets, including those that operate online. **65**

IREX’s 2024 VIBE report noted that the “reliable independent outlets” would not be able to survive without grants to supplement their income from advertising. ⁶⁶ According to Arsen Sultanyan, who founded the digital marketing agency Prodigy, the online advertising market in Armenia was valued at about \$9.3 million in 2022, a 17-percent decline compared with the previous year, partly due to a law that banned advertising for gambling websites. ⁶⁷

While net neutrality is not explicitly enshrined in Armenian law, a 2014 government resolution supports the principle. ⁶⁸ A 2008 PSRC decision requires ISPs to inform subscribers of any discriminatory traffic-management policies on their networks. ⁶⁹

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability?

3/4

A 2023 Internews survey found that 58 percent of Armenians use “social networks, blogs, vlogs and podcasts” as their top sources for political and social news, slightly ahead of television, at 56 percent. ⁷⁰ According to the study, 59 percent of respondents reported using Viber and WhatsApp several times a day, while Facebook and YouTube followed closely behind with usage at 58 percent. A variety of independent and opposition web resources provide audiences with politically neutral content as well as opposition viewpoints.

IREX’s 2024 VIBE report noted that while a large number of online outlets publish “misinformation,” the outlets that do not promote these narratives tend to have more readers. ⁷¹

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users’ ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues?

6/6

Activists and protest movements rely on social media to mobilize citizens and gather support.

After the September 2023 Azerbaijani military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh, upwards of 100,000 refugees fled to Armenia over several days. To help, activists used social media to coordinate aid campaigns for food, clothes, and money for refugees. **72**

In December 2022, Azerbaijani protesters, with the alleged backing of the government in Baku, **73** began blocking the Lachin Corridor, the only remaining road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia; the obstruction created a humanitarian crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh. **74** In response, Armenian activists launched an online campaign demanding an end to the blockade, **75** which was promoted by many celebrities and prominent figures around the globe.

Between April and June 2022, the Armenian opposition used social media to organize protests calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Pashinyan. Several protesters were detained for “refusing to obey officers’ orders,” and footage of these detentions was then shared across social media platforms. **76**

C. Violations of User Rights

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence?

3/6

The Armenian constitution guarantees freedom of speech to individuals and media outlets, **77** and Armenian criminal legislation grants journalists certain protections. According to Article 164 of the criminal code, hindering the legal professional activities of a journalist, or forcing a journalist to disseminate or withhold information, is punishable by fines or imprisonment for up to one year. The same actions committed by an official in abuse of their office are punishable by up to three years in prison and a ban on holding certain posts in the government for up to three years. **78** However, neither the criminal code nor media legislation clearly defines who qualifies as a journalist or states whether these rights apply to online journalists and bloggers, though draft amendments to the Law on Mass Media and the Civil Code would introduce a definition (see B6).

The 2003 Law on Mass Media adopted a unified regulatory framework for all forms of media content, including online content. **79**

On September 27, 2020, the government declared martial law after heavy clashes with the Azerbaijani army started on the border of Nagorno-Karabakh. **80** The law was later amended to give police the authority to fine media outlets and request the removal of critical content. These measures were eased after the November 10 cease-fire agreement, but the parliament did not vote to formally end them until March 2021. **81** In December 2022, the Ministry of Justice proposed new rules that would apply when martial law is in effect, allowing the authorities to block websites and platforms and to shut down internet service altogether, but the proposal remained in draft form at the end of the coverage period (see A3).

82

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?

3/4

Some laws threaten the constitution's guarantees of freedom of online expression. Criminal legislation prohibits the dissemination of speech that incites racial, religious, or national hatred, as well as calls to seize state power or change the constitutional order by force. **83** These laws apply to expression both online and offline, and some rights activists have warned that they could be used to arrest and prosecute nonviolent critics of the government.

In July 2022, the government enacted a new version of the criminal code that decriminalized "grave insults," which had been criminalized in the 2021 version of the code. **84** This reversal followed significant criticism from civil society groups and the international community after the parliament adopted the earlier version in July 2021. **85** The law had initially stipulated that grave insults, or comments that offend another's dignity in an "indecent manner" and are directed at state officials, politicians, civic activists, and other public figures, could be punished with a fine of up to 500,000 drams (\$1,200). Repeat offenses could have resulted in fines of between 1 million drams (\$2,400) and 3 million drams (\$7,100) and up to three months in prison. **86**

Armenian laws on pornography and copyright infringement generally align with European legal standards, ⁸⁷ and companies have not been held liable for illegal content shared by users (see B3). The act of downloading illegal materials or copyrighted publications is not subject to prosecution unless authorities can prove that the content was stored with the intent to disseminate it.

In April 2020, the parliament adopted amendments to the criminal code that criminalized violent hate speech. Publicly inciting or justifying violence based on gender, race, skin color, ethnic or social origin, or other such characteristics is subject to penalties including fines and imprisonment for up to three years. ⁸⁸ The amendments were met with some skepticism. ⁸⁹

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?

4/6

Individuals are sometimes arrested or detained for their online activity.

In March 2024, law enforcement officials detained Vazgen Saghatelyan and Narek Samsonyan, who criticized the government on their podcast, Imnemnimi. The hosts were then sentenced to two months in pretrial detention on charges of hooliganism. ⁹⁰ If found guilty, they could face up to five years in prison. Armenia's Investigative Committee stated that Saghatelyan and Samsonyan committed hooliganism by "showing an openly contemptuous attitude towards moral norms" and swearing at Pashinyan and his cabinet in an episode covering a recent parliamentary session. AntiFake, the media outlet that releases Imnemnimi and has previously been accused by the Atlantic Council of spreading "biased narratives and inauthentic online," published footage of Samsonyan's brutal arrest. ⁹¹

In November 2023, Avetik Ishkhanyan, who heads the Helsinki Committee of Armenia, reported that he had been charged with "inciting violence" over a September 2023 Facebook post that read "Death to Traitors!" There was no update on the case as of the end of the coverage period. ⁹²

In May 2023, an Armenian security agency asked the United States to extradite Vartan Ghukasyan, a former police officer who regularly criticized the government

on YouTube. The Investigative Committee accused him of extortion, claiming he had ordered a businessman to give him \$110,000 in exchange for withholding information about the businessman and his wife. The committee also accused him of attempting to extort \$60,000 from a Yerevan-based nightclub owner, issuing “public calls for violence,” and “disrespecting the Armenian judiciary.” ⁹³ Tigran Arakelyan, an Armenia-based associate of Ghukasyan, was detained and later released. ⁹⁴

In October 2022, Sashik Sultanyan, the founder of the Yezidi Center for Human Rights, failed to attend a court hearing related to a 2021 charge of “incitement of hatred,” and the court subsequently issued a warrant for his arrest. The charged stemmed from comments Sultanyan, who is believed to have fled the country, made about discrimination and other issues the Yezidi minority group in Armenia experiences (see C7). ⁹⁵

In 2021 and 2022, a multitude of individuals was charged under the July 2021 amendments to the criminal code that stipulated fines and prison time for “grave insult” offenses. In June 2022, the government announced that these measures would be removed from the criminal code going forward, and the revised code took effect that July (see C2). ⁹⁶

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption?

3/4

Anonymous communication and encryption tools are neither prohibited nor restricted in Armenia. However, the law requires individuals to present identification when purchasing a SIM card, effectively requiring people to disclose personal information to use a mobile phone. ⁹⁷

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users’ right to privacy?

2/6

Electronic surveillance by state authorities remains a threat to Armenians’ online privacy rights. There have been several reports of spyware being used against

people in the country in the past few years. The government is widely believed to possess Russian-designed surveillance technology known as the System for Operative Investigative Activities (SORM). The Armenian NSS has lawful interception powers, and surveillance without a court order is permitted for up to 48 hours when national security is imminently threatened. **98**

In May 2023, a joint investigation by CyberHUB-AM, Access Now, Citizen Lab, Amnesty International's Security Lab, and researcher Ruben Muradyan found that at least 12 victims—including a former ombudswoman of Armenia, two journalists with the Armenian service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), a United Nations official, a former spokesperson for Armenia's Foreign Ministry, and seven other representatives of Armenian civil society—had been targeted with Pegasus, the commercial spyware product sold by Israel-based NSO Group. Investigators indicated that Azerbaijan's government could have been responsible for the attacks, because it allegedly operates Pegasus servers that target individuals abroad. **99** Prior to the publication of this investigation, more than 20 people in Armenia had received an email from Apple informing them that they had been targeted by a state hacking effort; the warning was sent to affected individuals around the world in November 2021. In the fall of 2023, Apple sent emails to another wave of iPhone users in Armenia informing them that they may have been targeted by Pegasus. **100**

In November 2022, an investigation by Check Point Research found that Armenian “human rights organizations, dissidents, and journalists” had been targeted by a sophisticated version of OxtaRAT spyware, which enables the attacker to take control of the target's desktop. Check Point Research asserted that the “targets are consistent with Azerbaijani interests.” **101**

In December 2021, an investigation by Citizen Lab identified customers in Armenia who were likely operating Predator, an advanced spyware tool used to target and extract information from mobile phones. The tool was developed by Cytrox, a company originally founded in North Macedonia that is affiliated with the Intellexa spyware consortium. **102** Meta, Facebook's parent company, removed the accounts in response to the investigation. **103** In May 2022, cybersecurity expert Ruben Muradyan stated that he had received reports of hijacked Telegram accounts being used to disseminate links leading to the Predator spyware. **104** In the same month, Google's Threat Analysis Group reported that “likely

government-backed actors” had purchased and operated Predator in Armenia, among other countries. ¹⁰⁵ In an interview, Ruben Muradyan, who conducts his own forensic analysis, confirmed that the Predator spyware was detected on the smartphones of several politicians and media figures in Armenia. ¹⁰⁶

In July 2021, Microsoft reported that a spyware tool sold exclusively to governments by the Israel-based company Candiru had been used to target victims in Armenia. According to a report by Citizen Lab, the targets, including human rights defenders, dissidents, journalists, activists, and politicians, were sent fake links to Armenian news sites. ¹⁰⁷ On the same day, Google confirmed that it had identified two instances in which “zero day” exploits (high-severity vulnerabilities) in its Chrome internet browser were used to spy on targets in Armenia, who were similarly lured with fake links to news sites. ¹⁰⁸

In January 2020, the parliament passed amendments to the law regulating law enforcement and intelligence activities that authorized the police to seek and obtain warrants to tap phones for surveillance purposes. Previously, the law had authorized only the NSS to tap phones. ¹⁰⁹

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users’ right to privacy?	5/6
---	------------

Armenian law does not require service providers to monitor traffic or content. Moreover, the Personal Data Protection Law mandates that service providers store only the personal data required for billing purposes. ¹¹⁰

Enacted in 2015, ¹¹¹ the Personal Data Protection Law created the Personal Data Protection Agency, which has the authority to appeal decisions by other state agencies if they potentially violate citizens’ right to privacy through the use of personal data. Under the same law, government and law enforcement bodies are allowed to collect an individual’s personal data, but only with a court order. State monitoring and storage of personal data are illegal unless required for the provision of state services. Only data obtained in line with these narrow legal requirements may be used as evidence in legal proceedings. Nonetheless, the courts generally support data collection requests from law enforcement bodies.

In March 2020, the parliament adopted a law that required telecommunications companies to provide the authorities with their subscribers' phone records, including their phone numbers and the location, time, and date of their calls and texts, in order to facilitate COVID-19 contact tracing. ¹¹² The law did not allow the government to access users' communications, only their metadata, and it only applied for the duration of the pandemic-related state of emergency, which ended in September 2020. ¹¹³ The metadata collected via this program were to be deleted within one month of the end of the state of emergency. In September 2020, all collected metadata were destroyed in the presence of public officials. ¹¹⁴

Under the Law on Electronic Communication, ISPs must make customer data available to authorities "in connection with surveillance, inquest, or criminal prosecution." ¹¹⁵ When so instructed by a court order, they must also give authorities access to "any communications equipment," including "wiretapping devices." ¹¹⁶

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in relation to their online activities?

4/5

Online journalists are sometimes subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence in retaliation for their work, though such attacks have subsided somewhat since the Velvet Revolution. In 2023, the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression recorded 6 cases of physical violence against journalists, both offline and online, and 60 cases in which they were pressured in other ways. ¹¹⁷

In July 2023, Ani Gevorgyan, an editor at NewDay.am, and Hripsime Jebejian, a journalist at Aravot.am, experienced a barrage of threats on social media after questioning Prime Minister Pashinyan at a press conference. ¹¹⁸

In July 2022, Sashik Sultanyan, the founder of the Yezidi Center for Human Rights, left the country while on trial for incitement of hatred. He had been charged a year earlier over comments he made to an online journalist in Iraq, in which he detailed the discrimination that members of the Yezidi minority group face in Armenia. He thought his comments were off the record, but the journalist later

published them. **119** After Sultanyan did not appear in court for his October 2022 hearing date (see C3), the court issued a warrant for his arrest. **120**

Online hate speech toward LGBT+ people remains frequent and is mostly directed by far-right organizations and political movements. **121**

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack?

1/3

Technical attacks target both government websites and civil society groups in Armenia, and they frequently originate in neighboring Azerbaijan. The scope and pace of cyberattacks from Azerbaijan tend to increase in tandem with armed conflict between the two countries.

In June 2024, after the coverage period, a group named People’s Cyber Army of Russia initiated cyberattacks against the Armenian embassy in Ukraine and Armenian government and law enforcement websites, including the websites of the prime minister and the president. **122**

In January 2024, the hacking group Anonymous Russia initiated DDoS attacks against Armenian government sites, **123** banks, **124** and telecommunications operators **125** because the government had become more friendly with the EU and the United States. Then, in March 2024, Anonymous Sudan (a group affiliated with Russia) reportedly launched a cyberattack against Team Telecom, the Armenian mobile operator. **126**

In November 2023, a Turkish hacking group hacked a site used as a landing page for educational textbooks. As a result, when students scanned the QR codes in their books, the landing page displayed pro-Turkey propaganda. **127**

In October 2023, the digital security and defense group CyberHUB reported a malware attack that primarily targeted state bodies in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, days before the Azerbaijani military offensive. The websites included one belonging to the Army of Defence of Nagorno-Karabakh. According to CyberHUB, the attacks were likely launched by Azerbaijani hackers.

In August 2023, the website of the newspaper Hraparak suffered a DDoS attack. The perpetrator was not identified, though analysis suggests that it was likely not initiated by the Azerbaijani government. **129**

In March 2023, the Armenian media outlet Aravot had its YouTube channel hijacked by unidentified hackers, who posted promotions for cryptocurrency scams. The outlet stated that the attacks occurred as it was preparing to post a videyuo report on the business transactions of individuals close to Prime Minister Pashinyan. The outlet recovered control over the channel shortly after the attack. **130**

In October 2022, Azerbaijani hackers attacked more than 200 Armenian websites, commandeering them to publish propaganda. The hacked sites included those of the Gyumri municipal government, the South Caucasus Railway, the Byurakan Observatory, and the State Conservatory. **131**

Also that October, the Union of Informed Citizens, a nongovernmental organization, reported that three of its websites had been attacked by Azerbaijani hackers. **132** In April 2023, the organization reported that its YouTube channel had been attacked by unidentified hackers. Both the websites and the YouTube channel were later restored. **133**

In September 2023, ESET reported targeted attacks by the Russian hacking group APT 28 against governmental institutions in Ukraine, Armenia, and Tajikistan. In June 2023, ESET discovered a set of spear-phishing campaigns, dubbed Operation RoundPress, enabling the hackers to obtain access to steal emails and address books and to create forwarding rules to steal incoming emails. This operation primarily targeted government employees in Armenia, Tajikistan, and Ukraine. **134**

Footnotes

- 1** International Telecommunication Union Datahub, “Fixed Broadband Subscriptions per 100 people,” and “Mobile Broadband Subscriptions per 100 people,” accessed August 2024, <https://datahub.itu.int/data/?e=ARM>.
- 2** “Percentage of Individuals Using the Internet,” International Telecommunication Union Datahub, accessed August 2023,

<https://datahub.itu.int/data/?e=ARM>.

- 3 “PSRC 2020 Annual Report [in Armenian],” Public Regulatory Services Commission of the Republic of Armenia, 2021,
<https://psrc.am/uploads/files/%D5%8F%D5%A1%D6%80%D5%A5%D5%AF%D5%A1%D5%B...>
- 4 Arka Telekom, “Viva-MTS 5G network launches in Yerevan for the first time in Armenia,” Arka Telekom, April 6, 2023,
http://telecom.arka.am/en/news/telecom/viva_mts_5g_network_launches_in_...
- 5 5G technology network to be launched in Armenia, News.am, May 08, 2023,
<https://news.am/eng/news/758822.html>

More footnotes



On Armenia

See all data, scores & information on this country or territory.

See More >

Country Facts

Population

2,780,000

Global Freedom Score

54/100 Partly Free

Internet Freedom Score

74/100 Free

Freedom in the World Status

Partly Free

Networks Restricted

No

Social Media Blocked

No

Websites Blocked

No

Pro-government Commentators

Yes

Users Arrested

Yes

In Other Reports

Freedom in the World 2024

Other Years

2023

**Be the first to know
what's happening.**

Join the Freedom House weekly
newsletter

Subscribe

ADDRESS

1850 M St. NW Floor 11
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 296-5101

GENERAL INQUIRIES

info@freedomhouse.org

PRESS & MEDIA

press@freedomhouse.org

@2024 FreedomHouse