



HUMAN
RIGHTS
HOUSE
Yerevan

THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN ARMENIA



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report assesses the situation of human rights defenders (HRDs) in Armenia in 2025, examining the interaction between the formal legal framework and its practical implementation. While Armenia continues to present itself internationally as a reform-oriented democracy with constitutional guarantees of fundamental rights, developments throughout 2025 demonstrate a persistent and, in some areas, deepening gap between law and practice. That gap has resulted in tangible harm to journalists, civil society actors, minority rights advocates, environmental defenders, and other individuals engaged in protected human rights activity.

Armenia's Constitution and sectoral legislation formally guarantee freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, personal security, and protection from torture and ill-treatment. Institutional reforms in recent years, including the adoption of a new Criminal Code and amendments strengthening the mandate of the Human Rights Defender (Ombudsperson), reflect partial alignment with international human rights standards. However, the absence of a dedicated legal framework for the protection of human rights defenders, combined with weak accountability mechanisms and selective enforcement of laws, continues to undermine these guarantees in practice.

In 2025, journalists faced a particularly hostile environment. The year was marked by physical attacks on journalists, including incidents involving law enforcement officers, alongside a sharp escalation in defamation and "insult" lawsuits filed by high-ranking public officials and powerful private actors. These lawsuits, many of which meet the definition of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), imposed severe psychological, financial, and professional pressure on independent media outlets and individual journalists. Armenia's civil defamation framework, which lacks safeguards such as damage caps, anti-SLAPP filters, or mandatory pre-litigation remedies, proved especially vulnerable to abuse.

Legislative initiatives further compounded these pressures. Draft amendments proposing compulsory removal of allegedly "slanderous" content from online media, combined with public threats of regulatory action by senior government officials, signaled a readiness to restrict freedom of expression under the pretext of protecting reputation or public order. Although these proposals were not adopted by the end of 2025, their chilling effect on public-interest journalism and critical reporting was immediate.

Beyond the media sphere, 2025 revealed a broader pattern of institutional and administrative retaliation against human rights defenders. The disciplinary proceedings against LGBT+ rights advocate Mamikon Hovsepian illustrate how opaque ethics mechanisms can be instrumentalized to punish whistleblowing and protected speech on matters of public interest. Similarly, the prolonged and repeatedly reopened criminal prosecution of minority rights defender Sashik Sultanyan demonstrates how criminal law and procedural delay can be weaponized to silence dissent, even in the absence of any legitimate incitement or harm. In both cases, the process itself functions as punishment, producing a chilling effect that extends well beyond the individuals directly targeted.

Environmental defenders and journalists were likewise subjected to judicial harassment through SLAPP litigation initiated by large mining companies. Cases involving Tehmine Yenokyan and Nazeli Vardanyan exemplify how corporate actors exploit weak legal safeguards to suppress scrutiny of environmental harm

and public health risks. These proceedings underscore a broader structural problem: courts are increasingly used not as forums for redress, but as instruments of intimidation against public watchdogs.

The operating environment for civil society was further undermined by disinformation and smear campaigns portraying NGOs, human rights defenders, and international donors as “foreign agents” or security threats. Such narratives, amplified through social media, partisan outlets, and political rhetoric, eroded public trust in an independent civil society and heightened risks for organizations reliant on international cooperation. Human rights defenders engaged in election monitoring, peacebuilding, or cross-border dialogue were particularly exposed to reputational attacks and harassment.

Taken together, the developments documented in this report reveal a pattern of structural pressure on human rights defenders in Armenia. Rather than relying primarily on overt repression, this pressure is exercised through cumulative and normalized practices: legal, administrative, rhetorical, and physical, that steadily constrain civic space and weaken democratic accountability. While Armenia continues to accept international recommendations and affirm its human rights commitments in formal settings, the events of 2025 demonstrate that without meaningful implementation, effective accountability, and explicit political recognition of the legitimacy of human rights work, the gap between commitments and reality will continue to widen.

INTRODUCTION

Armenia's human rights defenders (HRDs) - defined as individuals and groups who peacefully advocate for the protection of human rights - faced a challenging and often hostile landscape in 2025. These include civil society activists, journalists, and community leaders who speak out against injustice. They continued to carry out their legitimate work amid threats, harassment, and intimidation. The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1998, provides an important international framework for their protection. Article 1 of the Declaration affirms that everyone has the right "individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms". Crucially, the Declaration also places a duty on states to safeguard those who do so: it underscores that states bear the primary responsibility for protecting human rights and must ensure that human rights defenders are safe. In particular, Article 12 requires governments to "take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone... against any violence, threats, retaliation... or any other arbitrary action" stemming from their legitimate human rights activities. This means Armenia, like all states, is obliged to create an enabling environment in which HRDs can operate freely and without fear of reprisal.

International scrutiny in 2025 highlighted the gap between Armenia's obligations and the reality faced by HRDs. In May 2025, Armenia's human rights record underwent its latest Universal Periodic Review (UPR) - a peer review process at the UN Human Rights Council. During this fourth UPR cycle, numerous UN Member States raised concerns about the safety of HRDs in Armenia and issued concrete recommendations to strengthen their protection. For example, Norway's delegation urged Armenia to conduct prompt, independent investigations into attacks on human rights defenders, to hold perpetrators accountable, and to implement measures ensuring defenders' safety. Several other states pressed Armenia to finally adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation explicitly protecting vulnerable groups - including LGBT+ persons - noting that such protections had been repeatedly recommended for years.

Additionally, delegations called for improved accountability of law enforcement to prevent abuses against protesters and journalists, and for steps to safeguard freedom of expression and association. The Armenian government responded positively: it formally accepted a number of UPR recommendations related to protecting human rights defenders, journalists, and civil society. Officials in Geneva emphasized Armenia's commitment to human rights reforms and acknowledged these recommendations as guidance for strengthening the national human rights system. On paper, Armenia thus agreed to take measures aligning with the UN Declaration - promising to better protect HRDs and uphold an open civic space.

However, events on the ground in 2025 demonstrate a significant gap between these formal commitments and actual practice. Despite the government's pledges, HRDs in Armenia continued to encounter serious threats and reprisals for their work. Local and international monitors documented instances of physical attacks against activists and journalists, as well as ongoing harassment and intimidation. In many cases, human rights defenders - especially women's rights and LGBT+ advocates - were subjected to online abuse and orchestrated smear campaigns, portrayed by hostile groups as threats to "traditional values," and even targeted with violence.

LEGAL CONTEXT

Constitutional Framework

Armenia's Constitution guarantees fundamental rights relevant to human rights defenders - including freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and the right to personal security. In line with international commitments, torture and ill-treatment are prohibited, and recent reforms have updated criminal legislation to strengthen protections. The new Criminal Code (adopted 2021) defines torture with aggravated penalties, and a 2023-2025 Human Rights Action Plan reinforces the absolute right to be free from torture¹. The Law on Freedom of Assemblies upholds the right to peaceful protest, though implementation issues remain. Defamation in Armenia is decriminalized (since 2010 and reaffirmed in 2022), but "grave insult" against officials was criminalized in 2021, creating a chilling effect². Civil defamation laws allow officials and public figures to file lawsuits demanding exorbitant damages, a tool increasingly used against journalists and activists (as detailed in the SLAPPs section).

Ombudsperson and Institutional Protections

The Human Rights Defender (Ombudsperson) is an independent constitutional institution mandated to protect human rights, including those of civic activists. In 2025, steps were taken to expand the Ombudsman's powers through amendments to the Law on the Human Rights Defender. In October, a parliamentary committee approved changes clarifying the Defender's mandate and ensuring continuity of the office in case of early resignation³. These amendments also oblige an outgoing Defender to submit a final report on the human rights situation.

The Ombudsperson (as of 2025, Anahit Manasyan) has been vocal in condemning violence against journalists and activists, affirming that even offensive speech should not lead to detention except in extreme cases⁴. However, Armenia has not yet enacted a specific law on the protection of human rights defenders. During the 2020 Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Armenia accepted all recommendations related to safeguarding HRDs and pledged to foster a safe environment for civil society and journalists⁵. In practice, these commitments have not been fully realized - the government has seldom offered public support to HRDs, and activists report that authorities often fail to investigate or prevent attacks and threats against them.

¹ Experts of the Committee against Torture Commend Armenia on Proactively Addressing Issues in Prisons, Raise Questions on Ensuring Police Accountability for Excessive Use of Force and Tackling the Criminal Subculture in Prisons. <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/meeting-summary/2025/04/examen-de-larmenie-au-comite-contre-la-torture-les-experts>

² Armenian Government Accused Of Planning Curbs On Press Freedom. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33409582.html>

³ RA Human Rights Defender's Powers to be Expanded. https://arminfo.info/full_news.php?id=95438&lang=3

⁴ Armenian Lawyer Arrested after Facebook Post Criticising Authorities. <https://oc-media.org/armenian-lawyer-arrested-after-facebook-post-criticising-authorities/>

⁵ The Status of Human Rights Defenders in Armenia. https://upr-info.org/sites/default/files/country-document/2025-02/Human_Rights_House_Yerevan_statement.pdf

Judicial and Law Enforcement Environment

The year saw continued concerns about accountability for law enforcement abuses. In 2023, Armenia created a Ministry of Internal Affairs to enhance civilian oversight of the police, and introduced body cameras for patrol officers to deter misconduct⁶. Yet, by 2025, this had not translated into effective accountability for past incidents of excessive force⁷. Local and international observers note that investigations into police violence have often been weak or misclassified. For instance, UN Committee Against Torture experts pressed Armenia in April 2025 on ensuring police officers are held to account for excessive force during demonstrations⁸. In recent protest incidents, few if any officers were prosecuted for injuring demonstrators, and in some cases the Investigative Committee justified tough police actions as necessary to prevent “mass disturbances”⁹.

In summary, Armenia’s legal framework formally recognizes core rights, but gaps between law and practice remained stark. The following sections detail how, in 2025, human rights defenders continued to encounter significant obstacles across several thematic areas - media freedom, police conduct, abusive litigation, legislative initiatives, administrative actions, physical safety, and the online space - illustrating the urgent need for more robust implementation of legal safeguards.

⁶ Experts of the Committee against Torture Commend Armenia on Proactively Addressing Issues in Prisons, Raise Questions on Ensuring Police Accountability for Excessive Use of Force and Tackling the Criminal Subculture in Prisons. <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/meeting-summary/2025/04/examen-de-larmenie-au-comite-contre-la-torture-les-experts>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

TARGETING OF JOURNALISTS AS HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Journalists within the Human Rights Defenders Framework

Journalists engaged in public-interest reporting constitute human rights defenders within the meaning of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998). Article 1 of the Declaration affirms the right of all individuals “to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms,” a function clearly fulfilled by journalists who investigate corruption, document abuse of power, expose environmental harm, and inform the public on matters of governance and accountability.

UN Special Rapporteurs on human rights defenders and on freedom of expression have consistently affirmed that journalists performing a watchdog role are entitled to the full spectrum of protections afforded to human rights defenders, particularly where their work contributes to democratic oversight and the realization of other rights. Attacks against journalists, therefore, must be assessed not merely as violations of press freedom, but as acts of retaliation against protected human rights activity.

Pattern of Interference with Human Rights Work

Findings documented by the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (CPFE) demonstrate that in 2025, journalists in Armenia faced a sustained pattern of interference that directly undermined their ability to carry out human rights work. CPFE recorded dozens of violations against journalists and media outlets throughout the year, including physical attacks, threats, obstruction of professional activity, and legal harassment through defamation and insult lawsuits¹⁰.

Physical violence against journalists in 2025 constituted one of the most severe forms of targeting and illustrates the heightened risks faced by journalists acting as human rights defenders. During the reporting period, 15 cases of physical violence against journalists and media workers were documented¹¹. This figure reflects a persistent pattern rather than isolated incidents.

Of these cases, 7 involved direct violence by law-enforcement officers, including the use of force during public protests, assemblies, or while journalists were performing their professional duties in public spaces.

Several incidents involved excessive and disproportionate use of force, including pushing, hitting, forcibly removing journalists from public or institutional premises, and obstructing filming or documentation. In multiple cases, violence occurred in the presence of other officials or in institutional settings, such as during protests or near government buildings, without immediate intervention or subsequent accountability.

¹⁰ Հայաստանում խոսքի ազատության վիճակի և լրագրողների ու ՉԼՄ-ների իրավունքների խախտումների մասին 2025թ. տարեկան զեկույց. <https://khosq.am/reports/66357/>

¹¹ Ibid.

Investigations into these incidents were frequently delayed, ineffective, or inconclusive, reinforcing a pattern of impunity and failing to provide redress or deterrence.

The targeting of journalists through physical violence has a broader chilling effect, discouraging coverage of sensitive political developments, protests, and human rights-related issues. Such acts directly violate the state's obligation to ensure the safety of journalists and to protect those who monitor, document, and report on human rights concerns.

Several documented incidents involved direct physical violence against journalists, including assaults during the coverage of protests and public events. CPFE's reporting confirms that in multiple cases, law enforcement officers themselves were implicated in the use of force against journalists performing their professional duties¹².

One egregious example was the ambush of journalist Hakob Karapetyan on September 12, 2025. Karapetyan, an experienced journalist and expert with Yerevan Press Club, was physically assaulted by a masked man waiting outside his workplace¹³. The attacker struck Karapetyan multiple times on the head and face, leaving him injured¹⁴. This attack did not occur in a vacuum; it followed an online altercation and threats¹⁵. Weeks earlier, Karapetyan posted a Facebook critique of Yerevan municipal employees over the unjust fining of a public transit passenger. In response, a user (later identified as Avetik Babayan, acting head of the Yerevan Municipality's Public Order Protection Service) bombarded Karapetyan with profanity and explicit threats¹⁶. When the journalist privately contacted Babayan to address the harassment, the official responded with more abuse and threats¹⁷. Karapetyan publicly exposed Babayan's behavior, and shortly thereafter, he was violently attacked in person¹⁸. While the perpetrator of the beating has not been identified at the time of reporting, Karapetyan and media advocates see a direct link between the earlier threats and the physical assault. Armenian law enforcement did initiate criminal proceedings for the attack, and media organizations demanded a thorough investigation to identify not only the assailant but also any officials who ordered or financed the attack. A coalition of journalism NGOs urged Yerevan's Mayor, Tigran Avinyan, to investigate Babayan's conduct and, if the threats are verified, to remove him from his post¹⁹. They emphasized that the hostile rhetoric of officials can fuel violence, noting with concern that Mayor Avinyan himself, at a September 15 press conference, launched unjustified verbal attacks on the media in an "irritable tone"²⁰.

Avinyan had insinuated that respected investigative outlet Hetq engaged in corruption and paid reporting - an accusation the NGOs called baseless and dangerously incendiary. Such high-level disparagement of independent media "generates hatred towards journalism and journalists... paving the way for... violence," the joint statement warned²¹. The assault on Hakob Karapetyan, they stressed, was one of many examples of this worrying trend.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Statement Regarding the Violence against Journalist Hakob Karapetyan. <https://ypc.am/statements/september-16-2025/>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

Financial Pressure

Throughout 2025, independent media also faced a barrage of defamation and “insult” lawsuits, often filed by powerful figures with the aim of intimidating journalists. These Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation - or SLAPPs - strained media outlets with legal defense costs and potential damages. By mid-year 2025, 29 lawsuits had been filed against journalists and outlets, a number the CPFE deemed “negative and worrying”²². All 16 suits filed in the second quarter were for defamation or insult, including claims by at least three current or former officials and other political figures²³. By September 2025, the total had risen to 37 lawsuits against 17 media outlets, demanding 66.7 million drams (≈ \$174,000) in damages²⁴. High-profile plaintiffs included National Assembly Speaker Alen Simonyan, who alone lodged four defamation suits seeking retractions and 3.4 million drams in compensation²⁵. Two senior government officials (Arayik Harutyunyan and Armen Pambukhchyan) each sued media for 3 million drams²⁶.

This litigious onslaught contributed to an atmosphere of self-censorship and caution in media reporting.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF), in its May 2025 assessment of Armenia, warned that the legal framework does “not sufficiently protect press freedom and does not meet European standards.”²⁷ RSF criticized the ease with which officials can haul media into court without first seeking corrections or mediation - Armenia does not require any out-of-court dispute resolution before filing a defamation suit. Media advocates have called for legal reforms to discourage frivolous or punitive lawsuits, especially with parliamentary elections looming in 2026, when officials’ sensitivity to criticism (and thus SLAPPs) are expected to increase²⁸.

According to the CPFE’s latest annual monitoring, legal pressure against journalists intensified throughout 2025²⁹. By the end of the year, 63 new lawsuits had been filed against journalists and media outlets, 61 of them based on allegations of insult or defamation, with nearly half initiated by state bodies or public officials. While not all claims were successful, courts ordered journalists to pay approximately 3.3 million drams in compensation in 15 cases. The CPFE noted that this growing reliance on litigation by powerful actors contributes to psychological, financial, and professional pressure on independent media and risks producing a chilling effect on public-interest journalism

Draft Legislation on Content Removal

In addition to case-by-case pressures, 2025 saw a major legislative proposal that threatened media freedom. In early May, it emerged that the Ministry of Justice had drafted amendments to force online media

²² 29 Lawsuits against Media in Armenia in Six Months. <https://jam-news.net/pressure-on-media-in-armenia-monitoring-results/>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ 2025: Media Outlets in Armenia Sued \$174,00 for Libel, Slander. <https://hetq.am/en/article/176847>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Հայաստանում խոսքի ազատության վիճակի և լրագրողների ու ՉԼՄ-ների իրավունքների խախտումների մասին 2025թ. տարեկան զեկույց. <https://khosq.am/reports/66357/>

to remove content³⁰ “slanderous” by authorities. The draft, quietly circulated for comment, would change the Civil Code and media legislation to empower courts - or potentially even government bodies - to issue takedown orders for news articles or even user comments that allegedly defame or insult someone.

Accordingly, the Ministry of Justice prepared draft amendments to the Civil Code (Article 1087.1) and related media legislation, which would expand liability for insult and defamation beyond traditional media to include online media and social media content. Crucially, the proposed changes would allow courts to order the full or partial removal of publications deemed insulting or defamatory, rather than limiting remedies to corrections, replies, or compensation.

This initiative came on the heels of an open warning by the Prime Minister’s Chief of Staff, Arayik Harutyunyan. On May 2 (the eve of World Press Freedom Day), Harutyunyan accused some media and journalists of “abusing press freedom” to incite intolerance and provocations, and he told them to “quickly self-regulate” or else face “serious regulatory tools” that media would label a restriction on free speech³¹. Two days later, the draft “content removal” bill surfaced - widely seen as the threatened tool.

Government officials justified the proposal as needed to protect individuals’ “honor and reputation” and privacy against hate speech³².

Investigative journalist Grisha Balasanyan expressed deep concern, noting Armenia’s courts are not sufficiently independent to resist politicized takedown orders. “We do not have trustworthy courts to be sure decisions [aren’t] made for political reasons or for the sake of concrete persons,³³” said, suggesting the timing aimed to suppress media criticism ahead of the June 2026 elections³⁴.

However, this package has not yet been submitted to parliament, and the organizations that participated in the process have not been informed about its subsequent fate, raising additional concerns regarding transparency and accountability in the legislative process.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

RISING HATE SPEECH

Early in the year, Grigor Yeritsyan, an opposition and civic activist (and former Yerevan city council member), led a peaceful protest against a public transport fare hike by buying an unlimited metro pass and letting 600 passengers ride free. Instead of engaging with the socioeconomic message, some detractors targeted³⁵ identity - circulating derogatory posts on social media that mocked him as an “unordinary” person due to his activism³⁶.

Another example was the renewed vilification of trans activist Lilit Martirosyan, who years earlier had become the first transgender woman to speak in Armenia’s Parliament about human rights. In 2025, anti-LGBT factions resurfaced slurs against Martirosyan, suggesting her mere appearance at the National Assembly’s podium was scandalous - a stark reminder of the entrenched prejudice faced by sexual and gender minorities. Among those amplifying anti-LGBT rhetoric was the then mayor of Gyumri, Vardan Ghukasyan, who was reported to have made transphobic and derogatory statements contributing to the spread of hate speech against LGBT+ persons³⁷. Armenian human rights lawyers and NGOs condemned these incidents as hate speech that not only harms the individuals targeted but also chills the broader freedom of expression and equal participation in public life.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Մետրոյում ակցիա եմ իրականացրել, անսահմանափակ քարտ եմ գնել եւ անսահմանափակ մարդկանց ներս թողել: Դա նշանակում է՝ իշխանությունները չեն հասկանում, թե ինչ են անում. Գրիգոր Երիցյան. <https://www.aravot.am/2025/02/04/1468299/>

³⁷ Տրանսգեյներ Լիլիթ Մարտիրոսյանը Վարդան Ղուկասյանի դեմ գլխավոր դատախազություն բողոք է ներկայացրել. <https://bit.ly/4an2i6O>

RETALIATION AGAINST A HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER THROUGH ADMINISTRATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL PRESSURE

The Case of Mamikon Hovsepyan

In 2025, the case involving Mamikon Hovsepyan illustrates a particularly concerning form of retaliation against a human rights defender: the use of administrative and quasi-disciplinary mechanisms to suppress criticism of public institutions and deter whistleblowing³⁸.

Hovsepyan, a well-known LGBT+ rights advocate and representative of Pink Human Rights Defender NGO, was a member of the Country Coordinating Mechanism against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (CCM), a multi-stakeholder body responsible for oversight of Global Fund programs. In the course of his mandate, Hovsepyan publicly raised concerns regarding possible financial mismanagement and lack of transparency within health governance structures. Rather than triggering a substantive inquiry into the issues raised, these actions were followed by disciplinary measures targeting the whistleblower himself.

According to the publicly available information, the Ethics Committee of the CCM - acting in a process lacking transparency and imitating procedural guarantees - issued a reprimand and suspended Hovsepyan's participation. The proceedings were reportedly conducted without granting him timely access to the complaints against him, without ensuring an adversarial process, and without providing a reasoned decision grounded in established standards. The framing of his conduct as an "ethical violation" appears to have relied not on demonstrable misconduct, but on the act of publicly expressing criticism of institutional practices.

From a human rights law perspective, this case raises acute concerns regarding freedom of expression, protection of human rights defenders, and due process guarantees. Critically, Hovsepyan's statements addressed matters of clear public interest, namely, transparency, accountability, and integrity in public health governance. Under international human rights standards, including the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, speech on matters of public interest enjoys the highest level of protection, particularly when expressed by civil society actors performing a watchdog function.

The decision to sanction Hovsepyan through an ethics-based mechanism reflects a broader and increasingly documented phenomenon: the instrumentalization of internal disciplinary frameworks to silence dissent, without resorting to overt criminal prosecution. Such measures are especially insidious because they are often presented as neutral or technical, while in effect producing a chilling impact on human rights advocacy. In this case, the message conveyed is clear: individuals who raise concerns about state-linked institutions may face professional exclusion rather than protection.

³⁸ We Condemn the Ministry of Health's Attempts to Silence a Human Rights Defender. <https://pinkarmenia.org/en/news-events/ccm-statement/>

The response of Armenian civil society organizations, who collectively condemned the actions taken against Hovsepyan, underscores the systemic nature of the issue. Their joint statement emphasized that punishing a human rights defender for criticism undermines democratic accountability and violates Armenia's obligations to ensure a safe and enabling environment for human rights work³⁹. The subsequent acceptance of Hovsepyan's legal challenge by the domestic courts further indicates that the legality of the disciplinary action is seriously in question.

Taken together, the events surrounding Mamikon Hovsepyan in 2025 reveal a pattern of institutional retaliation against a human rights defender for exercising protected speech, raising concerns about Armenia's compliance with its obligations to safeguard defenders from harassment, intimidation, and reprisal.

³⁹ Ibid.

SLAPPS AND JUDICIAL HARASSMENT

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and other forms of judicial harassment against activists and media reached a worrying level in 2025. Powerful individuals - from high-ranking officials to business magnates - increasingly used the courts as a weapon to silence criticism and deter watchdog activities. Human rights defenders often found themselves entangled in costly, time-consuming legal battles that appeared less aimed at genuine redress and more at intimidation.

Defamation Suits against Journalists

As described above, defamation and insult lawsuits hit Armenian media with unprecedented frequency in 2025. These suits, typically civil cases, are sometimes SLAPPs intended to burden outlets and possibly bankrupt them with damage awards. The first half of 2025 saw 16 new lawsuits filed, every one of which was based on alleged insult or defamation in publications⁴⁰.

From the perspective of HRDs, these lawsuits create a climate of fear and self-censorship.

In 2025, media outlet CivilNet became the target of judicial pressure in a high-profile defamation case brought by Yerevan Mayor Tigran Avinyan following its 2024 investigative report on alleged business ties involving his family⁴¹. On 31 October 2025, the Yerevan Civil Court ruled partly in favour of Avinyan, finding that certain wording in the article amounted to defamation and ordering CivilNet to issue a retraction, though it rejected his claim for monetary damages. CivilNet's counsel publicly described the verdict as a "dangerous precedent" for press freedom, arguing that the court's reasoning including questioning the reliability of verified information from public institutions could undermine investigative journalism and weaken public oversight of officials. Press freedom watchdogs similarly criticised the ruling as setting a troubling precedent for media independence in Armenia, prompting CivilNet to announce its intention to appeal the decision to higher courts.

Criminal Charges as Harassment

Another prominent example is the ongoing prosecution of Sashik Sultanyan, a minority rights activist (Yezidi rights defender). Sultanyan was charged back in 2020 under Article 226 (incitement of ethnic hatred) for comments he gave in an interview highlighting discrimination against Yezidis. Despite international calls

⁴⁰ 2025: Media Outlets in Armenia Sued \$174,00 for Libel, Slander. <https://hetq.am/en/article/176847>

⁴¹ CivilNet Counsel Calls Avinyan Verdict a "Dangerous Precedent" for Press Freedom. <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/985849/civilnet-lawyer-calls-avinyan-verdict-a-dangerous-precedent-for-press-freedom/>

to drop this “intimidating” case, Armenian prosecutors persisted for years⁴². In 2025, Sultanyan’s trial had still not reached a conclusion. Moreover, in 2025 his case has been reopened yet again, which means all the judicial processes will start all over again and in the absence of Sashik Sultanyan. UN human rights experts have unequivocally said that “raising human rights concerns about the treatment of minorities is not incitement to hatred”, and that the charges against Sultanyan appear designed simply to silence him and deter others. The prolonged nature of the case and the stress it entails exemplify how drawn-out legal processes themselves become punishment for HRDs (a phenomenon often called “process is the punishment”).

⁴² Armenia Must Drop “Intimidating” Criminal Charges against Minority Rights Activist - UN experts. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/08/armenia-must-drop-intimidating-criminal-charges-against-minority-rights>

SLAPP LAWSUITS TO SILENCE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

Tehmine Yenokyan

Armenia's human rights climate in 2025 was also marred by powerful corporate actors using the courts to intimidate journalists and environmental defenders. Tehmine Yenokyan, an investigative journalist and eco-activist, spent much of 2025 embroiled in a protracted legal battle with the Zangezur Copper Molybdenum Combine (ZCMC), one of Armenia's largest mining companies. ZCMC filed a defamation suit against Yenokyan in early 2023 after she re-posted a Facebook report about a toxic waste pipeline rupture at the company's mine in Syunik. The post in question stated that a pipeline carrying mine tailings from ZCMC to the Ardzvanik tailings pond had burst and polluted the Voghji River⁴³. Rather than address the environmental harm, ZCMC sought to sue Yenokyan for damaging its "business reputation", demanding a public retraction and 6 million AMD (~\$15,000) in damages.

By late 2025, Yenokyan had endured nearly two years of litigation. She noted that the company repeatedly shifted its claims and tactics; at one point ZCMC even misquoted her, accusing her of writing "the tailings dam exploded" (a phrase she never wrote) in order to demand a broader retraction⁴⁴. Yenokyan resolutely refused to "confess" to false statements: "I cannot deny something that I didn't write," she stated, explaining that her actual post described a pipeline failure - which was factually correct - not an explosion of the dam⁴⁵. Tellingly, Armenia's own Environmental Inspectorate confirmed that two major leaks occurred in 2025 along ZCMC's waste pipeline (which runs for tens of kilometers through towns and over rivers). One spill was serious enough that authorities imposed an administrative penalty on the company, while the second incident's investigation was ongoing. These official findings bolster Yenokyan's defense that her reporting was truthful and in the public interest.

Despite this, the SLAPP case pressed on. Yenokyan and her legal support characterize ZCMC's lawsuit as part of a broader pattern of retaliatory litigation to muzzle environmental activism. She drew parallels to a 2022 defamation case she lost against another mining firm (Lydian Armenia), after which she was fined 3,500 EUR - an outcome that emboldened ZCMC to try the same strategy. "They targeted me in order to ultimately pressure and silence me, so that I stop talking about environmental problems," Yenokyan observed, noting that such suits are meant to have a chilling effect on others as well.

However, Yenokyan has scored some partial victories: the court dismissed part of ZCMC's claims for missing the 6-month filing deadline, even ordering the company to compensate her for certain legal costs (approximately 150,000 AMD). The case continued into late 2025, with a key hearing held on November 11, 2025⁴⁶. Armenian free speech organizations view Yenokyan's struggle as emblematic of the shrinking

⁴³ "I Cannot Deny Something That I Have not Written": Tehmine Yenokyan. <https://cvmedia.am/page2-8963-&lung=en-88>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

space for environmental and human rights discourse in the face of powerful business interests. They advocate for stronger protections against SLAPPs, stressing that public watchdogs should not be subjected to ruinous lawsuits simply for exposing environmental hazards and corporate accountability issues.

Nazeli Vardanyan

Nazeli Vardanyan is an Armenian lawyer and environmental defender associated with the “Armenian Forests” NGO and, importantly, she has also served in an official capacity in relation to the Amulsar mining controversy, including as a member of a fact-finding working group established under the Prime Minister’s order and as an author of a legal report connected to suspected violations around the project⁴⁷. Against that background, the civil cases brought against her fit the classic pattern of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs): proceedings initiated by powerful private actors (typically companies operating in high-impact sectors) that frame public-interest speech as “defamation” or “damage to business reputation,” with the practical aim of deterring scrutiny and exhausting critics through time, cost, and legal risk.

Lydian Armenia v. Nazeli Vardanyan (Amulsar context)

Public reporting shows that Lydian Armenia filed a complaint against Vardanyan on 21 December 2018, identified as Case No. ԵՂ/30203/02/18, alleging that her statements “discredited” the company’s business reputation. Human rights organisations monitoring the situation treated this litigation as part of a broader pattern of judicial harassment and defamation campaigns against environmental defenders and journalists raising public awareness of environmental and health risks linked to mining operations, explicitly listing Vardanyan among those targeted⁴⁸.

What makes this litigation particularly important for a SLAPP analysis is the content and setting of the contested speech. EcoLur’s reporting describes a claim seeking a public refutation and 1,000,000 AMD in compensation, tied to Vardanyan’s public remarks questioning the meaning and integrity of certain funding practices (described by the claimant as defamatory)⁴⁹.

The report also notes a due-process concern that is typical in intimidation-type lawsuits: Vardanyan allegedly was not properly informed and learned of the case online. Separately, an international overview by the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre records the same case number and date, situating it within the broader Amulsar dispute and highlighting her institutional role and the nature of the claim (business reputation)⁵⁰.

⁴⁷ Lawsuit (SLAPP): Nazeli Vardanyan. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/nazeli-var-danyan/>

⁴⁸ Armenia: Judicial Harassment and Defamation Campaigns against Several Environmental Defenders. <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/armenia-judicial-harassment-and-defamation-campaigns-against-several>

⁴⁹ Lydian Armenia Demanding from Court to Confiscate 1 Million AMD from Nazeli Vardanyan, Member of Working Group Established by RA Prime Minister’s Decision. <https://www.ecolur.org/en/news/amulsar/lydian-armenia-demanding-from-court-to-confiscate-1-million-amd-from-nazeli-var-danyan-member-of-working-group-established-by-ra-prime-ministers-decision/11843>

⁵⁰ Lawsuit (SLAPP): Nazeli Vardanyan. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/nazeli-var-danyan/>

From a human-rights litigation lens, these elements matter because they place the speech at the core of democratic accountability: a lawyer and civil society actor raising issues of alleged irregularity and public interest in a project with significant environmental and community impacts. That type of speech is precisely what international freedom-of-expression standards protect most strongly.

The harm from SLAPPs is rarely only the final judgment; it is the chilling effect: the pressure on the defendant (and others watching) to self-censor rather than risk ongoing legal exposure, reputational damage, and financial burden.

Meta Gold v. Armenian Forests NGO and Nazeli Vardanyan (2025)

In 2025, Vardanyan again became the target of litigation that is explicitly framed in public reporting as a SLAPP. On 7 August 2025, EcoLur reported that Aram Osikyan, the director of “META GOLD” LLC, filed a lawsuit against “Armenian Forests” NGO and its director Nazeli Vardanyan, demanding retraction of allegedly defamatory information and 1 million AMD in compensation for non-pecuniary damage to business reputation and to Osikyan’s honor and dignity⁵¹. Armenian media reporting likewise described the proceeding as already being qualified by human rights actors as a SLAPP process, explicitly using the SLAPP concept (“strategic lawsuits against public participation”) to describe the broader trend of attempting to silence environmental actors through court claims⁵². Independent SLAPP documentation initiatives in Armenia have also indexed a “Meta Gold vs. Nazeli Vardanyan - 1 Million AMD Claim” entry, again characterizing the dispute as a SLAPP⁵³.

Legally, this 2025 lawsuit raises the same core concerns as the earlier Lydian claim: the use of private-law defamation/business-reputation frameworks to deter public participation. Even where a claimant asserts reputational harm, international standards require close scrutiny of necessity and proportionality when litigation targets speech related to public interest (especially environmental risks, corporate conduct, and community impact).

A demand for retraction paired with monetary compensation can function as a punitive tool when deployed against an NGO director engaged in environmental advocacy, because it raises the cost of speech and introduces personal liability risk, thereby discouraging continued watchdog activity.

⁵¹ Director of “META GOLD” LLC Sues Director of “Armenian Forests” NGO Nazeli Vardanyan, Demanding Retraction. <https://www.ecolur.org/en/news/mining/16112/>

⁵² Նազելի Վարդանյանի դեմ Արամ Օսիկյանը դատական հայց է ներկայացրել. <https://www.cvmedia.newhorizons.am/page2-8375--88->

⁵³ Meta Gold vs. Nazeli Vardanyan - 1 Million AMD Claim. <https://bit.ly/4qPluht>

DISINFORMATION TARGETING CIVIL SOCIETY AND FOREIGN AID

A notable trend in 2025 was the spread of disinformation aimed at NGOs and Western development programs, which undermined Armenia’s civil society environment. In February 2025, sensational allegations circulated regarding the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). These claims - amplified by both foreign and domestic actors - painted USAID as a “criminal organization” engaged in sinister activities. Citing a social media post by U.S. billionaire Elon Musk, some Armenian outlets repeated unverified accusations that “USAID, using your tax dollars, has funded biological weapons research, including COVID-19”⁵⁴.

Further conspiracy-laden narratives alleged USAID was a front for intelligence operations and “color revolutions,” and that Armenia’s post-2018 government had “increased USAID’s funding and programs” to serve a pro-Western agenda⁵⁵. This rhetoric culminated in questions about USAID’s future in Armenia, especially after neighboring Azerbaijan expelled the agency and U.S. political shifts signaled possible cuts.

Such accusations, though unfounded, fueled a climate of suspicion toward NGOs and independent media that receive foreign grants. Human rights observers noted that this “foreign agent” smear threatened to delegitimize legitimate civil society work. Fact-checkers and experts pushed back, emphasizing USAID’s decades-long positive impact. It was pointed out that it’s “impossible to underestimate the enormous work USAID has done in many countries, including Armenia”, implementing numerous educational, media, and rights programs.

On 20 October 2025, HCAV issued a public statement condemning the targeted campaign against human rights defender Daniel Ioannisyian, coordinator of the Aware Citizens Union programs and spokesperson for the Independent Observer alliance. The statement noted that for an extended period, political forces, individuals, and some civil society actors had sought to undermine and silence Ioannisyian’s work through politically motivated attacks, portraying his legitimate human rights monitoring and civic engagement as controversial or improper. HCAV emphasised that both governmental and opposition actors had been involved in such targeting at various times, and asserted that attacks and attempts to discredit Ioannisyian and the organisations with which he is associated are unacceptable. The statement framed these practices as efforts to restrict independent observation and criticism in the lead-up to elections and condemned them as limiting the space for civil society participation and democratic oversight⁵⁶.

Nevertheless, the episode exposed fault lines: as Armenia navigated geopolitical uncertainty, anti-Western or ultra-conservative groups readily scapegoated NGOs and international donors, jeopardizing the operating space for human rights organizations. Ensuring accurate information and protecting civil society from politically motivated attacks remained a key challenge in 2025.

⁵⁴ «Փաստ». Ի՞նչ ծրագրեր է իրականացրել «հանցավոր կազմակերպությունը» Հայաստանում. <https://news.am/arm/news/864870.html>

⁵⁵ Ibis.

⁵⁶ Against the Targeting of Daniel Ioannisyian: Statement. <https://hcav.am/en/against-the-targeting-of-daniel-ioannisyian-statement/>

In late November 2025, a delegation of Armenian civil society representatives participated in a two-day round of discussions in Baku as part of the Peace Bridge Initiative, aimed at deepening dialogue and cooperation between Armenian and Azerbaijani civil society actors and exploring joint media and expert-level projects⁵⁷. The meetings resulted in agreements to enhance cooperation and regular reciprocal visits under the Initiative's framework.

Shortly after the Baku visit, members of the Armenian delegation became the subject of online criticism and smear narratives circulated in some local media and social media spaces in Armenia, where participation in cross-border dialogue was portrayed by detractors as controversial or inappropriate. While mainstream reporting focuses mainly on the official meetings and stated peacebuilding goals, these online pressures reflect a social backlash that civil society actors involved in sensitive peace-oriented initiatives can face. Critics in public discourse often frame peace engagement efforts as politically problematic or undermining national interests, creating an environment of reputational risk for participating CSOs and activists.

⁵⁷ Armenian Civil Society Reps Meet Azerbaijani Counterparts in Baku. <https://hetq.am/en/article/178280>

CONCLUSION

Human rights defenders in Armenia increasingly operate in an environment shaped by cumulative pressure rather than overt repression. Physical attacks on journalists, the escalation of SLAPP litigation, the instrumentalization of disciplinary and criminal procedures, weak accountability for law enforcement abuses, and the spread of delegitimizing disinformation have collectively narrowed civic space. These practices do not always manifest as dramatic crackdowns; instead, they function through normalization, through the routinization of harassment, legal uncertainty, and reputational attacks that gradually erode democratic participation and public oversight.

Particularly concerning is the growing reliance on defamation and insult frameworks, both by public officials and powerful private actors, to constrain public-interest reporting and environmental advocacy. Without anti-SLAPP safeguards, proportionality standards, and effective judicial scrutiny, litigation risks become a tool of deterrence rather than a mechanism for legitimate remedy. Similarly, administrative and quasi-disciplinary measures used against civil society actors raise serious concerns about indirect retaliation against protected speech.

From the standpoint of Armenia's international obligations, including under the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the state bears a positive duty not only to refrain from violating rights, but to actively protect individuals who exercise them in the public interest. The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders makes clear that governments must ensure protection against violence, threats, retaliation, and arbitrary action. The patterns observed in 2025 indicate that this positive obligation remains insufficiently fulfilled.

If Armenia is to consolidate its democratic trajectory, the protection of human rights defenders must be treated not as a reputational issue, but as a structural priority. This requires:

- Explicit political recognition of the legitimacy and value of human rights work;
- Effective, independent investigations into attacks and threats against defenders;
- Legislative safeguards against SLAPPs and abusive defamation litigation;
- Strengthened judicial independence and proportionality review in cases involving public-interest speech;
- Public repudiation of disinformation and smear campaigns targeting civil society;
- Adoption of a dedicated framework to ensure the protection of human rights defenders in line with international standards.

Absent these measures, the gap between Armenia's formal commitments and the operational environment for civil society will continue to widen. Such a trajectory risks not only the safety of individual defenders, but also the broader resilience of democratic institutions and the rule of law.

The protection of human rights defenders is not a peripheral issue; it is a litmus test of democratic maturity.

The direction Armenia chooses in the coming years will determine whether civic space remains a foundational pillar of governance or becomes progressively constrained by normalized pressure and impunity.



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