

17 October 2024

Original language : Dutch

COI FOCUS

ARMENIA

Political situation

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**Co-funded by the
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Summary

The Velvet Revolution in April 2018 resulted in a change of power that left the former ruling authorities in the opposition. Armenia has since been ruled by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, former opposition leader and founder of the Civil Contract party. The country faced several crises in 2020, starting with the COVID-19 epidemic and, in the autumn of 2020, the 44-day war in Nagorno Karabakh. In the following years, a number of events related to the conflict with Azerbaijan put pressure on the government. These included a brief flare-up of violence on the border in September 2022, the months-long blockade of Nagorno Karabakh in 2023 and the eventual surrender of the region in September 2023. Subsequent negotiations with Azerbaijan over the demarcation of the border between the two countries caused further discontent and attempts by the opposition to oust the government through anti-government demonstrations. The return of four Azerbaijani exclaves on Armenian territory in April 2024 was another trigger for calls for the government's resignation and protests, this time led by a regional archbishop. These actions failed to persuade the prime minister to resign. Despite Pashinyan's waning popularity as a result of the above events, he continues to enjoy the most support, according to opinion polls. The opposition, still led by figures associated with the corrupt and authoritarian former regime, remains far less popular than Pashinyan.

Despite a wide range of political parties, the number of active parties is very limited. Political parties tend to revolve around an individual rather than a party programme or ideology. Several sources reported a shift from democratic rhetoric and practices towards an authoritarian political system in 2024. Power is mainly concentrated with the prime minister and his entourage while the opposition has little say. Parliament, which is largely controlled by Civil Contract, has limited powers of control over the government. A lot of staff in government agencies, both in senior and middle positions, as well as a considerable number of judges, have been replaced by people loyal to the ruling party. Political influence on the judiciary remains, but to a lesser extent than before the revolution. Unlike under the previous regime, it is currently difficult to influence or bribe a judge or a law enforcement officer. However, in the case of minor offences, it may be possible to pay a bribe in the initial stages, especially at the time of arrest, to prevent a case from being investigated further.

Political opponents regularly portray each other as a threat to national security, which has a negative impact on the democratisation process. Political polarisation manifests itself mainly between close supporters of the government on the one hand and the opposition on the other, i.e. the pre-revolutionary political elite and their allies. Unlike under the previous regime, there are little or no restrictions to openly expressing political opinions. In response to increasing hateful rhetoric and an increased risk of serious crimes in the aftermath of the war, there was a short-lived legal initiative to criminalise insulting people in public office. The new Penal Code, in force since July 1, 2022, no longer includes this article. As a result, all pending cases were dismissed. A charge of online hooliganism against two bloggers in March 2024, following offensive messages towards the prime minister in their podcast, raised concerns among human rights organisations about the right to freedom of expression. Openly calling for violence or justifying violence through hate speech also remains punishable and appears to be selectively applied to government critics.

Opposition leaders tend to portray lawsuits against opposition figures as politically motivated because of their (former) position. However, according to multiple sources, there is little or no political persecution. Political motivation occurs when one person is prosecuted and another is not in similar circumstances. This is notable, for example, in the run-up to elections when court cases are opened or reopened against opposition figures. Multiple sources point out that in most court cases, there is a valid reason to initiate criminal proceedings, but not everyone is prosecuted in the same way for the same type of crime. It is unlikely that anyone who has not committed a crime will be prosecuted.

After coming to power in 2018, the government promised to implement a series of reforms and address some well-established problems, including systemic corruption. Between 2019-2023, several anti-corruption agencies came into operation and numerous corruption investigations were launched, mainly against former government officials, their relatives and other influential people linked to the previous regime. Corruption investigations were also launched against some members of the current authorities. So far, there have been no convictions in high-profile corruption cases. Lawsuits against two ex-presidents were either closed without conviction, or withdrawn for lack of evidence. Court cases tend to drag on for a long time, which is considered to be one of the main problems in the judiciary, along with the lack of efficiency.

Despite many shortcomings, the judicial system is generally considered to be accessible and sufficiently independent. In some high-profile court cases, there may be political motives, but in other cases the judicial process is mostly fair and judges make correct decisions. Multiple sources point to the importance of having a good lawyer to improve the chances of obtaining justice. This can be a barrier for less well-off individuals. Alternatively, they can turn to free public defenders or pro bono lawyers, but they tend to be less experienced and understaffed, making them less trustworthy.

Of all law enforcement agencies, the police are the second most trusted after the army. The image of the police has been greatly improved by the new patrol police. Paying bribes to the police is no longer an issue since their introduction. People may be reluctant to contact the police because of a post-Soviet mentality, whereby it is seen as problematic to involve the police. A lack of confidence that the case will be investigated or dealt with effectively can also be a barrier. However, it is unlikely that someone will refrain from seeking help from the police out of fear of reprisals.

The influence of former leaders and oligarchs has diminished significantly since the revolution. Influential figures from the previous regime might still use former connections to, for example, coerce someone into silence. Influencing or intimidating witnesses is punishable and is not a widespread practice. Witnesses may be reluctant to testify because of past connections, partly so as not to betray the trust of their former boss or colleagues, but also for fear of having to reveal their own involvement in corrupt networks and being prosecuted for it. Existing witness protection mechanisms have shortcomings.

During several demonstrations, the police cracked down on protesters and made arrests. This happened mainly when the protest itself was not peaceful. There were situations where the police used excessive force against demonstrators. Human rights organisations complained that no one has been held responsible or convicted for police violence, unlike some demonstrators who have been prosecuted. Usually, people do not experience further problems following their participation or arrest during a protest.

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List of abbreviations

ACC	Anti-Corruption Committee
AMD	Armenian dram (currency)
ARF	Armenian Revolutionary Federation (<i>Dashnaktsutyun</i>)
CPC	Commission on the Prevention of Corruption
CPFE	Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression
CPI	Corruption Perception Index
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DDF	Democracy Development Foundation
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
EU	European Union
EUMA	European Mission in Armenia
GRECO	Group of States against Corruption
HCA	Helsinki Committee of Armenia
HCAV	Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor
HRH Yerevan	Human Rights House Yerevan
ICG	International Crisis Group
IRI	International Republican Institute
OC Media	Open Caucasus Media
OSW	Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich (Centre for Eastern Studies)
OSCE/ODIHR	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe / Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
PRWB	Protection of Rights Without Borders
RPA	Republican Party of Armenia (<i>Hayastani Hanrapetakan Kusaktsutyun</i>)
RSC	Regional Studies Centre
RSF	Reporters Sans Frontières (Reporters Without Borders)
SIS	Special Investigation Service
SJC	Supreme Judicial Council
TI	Transparency International
TIAC	Transparency International Anti-Corruption Centre
UIC	Union of Informed Citizens
USDOS	United States Department of State

ZOIS Zentrum für Osteuropa und internationale Studien (Centre for East European and International Studies)

Introduction

This COI Focus examines the current political situation in Armenia in the aftermath of the April 2018 Velvet Revolution, which saw the former government fall into opposition and former opposition leaders take power. Cedoca examined the impact of several events - including the war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and the region's surrender following an Azerbaijani offensive in September 2023 - on the domestic political situation and on political freedoms of citizens. Cedoca assessed in particular whether there are signs of political persecution, whether citizens or opponents may face difficulties in expressing their views on political issues, whether there are risks associated with participating in anti-government demonstrations, and whether past links to the former government or oligarchs might have consequences. Cedoca also examined what protection mechanisms exist and how accessible and effective they are for citizens experiencing problems with current or previous authorities.

Chapter one provides a chronological overview of key political developments and events following the Velvet Revolution through early September 2024, including developments in relation to the negotiation process with Azerbaijan and public reaction to it.

Chapter two describes how political parties can operate and interact, and briefly presents the conduct of elections. The chapter also outlines how citizens generally relate to politics, as well as the extent to which they can openly share their political views. Finally, this chapter discusses what freedoms or restrictions journalists have.

Chapter three explains what steps the authorities have taken to combat corruption, which was one of the promises of the new government after the Velvet Revolution. The chapter describes the operation of anti-corruption agencies and provides a view of the course and status of corruption trials opened after the revolution against former government representatives and oligarchs. The functioning of the courts, as well as signs of political influence, are briefly discussed. The chapter also focuses on corrupt practices by representatives of the current government. Finally, this chapter provides a view of the prevalence of petty corruption after the revolution – for example, paying bribes to the police.

Chapter four includes a view of the current position of high-ranking figures from the previous government (now in opposition), including (former) oligarchs, as well as of the situation of low-ranking political opponents and activists. On the one hand, Cedoca examines whether there are any indications of political persecution, for example in corruption trials, and whether individuals belonging to the opposition are under pressure in other ways. On the other, this chapter highlights potential risks to individuals called to testify against prominent figures from the previous regime. As regards lower-ranking political profiles, this chapter provides a view of how they may become involved in a corruption trial and the potential obstacles involved. Finally, the chapter discusses protection options. This includes the accessibility of the police and judiciary, potential obstacles to filing a complaint – for example in the case of problems with influential people, both from the current and previous authorities –, and whether formerly influential figures are still able to influence law enforcement agencies.

Chapter five describes the conduct of protests and the extent to which the right to demonstrate is generally respected. This chapter also mentions protests between 2020 and 2024 during which police used excessive force or detained several participants. It also discusses the legality of arrests, situations that could be grounds for arrest, or possible consequences for citizens arrested during a protest. The circumstances in which police use force against demonstrators or those in custody are also discussed in this chapter, as well as any measures taken by the authorities in response to police violence.

Research was based on reports from international organisations such as Freedom House, Human Rights Watch and the Bertelsmann Stiftung, as well as the annual human rights reports from the United States Department of State (USDOS). In addition, Cedoca consulted publications from

international news agencies, such as Eurasianet and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), including its Armenian variant, Azatutyun, as well as local independent news agencies such as Caucasian Knot, Open Caucasus Media (OC Media) and Jam News. Armenian independent press outlets engaged in investigative journalism, such as Hetq, CivilNet and EVN Report, were also consulted for this research. Publications of the Ombudsman Service or the Human Rights Defender of Armenia and several local human rights organisations were also used.

Cedoca interviewed several contacts on the above topics during its fact-finding mission to Armenia on 18-26 March 2024. They included delegates from Democracy Development Foundation (DDF), Union of Informed Citizens (UIC), Helsinki Committee of Armenia (HCA), Human Rights House Yerevan, Transparency International Anti-Corruption Centre (TIAC), representatives from the Armenian Human Rights Defender or ombudsman service, sources close to the EU, a journalist from an independent local press outlet, a political analyst and three organisations specialising in human rights in Armenia. The latter wished to remain anonymous for security reasons. This fact-finding mission was carried out with the financial support of the European Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF).

Research for this COI Focus was completed on 12 September 2024.

1. General political situation

1.1. Change of power after the Velvet Revolution in April 2018

When the second presidential term of Serzh Sargsyan from the Republican Party of Armenia (*Hayastani Hanrapetakan Kusaktsutyun*, RPA) expired on 9 April 2018 after a decade, Armenia switched from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary republic. This shifted power from the President to the Prime Minister and parliament.¹ The opposition saw the switch to a parliamentary system, ratified in a constitutional amendment after a controversial 2015 referendum, as a way for Sargsyan to consolidate his position of power and that of his party.²

Sargsyan is associated with the so-called Karabakh clan – a group of prominent politicians who came to power during the Nagorno-Karabakh³ conflict in the 1990s.⁴ According to the Polish think tank Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), the population views Sargsyan as the embodiment of a political system of oligarchs based on connections and widespread corruption.⁵ Under the RPA regime, several oligarchs – wealthy businessmen with close ties to the leadership – sat in parliament or held political office.⁶ This not only empowered them to pass or modify laws for the benefit of their own economic interests, but also shielded them from legal action, according to Carnegie Europe.⁷ EVN Report⁸, a local independent press outlet, speaks of a political-economic elite that controlled the economic and legal system for years, using exclusive business networks, tax evasion, money laundering strategies, bribery practices and misuse of public resources. A select group of oligarchs had a monopoly over certain industries or entire sectors of the Armenian economy, according to this source.⁹

Between 31 March 2018 and 13 April 2018, a peaceful protest march called My Step took place from the Armenian city of Gyumri to the capital city of Yerevan. It was led by Nikol Pashinyan, leader of the former opposition Civil Contract party. Members of opposition parties and of civil society participated in this protest march.¹⁰ They aimed to express their dissatisfaction with the socio-economic situation

¹ ZOIS (Shagoyan G.), 06/03/2019, [url](#); The Jamestown Foundation (Grigoryan A.), 23/04/2018, [url](#)

² The Jamestown Foundation (Grigoryan A.), 23/04/2018, [url](#); BBC (Demytrie R.), 01/05/2018, [url](#); ZOIS (Shagoyan G.), 06/03/2019, [url](#)

³ Nagorno-Karabakh (referred to as Karabagh in Azeri) was a de facto independent region for many years, officially belonging to Azerbaijan. However, following the first Karabkh war in the 1990s, it was effectively governed from its own capital, Stepanakert (Khankendi in Azeri), by ethnic Armenians residing there. Since the surrender of the de facto authorities on 20 September 2023, following an Azerbaijani offensive in the region the day before, Azerbaijani authorities have regained control of Nagorno-Karabakh. All but a dozen ethnic Armenians have left the region. Armenian sources regularly refer to the Republic of Artsakh in news reports about the region. For more information on this, see *COI Focus Armenia. Current situation in the context of the conflict with Azerbaijan and the surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh*, 05/12/2023, [url](#)

⁴ Politics Today (Kuznetsov O.), 02/03/2021, [url](#); OSW (Górecki W.), 10/09/2018, [url](#); Centre for Securities Studies (Petrosyan D.), 02/05/2011, [url](#)

⁵ OSW (Górecki W.), 10/09/2018, [url](#)

⁶ EVN Report (Kopalyan N.), 02/06/2020, [url](#); Freedom House, 31/01/2019, [url](#); OSW (Górecki W.), 10/09/2018, [url](#)

⁷ Carnegie Europe (Ishkhanyan A., Manusyan S.), 24/10/2019, [url](#)

⁸ EVN is the IATA airport code for Yerevan International Airport

⁹ EVN Report (Kopalyan N.), 02/06/2020, [url](#)

¹⁰ OC Media (Barseghyan A.), 13/06/2024, [url](#); BBC (Demytrie R.), 01/05/2018, [url](#); OSW (Górecki W.), 10/09/2018, [url](#)

in the country and protest a possible candidacy (and election) of Sargsyan for the post of Prime Minister.¹¹

Thousands of people joined peaceful protests across the country as from 13 April 2018.¹² When the parliamentary majority, including the ruling RPA and Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Dashnaktsutyun*, ARF), appointed Sargsyan as Prime Minister on 17 April 2018, Pashinyan announced the beginning of a peaceful Velvet Revolution. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets in the weeks that followed to protest Sargsyan's appointment.¹³ Unlike numerous protests in the past where police regularly cracked down on protesters, these were largely peaceful. Except for some violent police interventions, as well as the brief arrest of Pashinyan and several hundred other protesters, there were no significant incidents.¹⁴

On 23 April 2018, a day after Pashinyan's arrest and release, Sargsyan announced his resignation. Pashinyan offered himself as a candidate, but did not initially receive support from parliament, causing tens of thousands of people to revolt en masse in Yerevan and other major cities on 1 May 2018. In a second round of voting on 8 May 2018, Pashinyan received enough support to become the new Prime Minister.¹⁵ After his appointment, he replaced many people in prominent positions in central and local government administrations, as well as in law enforcement agencies and public broadcasting, with people loyal to him. Much of his Cabinet came from civil society and had little professional experience.¹⁶

The RPA still enjoyed ample dominance in parliament after Pashinyan's appointment and obstructed government initiatives to implement reforms. In response to this, Pashinyan resigned in October 2018 ahead of early parliamentary elections in December 2018. These elections were more free and fair than in previous years, according to local and international observers. The My Step Alliance, formed by a group of opposition parties led by Pashinyan, won 70% of the vote, accounting for 88 seats in parliament. The RPA did not meet the electoral threshold. Parties that ended up in opposition included Prosperous Armenia, led by business icon Gagik Tsarukyan (26 seats), and Bright Armenia, a small liberal party (18 seats). Following early municipal elections in September 2018, the RPA also lost its dominance in favour of My Step, including in Yerevan.¹⁷ In January 2019, Pashinyan officially took office as Prime Minister.¹⁸

The Pashinyan government promised to implement a series of reforms after the Velvet Revolution to address some long-standing problems, including systemic corruption. Other areas of focus included transparency in policy-making, electoral system reform and developing the rule of law.¹⁹

In 2019, minor reforms took place in a number of sectors, but they did not lead to large-scale institutional changes. The government's main effort at the outset was to address widespread corruption by investigating individual cases and establishing a body to prevent corruption. Mostly former authority figures, as well as some state representatives of the new government, were investigated for corruption.²⁰ Another focus was the launch of an investigation into those responsible

¹¹ The Jamestown Foundation (Grigoryan A.), 23/04/2018, [url](#); OSW (Górecki W.), 10/09/2018, [url](#); Centre for Securities Studies (Petrosyan D.), 02/05/2011, [url](#)

¹² OSW (Górecki W.), 10/09/2018, [url](#); RFE/RL, 17/04/2018, [url](#)

¹³ RFE/RL, 17/04/2018, [url](#); BBC (Demytrie R.), 01/05/2018, [url](#)

¹⁴ Freedom House, 31/01/2019, [url](#); HRW, 01/2019, [url](#)

¹⁵ OC Media, 02/05/2018, [url](#); OC Media, 08/05/2018, [url](#)

¹⁶ OSW (Górecki W.), 10/09/2018, [url](#)

¹⁷ Freedom House, 31/01/2019, [url](#); Freedom House, 03/04/2020, [url](#); Freedom House, 25/02/2021, [url](#)

¹⁸ Freedom House, 25/02/2021, [url](#)

¹⁹ Freedom House, 31/01/2019, [url](#); Freedom House, 03/04/2020, [url](#); Freedom House, 25/02/2021, [url](#); Freedom House, 17/02/2022, [url](#); European Parliament (Placzek J. & Jiráček M.), 04/2024, [url](#)

²⁰ Freedom House, 30/04/2020, [url](#); Bertelsmann Stiftung, 02/02/2022, pp. 4, 32, [url](#)

for police brutality during a demonstration against the election results on 1 March 2008, which resulted in ten fatalities.²¹

In 2020, the Pashinyan government faced several crises. When the COVID-19 pandemic reached Armenia, the government declared a state of emergency in March 2020, followed by a lockdown to stop the spread of the virus. Mass meetings were not allowed during this period. Most of the lockdown measures expired in May 2020, but the state of emergency remained in effect until September 2020.²² The next crisis was the 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh. On 27 September 2020, fighting broke out at the *line of contact*, the long-standing highly militarised border between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan. The Armenian government proclaimed martial law with immediate effect. This was the fiercest fighting since the four-day war in April 2016, with more than 7,000 casualties on both sides.²³ On the Armenian side, an estimated 3,800 soldiers died in the 44-day war.²⁴ On the night of 9-10 November 2020, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to a cease-fire, as mediated by Russia.²⁵ Areas taken by Azerbaijani forces during the 2020 war were to be handed over to Azerbaijan under the agreement, along with seven districts that officially belonged to Azerbaijan but had been under the control of the de-facto authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh since the 1990s. Russian peacekeeping forces were mandated to oversee the security situation in the region until 2025, but there was no decision on its status.²⁶

The signing of the agreement, including the lack of transparency or consultation prior to this decision, created a storm of criticism.²⁷ Led by the opposition, several protests took place to demand Pashinyan's resignation, despite the ban on demonstrations during the validity of martial law.²⁸ This ban was lifted in early December 2020, but the martial law remained in effect until 24 March 2021.²⁹ As long as the country was under martial law, it was indeed not possible to depose the Prime Minister.³⁰ Opposition parties behind these demonstrations had limited support, which according to Eurasianet can be explained by the fact that many of them had been discredited for being associated with the hated former regime.³¹ Pashinyan explained a few days after the agreement that the truce was necessary to avoid taking Stepanakert, the de-facto capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, and to avoid losing more troops.³² Protests continued until the end of 2020, but were unable to persuade Pashinyan to resign.³³

1.2. Political developments in 2021 – 2023 in the aftermath of the 2020 war

Protests against Pashinyan and his government, spearheaded by a group of 16 opposition parties, continued through the first half of 2021.³⁴ In February 2021, the army called for Pashinyan's

²¹ OSW (Górecki W.), 10/09/2018, [url](#); Bertelsmann Stiftung, 02/02/2022, p. 14, [url](#)

²² Freedom House, 25/02/2021, [url](#); Bertelsmann Stiftung, 02/02/2022, pp. 11, 20, [url](#)

²³ ICG, 16/09/2023, [url](#)

²⁴ RFE/RL, 24/08/2021, [url](#)

²⁵ ICG, 16/09/2023, [url](#)

²⁶ Freedom House, 28/04/2021, [url](#)

²⁷ Freedom House, 28/04/2021, [url](#); Eurasianet (Kucera J. & Mejlumyan A.), 10/11/2020, [url](#); RFE/RL, 10/11/2020, [url](#)

²⁸ Eurasianet (Kucera J.), 11/11/2020, [url](#); Caucasian Knot, 11/11/2020, [url](#)

²⁹ Azatutyun, 02/12/2020, [url](#); Azatutyun, 24/03/2021, [url](#)

³⁰ OC Media (Fabbro R.), 12/11/2020, [url](#)

³¹ Eurasianet (Kucera J.), 11/11/2020, [url](#)

³² Caucasian Knot, 12/11/2020, [url](#)

³³ Freedom House, 25/02/2021, [url](#)

³⁴ Freedom House, 20/04/2022, [url](#); Caucasian Knot, 11/01/2021, [url](#); RFE/RL, 28/01/2021, [url](#); RFE/RL, 20/02/2021, [url](#); RFE/RL, 22/02/2021, [url](#); RFE/RL, 23/02/2021, [url](#); RFE/RL, 26/02/2021, [url](#); RFE/RL,

resignation following the dismissal of a prominent commander. Initially, the Prime Minister refused to respond and accused the army of attempting a coup.³⁵ In April 2021, however, Pashinyan announced his resignation in response to the ongoing political crisis and increasing polarisation. As a result, early parliamentary elections took place on 20 June 2021.³⁶

Civil Contract obtained just under 54% of the vote and was able to form a parliamentary majority with 71 seats. The alliances Armenia (*Hayastan*), led by ex-President Robert Kocharyan (1998-2008), and I Have Honour (*Pativ Unem*), linked to ex-President Serzh Sargsyan (2008-2018), received 21% (29 seats) and over 5% (7 seats) of the vote respectively, ending up in opposition. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR) observer mission described these elections as competitive and well-organised, despite the inflammatory and polarising rhetoric between party leaders Pashinyan and Kocharyan during the election campaign.³⁷ Despite Pashinyan's waning popularity after the 44-day war, his party received more votes than predicted. This was due to the lack of an alternative, according to Eurasianet. His main opponent, former President Kocharyan, is still known to the population for his corrupt and authoritarian regime.³⁸ In the October-December 2021 local elections, which saw a meagre 33% turnout, Civil Contract suffered some major losses in several cities, including Goris and Gyumri.³⁹

The 10 November 2020 trilateral agreement continued to raise concerns in 2021, including about the return of war prisoners, the demarcation of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the possible construction of a link road between Azerbaijan and its exclave of Nakhichevan through the southern Armenian region of Syunik, the sudden proximity of Azerbaijani border posts in areas controlled for years by ethnic Armenian forces and the potential risks of the latter to national security.⁴⁰ Violations of the cease-fire agreement on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border in November 2021 prompted the opposition to boycott parliament and stage protests. In doing so, they were aiming to prevent any decisions on the demarcation of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁴¹

The tense political situation continued into 2022. The year began with the resignation of President Armen Sarkissian, an ex-diplomat appointed by parliament in March 2018. His motivation for resigning was related to the lack of influence of his symbolic role. Sarkissian expressed displeasure at not having decision-making authority and criticized Pashinyan, notably for not being involved in war negotiations.⁴² Internal tensions rose further when Pashinyan announced in late April 2022 that the Armenian government may be willing, under certain conditions, to make concessions on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. The statement was in response to a call by the international community to lower the bar on expectations as to the future status of the disputed region.⁴³ Opposition parties once again organised protests in response, again demanding the Prime Minister's resignation.⁴⁴ These actions were led by the alliances Armenia and I Have Honour under the name Resistance Movement, but they

27/02/2021, [url](#); RFE/RL, 01/03/2021, [url](#); RFE/RL, 03/03/2021, [url](#); RFE/RL, 06/03/2021, [url](#); RFE/RL, 13/03/2021, [url](#); RFE/RL, 18/03/2021, [url](#); Caucasian Knot, 21/04/2021, [url](#)

³⁵ Freedom House, 17/02/2022, [url](#); Eurasianet (Mejlumyan A.), 25/02/2021, [url](#)

³⁶ Freedom House, 20/04/2022, [url](#); RFE/RL, 25/04/2021, [url](#)

³⁷ Freedom House, 17/02/2022, [url](#)

³⁸ Eurasianet (Kucera J. & Mejlumyan A.), 21/06/2021, [url](#)

³⁹ Eurasianet (Mejlumyan A.), 18/10/2021, [url](#); Freedom House, 20/04/2022, [url](#)

⁴⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung, 02/02/2022, pp. 7-8, [url](#); Freedom House, 28/04/2021, [url](#); Bertelsmann Stiftung, 18/01/2024, p. 6, [url](#); Freedom House, 20/04/2022, [url](#)

⁴¹ RFE/RL, 16/11/2021, [url](#); Caucasian Knot, 20/11/2021, [url](#); Caucasian Knot, 26/11/2021, [url](#); Caucasian Knot, 28/11/2021, [url](#)

⁴² RFE/RL, 23/01/2022, [url](#)

⁴³ Bertelsmann Stiftung, 18/01/2024, p. 3, [url](#); OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 26/04/2022, [url](#)

⁴⁴ Caucasian Knot, 26/04/2022, [url](#)

did not present a concrete policy plan or solution to the problems.⁴⁵ On 1 May 2022, more than 10,000 opposition supporters took to the streets.⁴⁶ Anti-government demonstrations continued for weeks,⁴⁷ but did not increase in magnitude after 1 May 2022.⁴⁸ In the process, activists blocked streets and access to government buildings, which led to violent clashes between police and protesters and a series of arrests.⁴⁹ On 15 June 2022, the protests died down due to a lack of public support.⁵⁰

Most of the opposition MPs had been absent from parliamentary sessions since the protests began. When the protests ceased in mid-June 2022, several members of parliament gave up their mandates. Ishkhan Saghatelyan, ARF party leader and the main ringleader of the protest movement, was removed from his post as deputy parliament speaker in early July 2022 owing to prolonged absences.⁵¹ When two small opposition parties, Homeland (part of the alliance I Have Honour) and Reborn Armenia (part of the Armenia Alliance), left parliament in June and November 2022, respectively, the former ruling parties, ARF and RPA, were the only ones left in opposition.⁵²

Heavy fighting broke out on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border on 13-14 September 2022. It was the heaviest since the war in 2020. Azerbaijani forces attacked several Armenian border villages and shifted their positions into Armenian territory.⁵³ This event, along with increased tensions on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in November – December 2022, followed by a months-long blockade of the Lachin corridor⁵⁴ between December 2022 and September 2023, the eventual surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh after a brief Azerbaijani offensive on 19 September 2023, and the mass exodus from the region a few days later,⁵⁵ increased pressure on the Armenian leadership. Both the opposition and a significant portion of the population regularly criticised the government for its handling of the situation in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. Security issues exacerbated political polarisation in the Armenian parliament, causing the ruling party and the opposition to fail to enter a constructive dialogue, according to Freedom House. Nonetheless, this organisation considered the domestic political situation in 2023 to be more stable than in the previous two years, given that political activities mostly took place in parliament, in contrast to the many protests and boycotts of parliament in 2021-2022.⁵⁶

⁴⁵ Eurasianet (Mejlumyan A.), 02/05/2022, [url](#); Azatuyun (Khulyan A.), 13/05/2022, [url](#); Eurasianet (Mejlumyan A.), 16/06/2022, [url](#)

⁴⁶ RFE/RL, 01/05/2022, [url](#); CivilNet, 02/05/2022, [url](#)

⁴⁷ Eurasianet (Mejlumyan A.) , 02/05/2022, [url](#); RFE/RL, 03/05/2022, [url](#); RFE/RL, 04/05/2022, [url](#); RFE/RL, 05/05/2022, [url](#); RFE/RL (Wesolowsky T.), 06/05/2022, [url](#); OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 11/05/2022, [url](#); RFE/RL, 11/05/2022, [url](#); OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 03/06/2022, [url](#); RFE/RL (Saribekian G. & Musayelyan S.), 04/06/2022, [url](#); OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 10/06/2022, [url](#)

⁴⁸ Eurasianet (Mejlumyan A.), 02/05/2022, [url](#); RFE/RL, 03/05/2022, [url](#); Azatutyun (Saribekyan G.), 14/05/2022, [url](#); OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 15/06/2022, [url](#)

⁴⁹ RFE/RL (Saribekian G. & Musayelyan S.), 04/06/2022, [url](#); RFE/RL (Danielyan E.), 15/06/2022, [url](#)

⁵⁰ OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 15/06/2022, [url](#); OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 15/07/2022, [url](#); Eurasianet (Mejlumyan A.), 16/06/2022, [url](#)

⁵¹ OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 15/07/2022, [url](#)

⁵² OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 29/11/2022, [url](#)

⁵³ OC Media, 15/09/2022, [url](#); OC Media, 01/02/2023, [url](#)

⁵⁴ The Lachin corridor is the only connecting road between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh and passes through areas that have been recovered by Azerbaijan since the 2020 war. In accordance with the 10 November 2020 agreement, the road is under the control of Russian peacekeeping forces who oversee security on this route. During the blockade, the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh could not be resupplied for months, creating a humanitarian crisis. See *COI Focus Armenia. Current situation in the context of the conflict with Azerbaijan and the surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh*, 05/12/2023, [url](#)

⁵⁵ By the end of September 2023, more than 100,000 of the estimated 120,000 residents (ethnic Armenians) from Nagorno-Karabakh had fled to Armenia. See *COI Focus Armenia. Current situation in the context of the conflict with Azerbaijan and the surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh*, 05/12/2023, [url](#)

⁵⁶ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

Trust in Russia reached a critical point in 2023, according to several political scientists. Although the country had been the main actor in mediations between Armenia and Azerbaijan for years, Russia was failing to ensure stability and security in the region.⁵⁷ For example, there was no response or intervention from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a military alliance led by Russia to which Armenia belongs along with four other ex-Soviet countries, when Azerbaijan attacked several Armenian border villages on 13-14 September 2022.⁵⁸ The failure of Russian peacekeeping forces to respond when Azerbaijani troops blockaded the Lachin corridor for months and took control of it in April 2023, also caused increased dissatisfaction with Russia. From late 2022, anti-Russia demonstrations took place regularly.⁵⁹ In addition, there was a wave of immigration of Russians into Armenia following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Their presence had a positive impact on the Armenian economy, but at the same time it caused inflation which made life more expensive for Armenians.⁶⁰

The European Union (EU) and the United States acted as mediators between Armenia and Azerbaijan several times after the war in 2020, but the West expanded relations with Armenia mainly after Azerbaijan's offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023.⁶¹ This was reflected, among other things, in increased EU financial support for Armenia to implement reforms and address numerous challenges in the post-war context, such as the situation of refugees.⁶² In addition, a EU Monitoring Mission (European Mission in Armenia, EUMA) has also been operating in Armenia since October 2022. It monitors the situation on the border with Azerbaijan from Armenian territory.⁶³

Although security issues are the main focus for the government in the aftermath of the 2020 war, it remains committed to the democratisation process. The promised reforms were slow in 2021 – 2022, but were making some progress and being monitored by the Council of Europe, among others. These included efforts to amend electoral law, reform the police and the judicial system, and taking steps to combat corruption (see [3. Combating Corruption](#)).⁶⁴ The Freedom House report *Nations in Transit* on the year 2023 states that international bodies and partner countries are behind the reform agenda. The report mentions significant progress by 2023 as regards anti-corruption, reforms to fiscal policy, electoral law, education and local administrations. Shortcomings remain in terms of input to policy-making and policy implementation.⁶⁵

1.3. Position of Pashinyan after the surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023

The surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh on 20 September 2023, a day after Azerbaijan's offensive in the region, perpetuated discontent with Pashinyan.⁶⁶ His position had greatly weakened after the Velvet Revolution in 2018, due in part to successive crises, defeats and government missteps.⁶⁷ New protests following the surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh, driven by the opposition, gave way after a few days to

⁵⁷ Jam News (Martirosyan A.), 04/09/2023, [url](#)

⁵⁸ Bertelsmann Stiftung, 18/01/2024, pp. 18, 22, 31, [url](#); Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

⁵⁹ Bertelsmann Stiftung, 18/01/2024, p. 40, [url](#)

⁶⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung, 18/01/2024, pp. 18, 22, 31, [url](#)

⁶¹ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

⁶² European Parliament (Placzek J. & Jiráček M.), 04/2024, p. 5, [url](#)

⁶³ European Parliament Research Service, 02/06/2023, [url](#); Azatutyun, 20/11/2023, [url](#); RFE/RL (Buniatian H.), 13/11/2023, [url](#)

⁶⁴ Bertelsmann Stiftung, 18/01/2024, p. 4, [url](#); Freedom House, 20/04/2022, [url](#); Freedom House, 18/05/2023, [url](#); Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

⁶⁵ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

⁶⁶ RFE/RL (Kucera J.), 23/10/2023, [url](#)

⁶⁷ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (de Waal T.), 11/07/2024, [url](#); RFE/RL (Kucera J.), 23/10/2023, [url](#)

humanitarian actions to assist the more than 100,000 refugees. Still led by figures associated with the corrupt and authoritarian former regime, the opposition remained considerably less popular than Pashinyan, according to several experts cited by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). Moreover, the opposition did not present a concrete vision for paving a way out of the situation in which the country found itself.⁶⁸

An International Republican Institute (IRI) poll taken in late December 2023 showed that Pashinyan still enjoyed the most popular support, despite his waning popularity. At 15%, it was up 2% from the beginning of 2023,⁶⁹ but still considerably lower than shortly after the Velvet Revolution, when it reached over 80%.⁷⁰ In joint second place with 2% were Ararat Mirzoyan (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Civil Contract) and Aram Sargsyan (leader of the Republican Party, *Hanrapetutyun*).⁷¹ In early 2023, Kocharyan was in second place with 2%.⁷² By late 2023, he had dropped to 1%. Sixty percent reported having confidence in no one.⁷³

In 2024, the government continued peace process negotiations talks with Azerbaijan. The focus of the talks was on establishing the thousand-kilometre-long highly militarised border between the two countries.⁷⁴ A joint Armenian-Azerbaijani border commission, appointed after the war in 2020, reached a tentative agreement on 19 April 2024 to recognise Soviet-era administrative borders, never officially marked, as the international border between both countries. In so doing, Armenia agreed to return four Azerbaijani exclaves in the northern Armenian province of Tavush, located on the border with the Azerbaijani district of Gazakh. These four villages have been uninhabited since the 1990s, when the first war in Nagorno-Karabakh broke out and the population fled. Residents of nearby Armenian municipalities expressed concern about potential security risks if the exclaves fell under Azerbaijan's control.⁷⁵ Critics argued that Pashinyan was giving up territory without any guarantees from Azerbaijan. The opposition claimed that it may lead Azerbaijan to claim even more territory, by force or otherwise.⁷⁶ Pashinyan and his government representatives called these steps necessary to reach a lasting peace agreement and prevent any future military action.⁷⁷ Also, according to Pashinyan, from a legal standpoint, the border communities are better protected after demarcation than before.⁷⁸ The EU and the US also expressed their satisfaction with this agreement.⁷⁹

The announcement of the agreement on the four exclaves led to another wave of demonstrations. It was the archbishop of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the diocese of Tavush, Bagrat Galstanyan, who spearheaded this 'Tavush for the Motherland' protest movement.⁸⁰ Following persistent protests, Galstanyan started a march from Tavush on 4 May 2024. Upon arrival in Yerevan on 9 May 2024, the crowd numbered an estimated 20,000 people.⁸¹ Other sources spoke of 32,000 to 44,000 attendees. The parliamentary opposition was behind Galstanyan and appeared to be using the momentum for its own political objectives, according to analyst Benyamin Poghosyan. The opposition itself, owing to its reputation and a general lack of trust in politicians, was unable to mobilise many people, unlike a

⁶⁸ RFE/RL (Kucera J.), 23/10/2023, [url](#)

⁶⁹ IRI, 07/03/2024, [url](#); IRI, 01/05/2023, [url](#)

⁷⁰ RFE/RL (Kucera J.), 23/10/2023, [url](#)

⁷¹ IRI, 07/03/2024, [url](#)

⁷² IRI, 01/05/2023, [url](#)

⁷³ IRI, 07/03/2024, [url](#)

⁷⁴ Azatutyun (Galstian S.), 13/08/2024, [url](#); Euractiv, 13/06/2024, [url](#)

⁷⁵ CivilNet, 30/04/2024, [url](#)

⁷⁶ RFE/RL, 09/05/2024, [url](#); OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 13/05/2024, [url](#)

⁷⁷ RFE/RL, 09/05/2024, [url](#); Eurasianet, 10/05/2024, [url](#)

⁷⁸ Azatutyun (Galstian S.), 13/08/2024, [url](#)

⁷⁹ RFE/RL, 09/05/2024, [url](#)

⁸⁰ RFE/RL, 09/05/2024, [url](#); Eurasianet, 10/05/2024, [url](#)

⁸¹ Eurasianet, 10/05/2024, [url](#)

religious figure like Galstanyan, who was popular with the people.⁸² This, according to Poghosyan, may explain why for the first time after the Velvet Revolution, so many people, led by anger and despair, were taking to the streets to express their discontent.⁸³ Galstanyan denied any collaboration with political forces, although his past record did show that he had ties to the ARF.⁸⁴

Galstanyan and his supporters accused Pashinyan during protests of treason owing to the territorial concessions and demanded – unsuccessfully – his immediate resignation.⁸⁵ The archbishop offered himself as a candidate for the post of Prime Minister in May 2024, but was ineligible under the Constitution because of his dual citizenship.⁸⁶ After some violent clashes between police and protesters in mid-June 2024, the protest movement largely died down.⁸⁷ With the exception of the 9 May 2024 protest, Galstanyan failed to get a significant crowd on the streets to pose a real threat to Pashinyan.⁸⁸ Alexander Atasuntsev, an independent investigative journalist, wrote that there was a general consensus that Armenia's situation was not only Pashinyan's fault, but also that of his predecessors who, among other things, failed to modernise the army and regularly failed in negotiations with Azerbaijan. Many Armenians, according to Atasuntsev, knew that Pashinyan was continuing the demarcation process to avoid another military conflict, whereas a change of power might cause just that. Indeed, the former government had been known for their tougher approach and rhetoric towards Azerbaijan.⁸⁹

On 12 June 2024, when protests again took place in front of parliament, Pashinyan announced that a peace agreement with Azerbaijan was in sight.⁹⁰ As part of the negotiation process, and after prolonged insistence by Azerbaijan, Pashinyan ordered in late June 2024 that the Constitution be amended to remove all references to Nagorno-Karabakh, including a declaration on unification of the region with Armenia. A special council on constitutional amendments, already established in 2022, would have until the end of 2026 to draft a new one.⁹¹

The set deadline of 1 July 2024 to sign a final document to complete the demarcation process was not met.⁹² In June-August 2024, Azerbaijan accused Armenia several times of border provocations and cease-fire violations.⁹³ Armenia denied these allegations, calling them disinformation. At this point, Armenia proposed to establish a joint mechanism to investigate such allegations. EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, Toivo Klaar, supported this idea. Azerbaijan did not respond to this proposal.⁹⁴ In early August 2024, it became known that Azerbaijan was willing to remove a clause from the peace agreement on what is known as the Zangezur Corridor, a potential transport route to Nakhichevan through southern Armenia. If that were to happen, a major stumbling block for Armenia on signing an agreement would be removed.⁹⁵ Experts expected the issue to return to the

⁸² Common Space (Poghosyan B.), 26/05/2024, [url](#)

⁸³ Common Space (Poghosyan B.), 26/05/2024, [url](#); Byline Times (Neal W.), 15/07/2024, [url](#)

⁸⁴ The Jamestown Foundation (Krikorian O.J.), 05/06/2024, [url](#)

⁸⁵ Eurasianet, 10/05/2024, [url](#)

⁸⁶ OC Media, 13/05/2024, [url](#)

⁸⁷ Euractiv (Pambukhchyan A.), 23/07/2024, [url](#); RFE/RL, 17/06/2024, [url](#); RFE/RL, 13/06/2024, [url](#); OC Media (Barseghyan A.), 13/06/2024, [url](#)

⁸⁸ The Jamestown Foundation (Krikorian O.J.), 05/06/2024, [url](#)

⁸⁹ Common Space (Poghosyan B.), 26/05/2024, [url](#)

⁹⁰ Eurasianet (Avetisyan A.), 12/06/2024, [url](#)

⁹¹ RFE/RL, 20/06/2024, [url](#); Azatutyun (Saribekyan G.), 19/06/2024, [url](#); Armenian Weekly (Minoyan H.), 14/08/2024, [url](#)

⁹² RFE/RL, 01/07/2024, [url](#); Azatutyun (Galstian S.), 13/08/2024, [url](#)

⁹³ OC Media (Barseghyan A. & Farhadova A.), 16/08/2024, [url](#); OC Media (Barseghyan A. & Farhadova A.), 14/06/2024, [url](#); OC Media (Barseghyan A.), 24/06/2024, [url](#); Politico (Gavin G.), 30/07/2024, [url](#)

⁹⁴ OC Media (Barseghyan A. & Farhadova A.), 16/08/2024, [url](#)

⁹⁵ OC Media (Barseghyan A. & Farhadova A.), 07/08/2024, [url](#); Jam News, 16/08/024, [url](#); Armenian Weekly (Minoyan H.), 14/08/2024, [url](#)

agenda in the future, as a connection to Nakhichevan remained important for Azerbaijan.⁹⁶ In mid-August 2024, shortly after new allegations of shelling on the border, the Armenian government announced that negotiations with Azerbaijan on the demarcation process were continuing constructively. The goal, after completing the demarcation of the Tavush-Gazakh border in May 2024, was to mark the remaining border as well. The government hoped to continue the demarcation process in the near future, including in border areas occupied by Azerbaijan after several incursions in 2021-2022.⁹⁷ In early July 2024, Azerbaijani troops withdrew from the vicinity of the Berkaber border village in Tavush after more than 30 years, following the completed demarcation in the region in May 2024.⁹⁸

In July 2024, Pashinyan enjoyed more popular confidence than in May 2024, according to a poll by the International GALLUP Association. It showed that 13.4% of those surveyed were 'totally positive' about his work (up 4% from May 2024) and 21.7% were 'rather positive' (up 3% from May 2024), which was still significantly lower than shortly after he took power in 2018. The same polls showed that Galstanyan enjoyed significantly less support in July 2024 than in May 2024.⁹⁹

The government repeatedly hinted at interest in joining the EU in 2024. Leading opposition figures argued that Pashinyan was trying to gain popular support for the reconciliation process with Azerbaijan with this talking point. Russia, Armenia's main trading partner and natural gas supplier, also opposed it.¹⁰⁰ As Armenia continued to strengthen ties with the EU, it was increasingly distancing itself from Russia, mainly on defence.¹⁰¹ For example, Russian border guards, by order of the Armenian government, were to leave Zvartnots International Airport in Yerevan on 1 August 2024. They had been stationed there since Armenia's independence in the early 1990s to assist with border controls.¹⁰² In addition, Armenia's membership in the CSTO has been frozen since late 2023 in response to the failure of the military alliance to intervene during the conflict with Azerbaijan.¹⁰³ The Russian military base in Gyumri remains operative at the time of writing.¹⁰⁴ Economic partnerships with Russia continue in 2024¹⁰⁵, the Armenian economy being heavily dependent upon Russia.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁶ Armenian Weekly (Minoyan H.), 14/08/2024, [url](#); Jam News, 16/08/024, [url](#)

⁹⁷ Azatutyun (Galstian S.), 13/08/2024, [url](#)

⁹⁸ RFE/RL (Badalian S.), 07/08/2024, [url](#)

⁹⁹ 168.am., 17/07/2024, [url](#); Media Initiatives Center, 20/05/2024, [url](#); Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Atasuntsev A.), 03/06/2024, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰ Azatutyun (Kaghzvantsyan S.), 19/08/2024, [url](#)

¹⁰¹ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Zolyan M.), 27/11/2023, [url](#); Common Space (Poghosyan B.), 26/05/2024, [url](#); Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (de Waal T.), 11/07/2024, [url](#)

¹⁰² OC Media (Bardouka Y.), 01/08/2024, [url](#)

¹⁰³ OC Media (Barseghyan A.), 11/06/2024, [url](#); OC Media (Barseghyan A.), 12/06/2024, [url](#)

¹⁰⁴ Eurasianet (Avetisyan A.), 08/08/2024, [url](#)

¹⁰⁵ Common Space (Poghosyan B.), 26/05/2024, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶ OC Media (Bardouka Y.), 01/08/2024, [url](#); Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (de Waal T.), 11/07/2024, [url](#)

2. Political climate and political freedoms

2.1. Political party landscape

Political parties and opposition groups can operate far more freely than before 2018, according to the Freedom House report *Freedom in the World 2024*.¹⁰⁷ In June 2021, one hundred parties were registered with the Ministry of Justice, a limited number of which are active. According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung, this reflects the weak and fragmented party culture. Although all the parties and alliances express a desire to strengthen democratic institutions, political actors are more concerned with their own interests. Political affiliations are rarely based on common political goals and beliefs, according to the foundation.¹⁰⁸ Political parties revolve primarily around a person and not a party programme or ideology.¹⁰⁹ During Cedoca's March 2024 fact-finding mission to Armenia a political analyst explained that only five to seven political parties are active, but that they contribute to create polarisation.¹¹⁰

The legacy of the Soviet past hampers the development of a democratic pluralist party landscape, according to the Bertelsmann Stiftung. There is also a shift from democratic rhetoric and practices to an authoritarian political system. Power is mainly concentrated in Pashinyan and his entourage, and the parliament does not have sufficient space to function fully independently. According to this source, parliament's powers of control over the government are rather limited. On politically sensitive issues, there is no room in parliament for debate or the drafting of legislation without prior approval from the Prime Minister.¹¹¹ Caucasus expert Tomas de Waal wrote in July 2024 that Armenia had returned to pre-revolutionary political dynamics. He referred to the words of political scientist Alexander Iskandaryan, who spoke of a weak government and weak opposition, to describe these dynamics. De Waal added that in the current context, it is unlikely that any other political party will be able to defeat Civil Contract in elections.¹¹²

The independent press outlet Euractiv wrote in July 2024 that political opponents were portraying one another as a threat to national security. This has a negative impact on the democratisation process, according to several local and international sources quoted in the article. Other sources felt that political polarisation was necessary to bring up issues that had been taboo for years.¹¹³ A representative from the Democracy Development Foundation (DDF), a leading local NGO, also mentioned that political developments were taking place in a polarised environment as a result of existential threats and a general sense of fear in society. In this context, different political camps were calling one another traitors or thieves, making constructive dialogue difficult, even on the most fundamental issues.¹¹⁴

Despite promises by Pashinyan to end business interference in the policy-making process, there are several indications of political influence. For example, two influential businessmen entered the Civil Contract party list in parliament. The opposition also has a number of MPs with close ties to leading businessmen.¹¹⁵ The lack of transparency and accountability on funding for the ruling party further

¹⁰⁷ Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#)

¹⁰⁸ Bertelsmann Stiftung, 18/01/2024, p. 15, [url](#)

¹⁰⁹ Bertelsmann Stiftung, 02/02/2022, p. 17, [url](#); Political analyst, interview, Yerevan, 19/03/2024

¹¹⁰ Political analyst, interview, Yerevan, 19/03/2024

¹¹¹ Bertelsmann Stiftung, 18/01/2024, pp. 9, 15, [url](#)

¹¹² Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (de Waal T.), 11/07/2024, [url](#)

¹¹³ Euractiv (Pambukhchyan A.), 23/07/2024, [url](#)

¹¹⁴ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

¹¹⁵ Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#); CivilNet, 14/12/2021, [url](#)

contributes to concerns about a return to political influence from business.¹¹⁶ For example, two independent investigations pointed to irregularities in Civil Contract party funding and the lack of transparency about it.¹¹⁷ Most worryingly according Freedom House, the ruling party has done nothing wrong in the view of law enforcement agencies.¹¹⁸

2.2. Electoral climate

Elections are considerably more competitive than before the Velvet Revolution, according to Freedom House. The last parliamentary elections in June 2021 saw the participation of 22 parties and four alliances, an unprecedented number in Armenia.¹¹⁹ Since April 2021, there have been stiffer penalties for vote buying, electoral violence, disrupting the electoral process and obstruction of the election campaign. Such practices are now less common, according to Freedom House. In 2021, international observers reported some isolated cases of vote buying and abuse of administrative resources. During the September 2023 municipal elections, there was no overt vote buying, but there were some situations where voters were offered goods or services from political parties.¹²⁰ During those elections, the ruling party was also guilty of misusing administrative resources on an unprecedented scale since the revolution.¹²¹

Yerevan's municipal elections in September 2023 could be viewed as a vote of confidence in the government, according to the Freedom House report *Nations in Transit 2024*. The Civil Contract party obtained the most votes, but not enough to form a majority and elect a mayor.¹²² In several smaller municipalities, Civil Contract maintained its dominant position. Freedom House pointed to some situations where questionable practices had been used to fire a number of mayors from opposition parties. According to Freedom House, the current opposition remained unpopular and unable to meaningfully challenge the government. There are no alternative options that can count on popular support.¹²³

2.3. Political participation and freedom of expression

According to Freedom House, opinion polls show that most of the population is apathetic and feels powerless as regards politics, which is reflected in low turnout during local elections.¹²⁴ Sources close to the EU also pointed out that the turnout of just 28% in the local elections in September 2023 showed the people's disenchantment with politicians.¹²⁵ A journalist from a local independent news agency said that the population is mainly interested in how the government will prevent another escalation of the conflict with Azerbaijan.¹²⁶

Political polarisation manifests itself primarily between close supporters of the government on the one hand and opposition allies and parties of the pre-revolutionary political elite on the other.¹²⁷ Unlike

¹¹⁶ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

¹¹⁷ OC Media (Barseghyan A.), 08/03/2024, [url](#); CivilNet, 07/03/2024, [url](#); CivilNet (Karapetyan M. & Grigoryan A.), 11/03/2024, [url](#); Azatutyun (Saribekian G.), 10/06/2024, [url](#); Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

¹¹⁸ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

¹¹⁹ Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#)

¹²⁰ Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#)

¹²¹ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

¹²² Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

¹²³ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

¹²⁴ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

¹²⁵ Sources close to the EU, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024

¹²⁶ Journalist from an independent local news agency, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

¹²⁷ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

under the previous regime, it is now possible to talk openly about sensitive issues. The head of the leading local NGO Union of Informed Citizens (UIC), Ashkhen Musheghyan, explained to Euractiv in July 2024 that even apolitical citizens cannot escape polarisation. She states that everyone is expected to openly evaluate the government and the opposition and malign either side. Moreover, according to Musheghyan, most public information platforms and channels are filled with populist, polarising and often aggressive narratives, supplemented by misinformation and manipulations. This keeps reasonable proposals or discussions from reaching the public and decision-makers.¹²⁸

It is also not easy for civil society organisations to function in this polarised environment, engage in dialogue with the government or collaborate with it (in the context of reforms). Indeed, according to Musheghyan, they are often targeted and criticised by the opposition and their supporters.¹²⁹ The Bertelsmann Stiftung also notes that civil society is very active and is playing an important role after the revolution, but that the tense post-war situation in Nagorno-Karabakh puts pressure on their relations with the authorities.¹³⁰ According to Freedom House, civil society organisations are generally free to express their views on major policy issues and political development.¹³¹

Freedom House reports that in general, individuals can freely and openly express personal opinions on political or sensitive issues.¹³² According to the United States Department of State (USDOS), it is usually not a problem to criticise the government without fear of retribution. However, there are a few exceptions. For example, investigative journalists reporting on high-level corruption by government officials are under pressure (see [2.4. Freedom of the Press](#)).¹³³

During Cedoca's March 2024 fact-finding mission to Armenia, several sources indicated that there were few or no restrictions on openly sharing political opinions.¹³⁴ UIC explained that citizens are free to express their opinions.¹³⁵ This source, like DDF, said it is quite normal to criticise the ruling party.¹³⁶ The same goes for criticism of the opposition.¹³⁷ Alongside citizens, opposition politicians are also free to criticise the government, according to a political analyst. The opposition does this, mostly unhindered, through its own media channels.¹³⁸ Asked about any risks related to expressing a political affiliation or membership of a political party, for example when applying for jobs, several sources responded that there were no risks.¹³⁹ DDF was not aware of any situations where people experienced problems at work because of their political affiliation, but could not rule out that it might happen at the individual level. In this regard, the NGO noted that many people opposed to the government work for the current government.¹⁴⁰ Transparency International Anticorruption Centre (TIAC), the local branch of TI, said there is no risk to ordinary citizens in expressing political preferences. Someone in public office who is expected to be neutral but who does not conform to this, may face consequences, said the NGO. According to TIAC, it is unlikely that a person who performs well in the workplace would

¹²⁸ Euractiv (Pambukhchyan A.), 23/07/2024, [url](#)

¹²⁹ Euractiv (Pambukhchyan A.), 23/07/2024, [url](#)

¹³⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung, 18/01/2024, pp. 16, 29-30, [url](#)

¹³¹ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

¹³² Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#)

¹³³ USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 24, [url](#)

¹³⁴ Political analyst, interview, Yerevan, 19/03/2024; DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; Sources close to the EU, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024; Journalist from an independent local news agency, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024; TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

¹³⁵ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

¹³⁶ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

¹³⁷ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

¹³⁸ Political analyst, interview, Yerevan, 19/03/2024

¹³⁹ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

¹⁴⁰ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

be targeted, or intentionally falsely charged, as happened under the previous government. Based on a number of situations known to the NGO, opposition supporters working in government agencies do not experience any problems as long as they do not share their political opinions on social media. However, according to TIAC, many employees of government agencies, both senior and middle management, have been replaced by people loyal to the ruling party.¹⁴¹ According to another local human rights organisation, it is difficult for people who are not loyal to the government to secure or keep a government job. The real reason for not hiring or firing someone with close ties to Sargsyan or the RPA is unlikely to be communicated, according to this source. Nevertheless, there are also some who were loyal to Sargsyan who now support Pashinyan and work for the government.¹⁴²

Several sources mentioned a temporary legal initiative to criminalise insults, which was viewed as curtailing free speech.¹⁴³ Between July 2021 and the end of June 2022, it was punishable to seriously offend people in public office. When this amendment to the Penal Code was introduced, international human rights organisations, the Armenian Ombudsman and local news agencies expressed concern about its potential impact on free speech and freedom of the press.¹⁴⁴ This was because government officials, politicians and other public figures tended to consider objective criticism as slander and to take journalists to court for it.¹⁴⁵ The motivation for passing this change in the law was that, in the aftermath of the war, social media networks were inundated with insults and rhetoric that could lead to serious crimes.¹⁴⁶ A representative from an established organisation with human rights expertise in Armenia pointed out that such an initiative was temporarily necessary in the context at the time, where an atmosphere of intolerance based on opposing views resulted in a number of serious crimes.¹⁴⁷ Under the new Penal Code, in effect since 1 July 2022, serious insults are no longer punishable. As a result, all cases under the old law, 802 in all, were dismissed.¹⁴⁸ Insults can still be challenged in a civil court, but the NGO Helsinki Committee of Armenia (HCA) points to the risk that insults directed at government representatives could be unfairly prosecuted under the Penal Code through the article on online hooliganism. Such interpretation of this law article, according to this source, has a chilling effect on others in a similar situation.¹⁴⁹

On 22 March 2024, two vloggers were arrested and charged with online hooliganism in connection with swearing at government representatives in their podcast. This was a cause for concern about the right to freedom of expression, according to several sources.¹⁵⁰ In addition to a period of nearly two months in pre-trial detention, they were banned from hosting their podcast or other programmes for three months.¹⁵¹ In their situation, according to multiple sources, this is a case of political persecution.¹⁵² A representative from HRH Yerevan explained that many individuals used offensive language, but they were the only ones charged, so the case could be considered political persecution. The way the article on online hooliganism was interpreted in this case was disturbing, according to this source. Treating insults expressed online as online hooliganism, which is categorised as a serious crime in the new Penal Code, makes hate speech punishable again. According to HRH Yerevan, there

¹⁴¹ TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

¹⁴² Local human rights organisation, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

¹⁴³ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024; HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

¹⁴⁴ Jam News, 14/06/2022, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵ Freedom House, 20/04/2022, [url](#)

¹⁴⁶ EVN Report (Mamulyan A.), 15/08/2022, [url](#)

¹⁴⁷ Established organisation with human rights expertise in Armenia, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024

¹⁴⁸ EVN Report (Mamulyan A.), 15/08/2022, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹ HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

¹⁵⁰ HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024; DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

¹⁵¹ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

¹⁵² HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024; HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

is a general culture of hate speech and even the ruling party is regularly guilty of using hateful language.¹⁵³

Openly calling for violence or justifying violence through hate speech (under Article 226.2 of the Penal Code) also remains punishable and is used against government critics, according to Freedom House. Since this article's introduction in 2020, 38 cases have appeared in court, 36 of which involve alleged calls for violence against the Prime Minister or his supporters. The other two cases involve calls for violence against the opposition. According to Freedom House, the number of cases under this section of the law doubled in 2023 compared to 2022. The defendants are mainly opposition politicians and active social media users. In most situations, a post on social media is the trigger for legal action. Those involved speak of a selective application of the law. They claim that when members of the ruling party openly call for or threaten violence, law enforcement agencies ignore it.¹⁵⁴ HCA also points to the selective use and misinterpretation of hate speech legislation and the risk of disproportionate sanctions. According to this source, 95% of all pending cases are related to hate speech against the Prime Minister and his entourage. It is therefore important to study each individual case thoroughly to determine whether political persecution is involved.¹⁵⁵

On 24 April 2024, seven supporters of the opposition Armenian National Alliance group were detained during a memorial ceremony in Tsitsernakaberd. They were arrested for shouting at Anna Hakobyan, Pashinyan's wife, calling the Prime Minister a traitor and murderer. They were all released in the following days. One of them was charged under Article 329 §1.2 of the Penal Code for spreading public messages inciting hatred, intolerance and hostility.¹⁵⁶

2.4. Freedom of the Press

Since the revolution, there has been a greater variety of press agencies. Investigative journalism in particular is on the rise, as is the number of independent online media channels.¹⁵⁷ Most channels and the written press belong to individuals or groups linked to the former authorities or parliamentary opposition and tend to reflect the political and commercial interests of their owners in their reporting.¹⁵⁸ The pluralistic media landscape remains highly polarised in the aftermath of the war and the subsequent political tensions.¹⁵⁹

In the early years after the revolution, the Pashinyan government was more concerned than its predecessors with informing the population. Through press releases and social media, the Prime Minister regularly addressed the public. The government was however criticised for withholding information on casualties during the Nagorno-Karabakh war and for the lack of a public debate on signing the cease-fire agreement in November 2020.¹⁶⁰ In 2021, the Prime Minister stopped speaking to journalists during press conferences for a while. His communication was primarily online, much to the dismay of local news agencies. By 2023, the trend had reversed and Pashinyan was once again attending press conferences and engaging in dialogue with the people.¹⁶¹

When asked whether journalists could work in a free environment, a journalist from an independent local news agency told Cedoca that journalists can generally write and talk about anything without

¹⁵³ HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

¹⁵⁴ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#); Hetq (Hakobyan L.), 26/01/2024, [url](#)

¹⁵⁵ HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

¹⁵⁶ Azatutyun (Bulghadarian N.), 29/04/2024, [url](#); ArmInfo (Mkrtchyan M.), 25/04/2024, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷ Bertelsmann Stiftung, 18/01/2024, p. 10, [url](#); Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

¹⁵⁸ USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 26, [url](#)

¹⁵⁹ Bertelsmann Stiftung, 18/01/2024, p. 10, [url](#)

¹⁶⁰ Freedom House, 25/02/2021, [url](#)

¹⁶¹ Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#)

problems. The news agency for which this journalist works criticises the government in the event of undemocratic events and can do so undisturbed, he says. In terms of corruption cases, there are no obstacles to investigating and writing about them either. However, the relevant authorities take no steps to open a criminal investigation when investigative journalists publish a piece about corrupt practices by the ruling party. The journalist referred to the example of a publication about party donations to the ruling party in the run-up to the 2023 municipal elections. After a response from the Prime Minister that the allegations were unfounded, the Prosecutor General announced that no criminal investigation would be opened. According to this source, it shows that Pashinyan can influence the Prosecutor General.¹⁶²

According to the NGO Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (CPFE), violence against journalists declined after the revolution, but does still occur.¹⁶³ There were six reported cases in 2023.¹⁶⁴ In addition, numerous lawsuits were opened against journalists and news agencies, mainly for defamation or insults under Article 1087.1 of the Civil Code.¹⁶⁵ In 2022, the number of lawsuits halved compared to 2021,¹⁶⁶ with 32 in total.¹⁶⁷ In 2023, there was a rise, with 36 new lawsuits.¹⁶⁸ This increase continued through 2024, according to the CPFE.¹⁶⁹ One explanation for this, according to the Armenian Media Initiatives Centre, is increased polarisation.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶² Journalist from an independent local news agency, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

¹⁶³ Freedom House, 25/02/2021, [url](#); Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#)

¹⁶⁴ CPFE, 23/01/2024, p. 14, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵ Media Initiatives Centre (Danielyan M.), 23/06/2023, [url](#); CPFE, 23/01/2024, [url](#); CPFE, 23/04/2024, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶ Freedom House, 18/05/2023, [url](#)

¹⁶⁷ CPFE, 23/01/2024, p. 14, [url](#)

¹⁶⁸ CPFE, 23/01/2024, [url](#); Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

¹⁶⁹ CPFE, 23/04/2024, [url](#)

¹⁷⁰ Media Initiatives Centre (Danielyan M.), 23/06/2023, [url](#)

3. Combating Corruption

One of the main promises after the Velvet Revolution in 2018 was the battle against corruption.¹⁷¹ Under the previous regime, corruption was structurally present in several areas, including in government departments, parliament, the judiciary and law enforcement. There is evidence that before the revolution government representatives used personal connections for business contracts and embezzlement of public funds, according to the USDOS.¹⁷²

The government's aim with its anti-corruption strategy is to achieve a score of 55 out of 100 in Transparency International's (TI) Corruption Perception Index (CPI), 20 points higher than before the revolution. In 2021, the score was 49 points. In 2023, the score increased by one point compared to 2022, from 46 to 47. The latest score shows little progress in the battle against corruption, according to TI's local division. This is mainly due to limited implementation of anti-corruption measures.¹⁷³ In October 2023, the government approved a new anti-corruption strategy for the period 2023-2026.¹⁷⁴ The focus lies on prevention, anti-corruption, awareness-raising, business relations and improving the monitoring and evaluation system.¹⁷⁵

In 2019-2022, several anti-corruption agencies came into force.¹⁷⁶ The Commission on the Prevention of Corruption (CPC), established in November 2019, has an advisory role and is empowered, among other things, to conduct integrity investigations of people holding public office, including prospective judges (for the Constitutional Court), prosecutors and investigators.¹⁷⁷ This body also analyses tax returns from judges, on the basis of which law enforcement agencies can take legal action.¹⁷⁸ However, the CPC's advice has not always been heeded.¹⁷⁹ The Anti-Corruption Committee (ACC) has taken over the duties of the Special Investigation Service (SIS) since October 2021. The ACC is the lead agency in terms of investigating and prosecuting corruption.¹⁸⁰ With the opening of an anti-corruption court in November 2022, there was renewed progress in the battle against corruption.¹⁸¹ In addition, in 2022 and 2023, appellate bodies specialising in corruption also came into force.¹⁸² Civil society representatives were involved in the integrity check for candidate judges for the anti-corruption court and provided some advice on reforms.¹⁸³

After the change of power, the authorities opened numerous investigations into large-scale corruption by senior former government officials and their relatives, members of parliament, former presidents, some members of the judiciary and their relatives.¹⁸⁴ Corruption investigations were also opened into

¹⁷¹ Eurasianet (Mgdesyan A.), 30/03/2023, [url](#)

¹⁷² USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 36, [url](#)

¹⁷³ Azatutyun (Sahakian N.), 30/01/2024, [url](#); Massis Post, 30/01/2024, [url](#)

¹⁷⁴ Council of Europe - GRECO, 18/04/2024, p. 8, [url](#)

¹⁷⁵ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶ Freedom House, 20/04/2022, [url](#); USDOS, 20/03/2023, p. 36, [url](#); USDOS, 10/07/2024, [url](#)

¹⁷⁷ USDOS, 30/03/2021, pp. 37-39, [url](#); USDOS, 20/03/2023, p. 36, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸ USDOS, 12/04/2022, p. 44, [url](#)

¹⁷⁹ USDOS, 20/03/2023, p. 36, [url](#); USDOS, 23/04/2024, pp. 17, 38, [url](#); TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; Local human rights organisation, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

¹⁸⁰ Freedom House, 20/04/2022, [url](#); Freedom House, 18/05/2023, [url](#); USDOS, 12/04/2022, pp. 1, 44, [url](#)

¹⁸¹ Council of Europe - GRECO, 18/04/2024, p. 7, [url](#); EVN Report (Mamulyan A.), 17/11/2022, [url](#); Freedom House, 18/05/2023, [url](#)

¹⁸² Council of Europe - GRECO, 18/04/2024, p. 7, [url](#)

¹⁸³ Freedom House, 20/04/2022, [url](#); Freedom House, 18/05/2023, [url](#)

¹⁸⁴ USDOS, 30/03/2021, pp. 37-39, [url](#); USDOS, 12/04/2022, p. 44, [url](#); USDOS, 20/03/2023, p. 36, [url](#); USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 37, [url](#); Bertelsmann Stiftung, 02/02/2022, p. 14, [url](#)

several current authority figures and members of the judiciary.¹⁸⁵ The number of investigations into senior figures in the current government and their supporters is small, according to Freedom House.¹⁸⁶ The individuals involved are suspected of illegal enrichment, bribery, misappropriation or abuse of power, as determined from tax returns. The cases involve several thousand to several million Armenian Dram (AMD).¹⁸⁷

Since 2020, a law has been in force on unexplained wealth acquired since 1991. On this basis, a specialist prosecutor's department can seize property worth more than AMD 50 million, equivalent to 115,500 euros, if it is proven to have been acquired through corruption and if the court agrees.¹⁸⁸ In 2022, this department seized tens of millions of dollars-worth of illegally acquired property.¹⁸⁹ The first prosecution under this law was initiated in September 2021, but by March 2023, only one case had been resolved out of a total of 34 lawsuits.¹⁹⁰ Hundreds of other cases were subject to legal proceedings.¹⁹¹ Several former government officials said they were willing to return assets to the state in 2020 to avoid criminal charges. The extent to which and how this would take place is unclear, according to the USDOS.¹⁹² The Bertelsmann Stiftung also stated that, although most of these former officials claim the cases are politically motivated, some voluntarily declared illegally acquired assets.¹⁹³

Progress in the investigations of high-profile corruption cases has been slow and was hampered by the war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020.¹⁹⁴ When corruption trials against high-ranking members of the previous regime resumed in 2021-2022 during a period of political unrest, doubts arose about the motives for holding these trials at that time. Yet for many, according to Eurasianet, it was an important step towards restoring justice after a decade of looting.¹⁹⁵ Most of the cases against the former political elite are still awaiting a verdict.¹⁹⁶ According to the USDOS' 2022 Human Rights Report, there have not yet been any convictions in high-level corruption cases.¹⁹⁷ The USDOS stated that a number of corruption cases with high societal impact had been referred to court during the year 2023. Other cases were at the preliminary investigation stage.¹⁹⁸ According to an evaluation report by the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), there had not yet been any convictions in leading corruption cases in 2023.¹⁹⁹

By the end of 2023, two high-level corruption cases against ex-presidents Kocharyan and Sargsyan, begun in 2019, ended without acquittal or conviction. In Kocharyan's case, the court followed his request to invoke the statute of limitations, which expired in May 2023.²⁰⁰ As for Sargsyan, the prosecution withdrew the charges because of a lack of evidence.²⁰¹ In late May 2024, Sargsyan was

¹⁸⁵ USDOS, 30/03/2021, pp. 37-39, [url](#); USDOS, 12/04/2022, p. 44, [url](#); USDOS, 20/03/2023, pp. 36-37, [url](#); USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 37, [url](#); Bertelsmann Stiftung, 02/02/2022, p. 14, [url](#); Bertelsmann Stiftung, 18/01/2024, p. 12, [url](#); OC Media (Barseghyan A.), 31/01/2024, [url](#); Eurasianet (Avetisyan A.), 19/02/2024, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶ Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#)

¹⁸⁷ USDOS, 30/03/2021, pp. 37-39, [url](#); USDOS, 12/04/2022, p. 44, [url](#); USDOS, 20/03/2023, p. 36, [url](#)

¹⁸⁸ Eurasianet (Mgdesyan A.), 03/08/2022, [url](#)

¹⁸⁹ USDOS, 20/03/2023, p. 36, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰ Eurasianet (Mgdesyan A.), 30/03/2023, [url](#)

¹⁹¹ USDOS, 20/03/2023, p. 36, [url](#); USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 38, [url](#)

¹⁹² USDOS, 30/03/2021, pp. 37-39, [url](#)

¹⁹³ Bertelsmann Stiftung, 02/02/2022, p. 14, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴ Freedom House, 09/03/2023, [url](#); Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵ Eurasianet (Mgdesyan A.), 03/08/2022, [url](#)

¹⁹⁶ Bertelsmann Stiftung, 02/02/2022, p. 14, [url](#); Freedom House, 17/02/2022, [url](#); Freedom House, 20/04/2022, [url](#)

¹⁹⁷ USDOS, 20/03/2023, p. 36, [url](#)

¹⁹⁸ USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 37, [url](#)

¹⁹⁹ Council of Europe - GRECO, 18/04/2024, pp. 4, 8, 43, [url](#)

²⁰⁰ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#); Azatutyun (Galstian S.), 16/07/2024, [url](#)

²⁰¹ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

acquitted after more than four years in another corruption trial relating to embezzlement of state funds.²⁰² During the early years of Kocharyan's trial, several sources argued that the court was under the influence of authority figures from the previous regime. This was partly because the Constitutional Court dropped charges against the former President (for his role in the fatal police crackdown on demonstrators on 1 March 2008) in March 2021.²⁰³ The USDOS also wrote about the 2021 court rulings in favour of the previous regime.²⁰⁴ Over the years 2022-2023, the USDOS noted that the judiciary still could not be considered independent or impartial. This, according to the report, was the result of years of practices of political influence and corruption, as well as the failure of efforts to reform the judicial system, such as by vetting or screening judges. In 2023-2024, concerns shifted to possible attempts by the current administration to influence judges. For example, according to human rights lawyers, certain judges are under pressure from their superiors, including the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), to give a particular verdict.²⁰⁵ The SJC is an oversight body run by figures loyal to the current government.²⁰⁶ Bribery of judges was no longer a widespread problem during this period, but some lawyers solicited bribes from their clients, supposedly to bribe a judge, according to the USDOS.²⁰⁷

In response to the slow progress of corruption trials and the outcome of the Kocharyan trial, the SJC published a video in early 2024. In it, the SJC accused the judges involved of a lack of efficiency in handling these cases. Following this publication the Armenian Union of Judges accused the SJC of interfering in the work of judges.²⁰⁸ In July 2024, the SJC dismissed the Kocharyan trial judge. The motive reads that she allowed the lawsuit to drag on, which allowed it to lapse. Since 2022, the SJC has dismissed dozens of judges.²⁰⁹ The dismissals raised concerns among human rights groups about possible political interference in the judicial process.²¹⁰

Pashinyan claimed to have eliminated systemic corruption several times in 2023.²¹¹ Isabella Sargsyan, Programme Director for the Eurasia Partnership Foundation, and Sona Ayvazyan, the head of TI's Armenian division, confirmed that the level of corruption had dropped after the revolution. Studies show that systematic institutional corruption has declined, according to Ayvazyan. This concerns mainly small-scale corruption. Corruption took on other forms after the revolution, according to both experts. Thus, according to Ayvazyan, the main problem is no longer bribery, but nepotism. She pointed to the existence of new corruption schemes in which companies give contributions to local municipalities for the purpose of obtaining building permits, or in which high-ranking government representatives enjoy reduced property prices and interest-free loans. The ruling party grants favours to certain business people, according to Sargsyan.²¹² The Bertelsmann Stiftung also speaks of impressive progress in the battle against corruption, but at the same time points to continuing challenges regarding the implementation and results of anti-corruption measures. This foundation wrote about the period 2021 – early 2023 that both citizens and businesses still consider corruption a major problem. It remains present in many institutions, according to many Armenians. Clientelism

²⁰² OC Media (Barseghyan A.), 03/06/2024, [url](#); CivilNet (Dovich M.), 31/05/2024, [url](#)

²⁰³ RFE/RL, 26/03/2021, [url](#); Eurasianet (Mejlumyan A.), 06/04/2021, [url](#); Freedom House, 20/04/2022, [url](#)

²⁰⁴ USDOS, 12/04/2022, p. 21, [url](#)

²⁰⁵ USDOS, 20/03/2023, pp. 16-17, [url](#); USDOS, 23/04/2024, pp. 15, 17-18, [url](#)

²⁰⁶ This body is theoretically independent, oversees the operation of the court, and seeks to avoid influencing courts. In addition, it has the power to appoint, sanction and dismiss judges. See Azatutyun (Bulgadarian N.), 12/02/2024, [url](#); Azatutyun (Galstian S.), 16/07/2024, [url](#)

²⁰⁷ USDOS, 20/03/2023, pp. 16-17, [url](#); USDOS, 23/04/2024, pp. 15, 17-18, [url](#)

²⁰⁸ Azatutyun (Bulgadarian N.), 12/02/2024, [url](#); Azatutyun (Galstian S.), 16/07/2024, [url](#)

²⁰⁹ Azatutyun (Galstian S.), 16/07/2024, [url](#)

²¹⁰ Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#)

²¹¹ Azatutyun (Bedevian A.), 07/12/2023, [url](#); Azatutyun (Sahakian N.), 30/01/2024, [url](#); Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

²¹² CivilNet, 29/08/2023, [url](#)

and patronage, reinforced by petty corruption, also remain part of political and administrative structures, according to the Bertelsmann Stiftung.²¹³

Although local watchdogs agree that levels of corruption have dropped since the revolution, a number of corrupt practices involving representatives from the current government came to light in 2023.²¹⁴ Armenian press outlets accused Pashinyan's entourage of enriching itself. Pashinyan denied these claims and in early 2023 ordered press outlets to be sued for spreading false information.²¹⁵ Another event about which civil society organisations were expressing concern in 2023 was the resignation of Haykuhi Harutyunyan, the head of the CPC since its creation in 2019. The reason for their concern was the fact that this body had conducted investigations into several pro-government MPs suspected of illegal enrichment, conflict of interest and other corrupt practices.²¹⁶ In addition, several investigative journalists revealed corrupt acts by those in authority and those close to them, such as the sale of public property below market value and the existence of a widespread practice of awarding exclusive contracts for government tenders.²¹⁷ Journalists pointed to a suspected link between high-ranking government officials and companies winning the contracts.²¹⁸ It also emerged that several former high-ranking government representatives had sold properties that were part of an ongoing lawsuit. According to several human rights activists, the current authorities facilitated these sales, demonstrating political patronage, as Eurasianet reported.²¹⁹

During the March 2024 fact-finding mission, Cedoca asked several sources about the possibility of bribing police officers and the possibility of influencing a case in this way. Multiple sources stated that paying bribes to the police has not completely disappeared, but that it is much less common than in the past.²²⁰ Bribing a Patrol Police officer is unlikely.²²¹ Established in July 2021, this police department oversees traffic safety.²²² Those who try risk arrest and criminal prosecution for doing so.²²³ In the case of a minor crime, depending on the situation and the police officer(s) involved, it may be possible to pay a bribe at the initial stage, during the arrest, to prevent the case from being investigated further. Once a case is in the investigation phase, UIC said it is impossible to bribe anyone.²²⁴ Another source stated that corruption is less prevalent than in the past and is less visible, so people are less confronted with it in their daily lives. However, according to this source, it still occurs in the police and in the courts.²²⁵

²¹³ Bertelsmann Stiftung, 18/01/2024, p. 12, [url](#)

²¹⁴ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

²¹⁵ Asbarez, 09/02/2023, [url](#); Azatutyun (Sahakian N.), 30/01/2024, [url](#)

²¹⁶ Azatutyun (Bedevian A.), 07/12/2023, [url](#); Azatutyun (Sahakian N.), 30/01/2024, [url](#)

²¹⁷ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

²¹⁸ USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 38, [url](#); Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

²¹⁹ Eurasianet (Mgdesyan A.), 30/03/2023, [url](#)

²²⁰ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; Sources close to the EU, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024; Journalist from an independent local news agency, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²²¹ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

²²² FIP (Ghazaryan S.), 19/04/2023, [url](#); EVN Report (Avetisyan A.), 16/10/2023, [url](#)

²²³ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

²²⁴ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

²²⁵ Journalist from an independent local news agency, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

4. General situation of political opponents and activists

Under the previous government, numerous fabricated lawsuits were launched against former opponents that were quickly settled in favour of the authorities. There are no pending cases from that period, according to a journalist from an independent press outlet.²²⁶ With the change of power in 2018, former authority figures and oligarchs lost their positions of power in the blink of an eye and many of them were charged with corruption in the aftermath.²²⁷

This chapter examines whether former authorities or influential people under the previous government can still exert influence, for example on the courts. It also examines whether there are any indications of political persecution or politically motivated or fabricated lawsuits under the current government. Another question being considered is how ordinary citizens or people with low profiles might get into trouble with former high-ranking figures or oligarchs, including possible implications for witnesses in high-profile corruption cases. The possibility of obtaining protection in the event of problems with influential people from previous or current authorities is also addressed in this chapter. To answer these research questions, Cedoca interviewed several local human rights organisations and other experts on the subject during a fact-finding mission to Armenia in March 2024. Their responses are presented below, in combination with information from open sources where available and relevant.

4.1. Current influence of former government representatives and oligarchs

Asked about the current influence of former government representatives and oligarchs, multiple sources responded during Cedoca's March 2024 fact-finding mission that their influence had declined significantly following the 2018 revolution.²²⁸

According to HRH Yerevan, there are still some oligarchs in Armenia, but not in the same sense as in the past. These are people in powerful positions, including a number of politicians, who currently operate largely within the law. The law requires businessmen who hold political office to have their businesses managed by someone else. As a result, oligarchs are no longer as influential as before.²²⁹

A journalist for an independent press outlet also responded that many former authority figures still own large companies, including telecommunications or software companies. These are of great importance to the Armenian economy, according to this source.²³⁰

An established organisation with expertise in human rights responded that individuals linked to the previous regime are more likely to exert influence at the local level. This is mainly due to the fact that certain figures still have a reputation that makes people afraid of them. Because people have lived under their influence for years, they prefer to call it respect. These factors may allow someone from the previous regime, mainly at the local level, to still exert some influence in certain situations.²³¹ DDF also mentioned the possibility of influence at the local level.²³²

According to HCA, former authority figures are no longer in a position to make or instruct decisions. Former government officials are under constant surveillance, according to this source. Moreover,

²²⁶ Journalist from an independent local news agency, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²²⁷ HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²²⁸ Sources close to the EU, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024; HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024; Political analyst, interview, Yerevan, 19/03/2024; HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024; TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

²²⁹ HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²³⁰ Journalist from an independent local news agency, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²³¹ Established organisation with human rights expertise in Armenia, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024

²³² DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

criminal proceedings have been opened against some of them, making it impossible to influence a judge in such a situation. Judges will not take such a risk either, according to this source, as they would risk dismissal.²³³

Regarding the possible influence of former authority figures on the judiciary, HRH Yerevan responded that judges appeared to position themselves against the new government shortly after the revolution, but a large majority have since been replaced by people loyal to the current government. According to this source, the ruling party is able to find judges who will decide to arrest and prosecute someone for its political interests. However, judges do not simply follow all orders.²³⁴ The HCA also argued that the newly appointed judges are loyal to the current government. Even though they attempt to appear independent, according to this source, in practice it is not easy to make an independent decision in a case with political elements. Only a few can withstand such pressure, according to HCA. Regarding a series of judges' resignations, HCA said this was due to criticism of the independence of the judiciary, specifically about the SJC and links between this body's head and the ruling party.²³⁵ DDF said that according to the opposition, a number of judges have been dismissed because of their political views. The organisation does not approve of the method used to dismiss them, but does believe that there were some valid reasons for their dismissal. Political influence remains present in the legal system but is gradually decreasing, according to this NGO.²³⁶

Several other sources did not rule out the possibility that formerly influential people may still be able to influence a lawsuit through their former connections.²³⁷ TIAC said this took place systematically under the previous regime where they could rely on an organised network of actors to exert influence, but that it is now much harder to bribe a judge or other law enforcement agencies. It is possible, according to this source, that they could exert their influence by warning their former associates or protégés to keep quiet. For example, they might try to silence a witness. This source calls this "not an impossible scenario", but knows of no concrete situations where this has actually happened. In corruption lawsuits, the chances of influencing someone are even lower, as the authorities are focused on investigating these cases thoroughly and accurately identifying all those involved. Only in small-scale corruption cases is there a potential chance of influencing someone, in particular in the early stages.²³⁸

According to a local human rights organisation, there are still a number of people working at law enforcement agencies, including prosecutors, judges or investigators, who are vulnerable because they themselves were involved in corrupt activities in the past. Those who have evidence of this can use it to influence them. Such information can also be used by the current authorities as a means of exerting pressure, as they can launch an investigation. According to this source, young judges appointed in recent years are able to act much more independently because they are not linked to the former authorities and were not themselves involved in any corrupt activities. However, they need time to gain experience.²³⁹ Another source also pointed to the fact that a number of judges had previously held other positions at law enforcement agencies, including at investigative bodies or as a prosecutor. According to this source, they had experience but many of them had ties to the previous government and have since resigned. The new generation of judges still needs to gain knowledge and experience in order to function better.²⁴⁰

²³³ HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

²³⁴ HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²³⁵ HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

²³⁶ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

²³⁷ TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; Local human rights organisation, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²³⁸ TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

²³⁹ Local human rights organisation, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²⁴⁰ Established organisation with human rights expertise in Armenia, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024

Following a temporary stall in reforms of the judicial system, a vetting process of the judiciary has begun in 2024. Its purpose is to subject judges, prosecutors and investigators to a vetting process on a regular basis, consisting of an audit of their finances as well as an integrity check.²⁴¹

4.2. Lawsuits against high-ranking figures from the former regime

Several senior opposition figures against whom legal proceedings were opened after the Velvet Revolution for corruption or abuse of power called these cases politically motivated. They include former Presidents Sargsyan and Kocharyan,²⁴² Gagik Khachatryan (former Finance Minister),²⁴³ Gagik Tsarukyan (business icon and leader of the opposition party Prosperous Armenia),²⁴⁴ Seyran Ohanyan (opposition leader of the Armenia Alliance and former Defence Minister, 2008-2016),²⁴⁵ Vigen Sargsyan (former Defence Minister, 2016-2018)²⁴⁶ and Armen Ashotyan (former Education Minister, 2009-2016).²⁴⁷

Freedom House stated that according to observers there is a fine line between legally founded and politically motivated lawsuits, but there was sufficient evidence of crimes in the case of the figures against whom a case was opened at the time.²⁴⁸ The organisation did not mention any signs of political persecution in these corruption cases in its 2019-2024 annual reports. It did, however, point to concerns as to the capabilities of the judiciary and investigative bodies to ensure due process in the numerous corruption investigations into the former political elite and their allies.²⁴⁹

There have not yet been any convictions in prominent corruption cases.²⁵⁰ As mentioned earlier, two prominent court cases against former Presidents Sargsyan and Kocharyan ended in late 2023 after years of trial without conviction or acquittal, but due the statute of limitations.²⁵¹ The USDOS human rights reports for 2022 and 2023 mention that judicial decisions in some high-profile corruption cases appear to be politically motivated, according to human rights lawyers. The reports do not mention specific cases or why the cases could be considered politically motivated. The USDOS also points out the unpredictability of court decisions in cases with similar circumstances. In addition, human rights lawyers spoke of shortcomings by law enforcement agencies in investigations and prosecutions. For example, when flawed evidence presented by the public prosecutor influenced the judges' decision. According to observers, this is particularly evident in judicial decisions that appear to be politically motivated, as the USDOS states.²⁵²

²⁴¹ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

²⁴² Euractiv, 25/02/2020, [url](#); Caucasus Watch, 04/06/2024, [url](#)

²⁴³ Eurasianet (Mgdesyan A.), 03/08/2022, [url](#); OC Media (Barseghyan A.), 09/07/2024, [url](#); EVN Report (Kopalyan N.), 02/06/2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁴ RFE/RL (Khulian A.), 26/09/2020, [url](#); The Armenian Mirror Spectator (Bughadarian N.), 30/11/2023, [url](#); OC Media, 16/06/2020, [url](#); Eurasianet (Mejlumyan A.), 15/06/2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁵ Eurasianet (Mgdesyan A.), 03/08/2022, [url](#); OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 20/01/2023, [url](#); OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 09/02/2023, [url](#)

²⁴⁶ Eurasianet (Mgdesyan A.), 03/08/2022, [url](#); Eurasianet (Mgdesyan A.), 30/03/2023, [url](#); OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 10/02/2023, [url](#)

²⁴⁷ OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 16/06/2023, [url](#); Caucasus Watch, 08/01/2024, [url](#)

²⁴⁸ Freedom House, 31/01/2019, [url](#)

²⁴⁹ Freedom House, 03/04/2020, [url](#); Freedom House, 25/02/2021, [url](#); Freedom House, 17/02/2022, [url](#); Freedom House, 09/03/2023, [url](#); Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#)

²⁵⁰ News.am, 18/04/2024, [url](#); Council of Europe - GRECO, 18/04/2024, pp. 4, 8, 43, [url](#); USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 37, [url](#)

²⁵¹ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#); Azatutyun (Galstian S.), 16/07/2024, [url](#)

²⁵² USDOS, 20/03/2023, p. 17, [url](#); USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 17, [url](#)

There are no credible reports of political prisoners or detainees, according to the USDOS.²⁵³ The USDOS and Freedom House point out that pretrial detention remains a widely used measure pending trial.²⁵⁴ Opposition politicians, activists and lawyers complain that the authorities continue to use this method as a punitive measure, despite the fact that alternative measures, such as house arrest, have been available since 2021. Freedom House adds that pretrial detention is also being used against a number of opposition figures, without mentioning specific cases.²⁵⁵

At the local level, there were some indications of political persecution in 2022-2023, according to Freedom House. For example, there were a number of opposition elected officials against whom legal proceedings were opened after the municipal elections in late 2021.²⁵⁶ They include Aharon Khachatryan, the elected mayor in Vardenis;²⁵⁷ Mamikon Aslanyan, the elected mayor of Vanadzor;²⁵⁸ and Arush Arushanian, the mayor of Goris.²⁵⁹ Local human rights activists called these cases politically motivated, according to Freedom House.²⁶⁰ The *Nations in Transit 2024* report pointed to systematic attempts at the local level to depose mayors linked to the opposition and replace them with someone from Civil Contract. This is often accompanied by blackmail and other forms of pressure, which may question the legitimacy of this dismissal procedure, although it usually follows official guidelines.²⁶¹

In addition, Freedom House reported an unusual measure against Avetik Chalabyan, an activist and political opponent.²⁶² In December 2023, a court imposed on Chalabyan a two-year ban from participating in demonstrations or other public events. Chalabyan was accused of trying to bribe students in exchange for their participation in anti-government demonstrations in 2022.²⁶³

A local human rights organisation stated during Cedoca's March 2024 fact-finding mission that the former government had engaged in extremely corrupt and criminal activities. When an investigation was opened into this, those involved regularly claimed that the case was politically motivated because they were political figures. This source highlighted the importance of properly investigating these issues. If the investigation is not carried out thoroughly or effectively, this may be grounds for calling the case politically motivated.²⁶⁴

4.3. Political persecution

According to multiple sources, there are no or hardly any situations of political persecution in the current Armenian context.²⁶⁵ The HRH Yerevan stated that people are generally not pressured for political reasons. Although there are some criminal cases where political motives cannot be ruled out, this is not the rule. In some high-profile court cases, there may be political motives, according to this source, but in other cases the court proceedings are usually fair and judges make correct decisions. Political motives are present when one person is prosecuted in similar circumstances and another is not. According to this source, in most court cases there are justifiable reasons for initiating criminal

²⁵³ USDOS, 12/04/2022, p. 23, [url](#); USDOS, 20/03/2023, p. 19, [url](#); USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 19, [url](#)

²⁵⁴ USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 13, [url](#); Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

²⁵⁵ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

²⁵⁶ Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#); Freedom House, 09/03/2023, [url](#)

²⁵⁷ The Armenian Mirror Spectator, 04/01/2022, [url](#); The Armenian Mirror Spectator, 05/04/2022, [url](#)

²⁵⁸ Azatutyun (Bulghadarian N.), 15/07/2024, [url](#); Azatutyun (Simonian K.), 03/09/2024, [url](#)

²⁵⁹ Azatutyun (Khachatryan M.), 09/02/2022, [url](#); Azatutyun (Badalian S. & Hovsepian T.), 03/09/2024, [url](#)

²⁶⁰ Freedom House, 09/03/2023, [url](#); Freedom House, 18/05/2023, [url](#)

²⁶¹ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

²⁶² Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#)

²⁶³ Hetq, 21/12/2023, [url](#); Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#)

²⁶⁴ Established human rights organisation, interview, Armenia, 18/03/2024

²⁶⁵ Established human rights organisation, interview, Armenia, 18/03/2024; HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024; Sources close to the EU, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024

proceedings, but not everyone is prosecuted in the same way for the same type of crime. This source stated that there are no situations where lawsuits or evidence are fabricated.²⁶⁶

A local human rights organisation explained that political pressure was highly visible under the previous government. Many people were on trial without justifiable reasons prior to 2018. In the present context, there are a limited number of situations where there may be political motives to prosecute someone. This is particularly noticeable, according to this source, when cases are reopened as soon as someone becomes politically active (even if there are legitimate reasons to prosecute that person). These are usually people in prominent roles or public figures with a wide reach. This source was not aware of any politically motivated lawsuits against low-level individuals. Given the high number of pending lawsuits, it is unlikely that the authorities will focus on prosecuting ordinary citizens.²⁶⁷

UIC confirmed that it is unlikely for anyone to be prosecuted without just cause. A person who has not committed a crime will not be prosecuted, according to this source. It would be exceptional for this to happen. The mere fact that someone belongs to the opposition or the previous regime is not a reason to prosecute that person. Conversely, according to UIC, there are some situations where individuals are not prosecuted and punished for crimes they have committed.²⁶⁸

The HCA pointed to indications of a selective application of the law in certain situations, whereby criminal proceedings may be considered politically motivated owing to underlying political motives. Another possibility is that minor acts could lead to serious consequences if the law is applied in a discriminatory manner. Opposition supporters, for example, have been charged with paying bounties to demonstrators in exchange for their participation in protest actions, while no-one from the ruling party has been charged for similar payoffs during the election campaign.²⁶⁹

Sources close to the EU indicated that there were no situations where people should fear political persecution although the opposition uses the fact that some opposition figures are in prison to make this claim. These sources had the impression that former oligarchs who are no longer politically active were generally being allowed to continue their affairs undisturbed, while some others who have remained politically active are facing criminal charges for corruption.²⁷⁰

An established human rights organisation in Armenia also mentioned that there was a distinction in how people loyal to the authorities are prosecuted for criminal offences versus those belonging to the opposition. This source called it problematic that there were a number of cases where a person's political beliefs had played a role in how a case was handled. At the same time, according to this source, there are also some opposition supporters who have been acquitted and found innocent by the court.²⁷¹

Some sources observed that in the run-up to the elections, legal proceedings were opened or reopened against candidates.²⁷² A local human rights organisation said that in a number of situations, court cases were reopened after four or five years at the time when individuals, usually linked to the opposition, were running for election. According to this source, the timing of the reopening of these cases suggests that some political elements are present, even if there are legitimate reasons to

²⁶⁶ HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²⁶⁷ Local human rights organisation, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²⁶⁸ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

²⁶⁹ HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

²⁷⁰ Sources close to the EU, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024

²⁷¹ Established organisation with human rights expertise in Armenia, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024

²⁷² TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; Local human rights organisation, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024; UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

prosecute these individuals.²⁷³ In addition, there were also some situations where individuals were under judicial investigation and still were elected. UIC clarified that a crime was suspected in those situations, and that the investigation was separate from the political activities of those involved.²⁷⁴ In the case of candidates for the party Public Voice (Hanrayin Dzayn), a controversial party that was elected in Yerevan in September 2023, the investigation into their suspected criminal activities was already underway at the time they ran for office. There are no reasons to believe these cases are politically motivated, according to TIAC.²⁷⁵

Situations where there may be political motives, according to multiple sources, include the lawsuits against Sashik Sultanyan, the head of the Yezidi Human Rights Centre,²⁷⁶ and Armen Ashotyan, former Minister for Education under the RPA government.²⁷⁷ In Ashotyan's case, according to UIC, the reason for the charges is not his political affiliation or his political past, but rather the corrupt practices of which he is suspected. According to this source, others who are far more critical than Ashotyan have not been charged. This source further clarified that a number of opposition members are in pretrial detention, but that this is unrelated to their position. This source stressed that the number of people actually in detention is limited. When that happens, according to UIC, it is not because they belong to the opposition, but because of actual crimes.²⁷⁸

4.4. Role of low profiles and witnesses in corruption cases against high-ranking figures

Cedoca asked a number of contacts during the fact-finding mission in Armenia about the possibility and ways in which people with low profiles may encounter problems with or be under pressure from influential figures from the previous regime. In doing so, Cedoca also considered whether witnesses in a corruption case may have difficulty testifying against prominent figures from the previous and current governments. Several sources pointed out that it was punishable to influence witnesses,²⁷⁹ as was giving false testimony.²⁸⁰ According to multiple sources, influencing or intimidating witnesses is not a widespread practice.²⁸¹ Some sources did indicate, however, that witnesses in a corruption trial may be afraid to give testimony owing to their past connections.²⁸²

TIAC explained that the corrupt networks of the past were based on established connections. Many ordinary, low-level individuals were also involved. People who had ties to influential people under the previous regime may be vulnerable because they themselves often participated in wrongdoing and because they are often still under their influence. As a result, they feel a certain obligation to their former colleagues or boss not to violate trust. Low-level individuals themselves are unlikely to be targeted in a corruption investigation, according to TIAC, but they may be called as witnesses.

²⁷³ Local human rights organisation, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²⁷⁴ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

²⁷⁵ TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

²⁷⁶ Established human rights organisation, interview, Armenia, 18/03/2024; Sources close to the EU, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024

²⁷⁷ Political analyst, interview, Yerevan, 19/03/2024; Local human rights organisation, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024; Sources close to the EU, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024

²⁷⁸ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

²⁷⁹ TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; Representatives from the Armenian Human Rights Defender, interview, Yerevan, 19/03/2024; HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²⁸⁰ Representatives from the Armenian Human Rights Defender, interview, Yerevan, 19/03/2024

²⁸¹ HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024; TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; Established human rights organisation, interview, Armenia, 18/03/2024

²⁸² TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024; Established human rights organisation, interview, Armenia, 18/03/2024

According to this source, an oligarch is unlikely to try to influence low-level individuals or prevent them from giving testimony. An oligarch is more likely to target a high or mid-level witness, as they probably had an important role in the company or government department where they worked, or at least some influence within the network of which they were a part.²⁸³ Also, according to a local human rights organisation, the government is more interested in trying and punishing important figures rather than prosecuting ordinary citizens.²⁸⁴

It is not easy for low-level individuals to cooperate with an anti-corruption investigation, according to TIAC, because they are uncertain of the outcome and have little confidence in law enforcement agencies. They often lack the financial resources to hire a good lawyer, unlike mid-level individuals, who are usually better off. This means they have little confidence that their rights will be protected.²⁸⁵

According to TIAC, there were also frequent cases in the past where high-level individuals passed the blame to individuals in lower-level roles. This was done by mutual agreement, with the promise of getting the person released quickly and covering all costs. It was a way for higher-ups to escape prosecution themselves and rid themselves of shame. An additional reason is that high-level individuals are subject to a higher level of liability and receive harsher punishment for wrongdoing than low-level individuals.²⁸⁶

A journalist from an independent news agency also mentioned the existence of connections in criminal networks. In a number of situations, according to this source, the assets of former government representatives are officially registered in the names of their advisers or connections so that the actual beneficiaries are not listed in company documents. This source pointed out that ongoing corruption cases only involve high- and mid-level business people and government officials. No information is known about low-level individuals under judicial investigation.²⁸⁷

HRH Yerevan pointed out that where there is a risk that a defendant will or may influence a witness, a judge will generally decide to remand the defendant in pretrial detention. In the 1990s – 2000s, at a time when so-called criminal authorities were in control in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, witnesses could be pressured and intimidated. According to HRH Yerevan, this criminal sub-culture has been greatly weakened because the authorities have taken action against it. In the current context, only a very limited number of high-powered figures are potentially capable of pressuring a witness. It is by no means a widespread practice for witnesses to be under pressure. In the event that someone is intimidated, there are ways to obtain help, according to this source. This applies both to individuals who might be under pressure from someone in the ruling party as well as the former regime. In such situations, political opponents are willing to release financial resources for this purpose.²⁸⁸ Another source also states that ordinary citizens can easily get financial aid from figures linked to the opposition if they have problems with the current authorities.²⁸⁹

The likelihood of retaliation or revenge against potential witnesses is also very low, according to another source. The law provides for measures to protect witnesses who cooperate with the investigation when there is an objective risk. The law enforcement officials are authorised to take action when there is an actual threat. This source does not rule out the possibility that the current authorities themselves put pressure on witnesses in court cases against influential figures from the

²⁸³ TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

²⁸⁴ Local human rights organisation, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²⁸⁵ TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

²⁸⁶ TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

²⁸⁷ Journalist from an independent local news agency, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²⁸⁸ HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²⁸⁹ Established organisation with human rights expertise in Armenia, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024

previous regime.²⁹⁰ According to another human rights organization, investigative bodies are obliged to protect key witnesses and prevent them from being pressured in any way.²⁹¹

Existing witness protection mechanisms have shortcomings, according to multiple sources.²⁹² Although the authorities are working to develop a whistle-blower mechanism, DDF says there are currently insufficient guarantees to properly protect witnesses. The organisation is not aware of any situations in which witnesses were met with reprisals, but does not rule out their existence. Law enforcement agencies are willing to provide protection for witnesses, according to DDF, but the existing mechanisms are not sufficiently effective.²⁹³ According to some sources, the police can guarantee protection in certain situations,²⁹⁴ but fall short in others.²⁹⁵

Regarding key witnesses – witnesses who possess crucial information about a case –, a local human rights organisation argued that investigative bodies are obligated to take measures to prevent any form of pressure being exerted on them. This can be achieved by the police providing round-the-clock surveillance or escorting the individual. It is also possible for the key witness to be provided with a safe house. According to this organisation, the police are able to provide protection in that case. Moreover, if the investigative body takes no action, it is an indication that the investigative body does not want the real culprit to be identified and held accountable. This has happened in criminal cases involving torture, according to this source, but is now less common.²⁹⁶

With regard to the procedure for calling a witness, several sources explained that the competent investigative body is required to summon them by means of a written notification.²⁹⁷ In most cases, it is the Investigative Committee or the Anti-Corruption Committee.²⁹⁸ In practice, witnesses are usually phoned first before they are summoned in writing.²⁹⁹ A person who has only been notified by phone, but has not received a written notification, is not required to appear.³⁰⁰ This written notification contains information about their status (witness/accused) in the interrogation, the article under which the criminal case was initiated, their rights, the date, time and location where they are to present themselves.³⁰¹ Prior to questioning, the specific reason or content of the criminal investigation is often not clear to the person being summoned.³⁰² What often happens, according to some sources, is that the status changes from witness to suspect in the course of the interrogation.³⁰³ This is mainly due to a capacity problem and ignorance, according to DDF. It can be construed as intentional when someone is called as a witness because there is insufficient evidence to indict the person. In that case, they try to collect additional evidence during the interrogation. The interrogators themselves, according to this

²⁹⁰ Established organisation with human rights expertise in Armenia, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024

²⁹¹ Established human rights organisation, interview, Armenia, 18/03/2024

²⁹² Council of Europe – GRECO, 18/04/2024, pp. 63-67, [url](#); DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; Sources close to the EU, e-mail, 30/05/2024; Local human rights organisation, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²⁹³ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

²⁹⁴ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; Established human rights organisation, interview, Armenia, 18/03/2024; Journalist from an independent news agency, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²⁹⁵ Journalist from an independent local news agency, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

²⁹⁶ Established human rights organisation, interview, Armenia, 18/03/2024

²⁹⁷ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

²⁹⁸ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

²⁹⁹ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

³⁰⁰ TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

³⁰¹ Established human rights organisation, interview, Armenia, 18/03/2024; Local human rights organisation, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024; DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

³⁰² UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

³⁰³ TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; Local human rights organisation, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

source, are often unaware that such practices are incorrect.³⁰⁴ A defendant has the right to a lawyer and is not required to answer the questions. There is also no obligation to give testimony against yourself or any family members, regardless of your status.³⁰⁵ Those who do not respond to a written notification may be picked at home up by the police for questioning at the investigating agency by order of the investigator.³⁰⁶ This does not cause any further problems, according to UIC.³⁰⁷

4.5. Protection options

After the revolution, the Pashinyan government promised to reform the police and justice system. In 2020, the Police Reform Coordination Council, a group made up of several NGOs in addition to government actors, was established to work on police reforms. Pashinyan's choice to appoint Vahe Ghazaryan, previously Chief of Police, as Minister for Home Affairs in January 2023 prompted NGOs to leave the Council. They did not consider Ghazaryan to be independent and argued that he was known not to support the reforms.³⁰⁸

As part of the police reforms, a new police department was created in 2021 - the Patrol Police, a force that primarily oversees traffic safety and will eventually replace the regular police. A positive development in this regard, according to EVN report, is the six-month recruitment and training period. Prospective police officers must pass an exam to demonstrate that they have sufficient knowledge to properly perform their duties. According to EVN Report, this is reflected in high public satisfaction with this police service, according to a 2023 poll. At the same time, the article mentions that the efficiency of this service has declined in 2023 compared to the early years. For example, the Patrol Police were initially not afraid to stop high-ranking government representatives on the street, but later began apologising when they stopped a local official, UIC's Daniel Ioannisyanyan told EVN Report.³⁰⁹ In late 2023, Ioannisyanyan and Artur Sakunts of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor (HCAV) voiced additional criticism. Sakunts mentioned reports of members of this relatively well-paid police force physically and verbally harassing citizens and failing to enforce traffic laws.³¹⁰

Meanwhile, there has been little progress on police reforms. A new procedure to assess the suitability of police officers was introduced in 2023. Its goal was to test the entire police force within three years for IQ, physical and professional knowledge. During the fact-finding mission, DDF explained that police officers can currently participate in these tests on a voluntary basis and those who pass have a chance for promotion or a bonus. Once testing becomes mandatory, a failing grade on any of the components will result in dismissal.³¹¹ In July 2024, Azatutyun drew a link between the lack of thorough police reforms and increased crime rates. Between 2017 and 2023, the number of recorded crimes doubled. In addition to an increase in the number of armed robberies, there was a sharp rise in drug-related crimes. One explanation for this, according to Ioannisyanyan as quoted in the article, is that in recent years the police have been less competent, professional and efficient and the police system has increasingly been plagued by nepotism.³¹²

UIC released the results of an opinion poll on trust in law enforcement agencies carried out among 1,200 people in March 2024. It shows that the police (57.9%) enjoy the most trust from the population

³⁰⁴ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

³⁰⁵ Local human rights organisation, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

³⁰⁶ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

³⁰⁷ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

³⁰⁸ HCAV, 10/01/2023, [url](#); Caucasus Watch, 12/07/2023, [url](#); Azatutyun (Khulian A.), 18/12/2023, [url](#)

³⁰⁹ EVN Report (Avetisyan A.), 16/10/2023, [url](#)

³¹⁰ Azatutyun (Khulian A.), 18/12/2023, [url](#)

³¹¹ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

³¹² Azatutyun (Khulian A.), 23/07/2024, [url](#)

after the military (76.6%), followed by the courts (41.4%) and the Prosecutor General (39.8%). Furthermore, the results show that 40% of respondents would report a crime to the police as a victim or witness. One in five people who were victims of or witnesses to a crime in the past year actually reported it. The main reasons for not contacting the police were: assuming that nothing would change (15.6%), fearing that it would not end well (17.3%), unacceptable because it would make them a snitch (17.6%), and not wanting to make a fuss (37.4%).³¹³

During the fact-finding mission, Cedoca asked several sources about police and court accessibility. In doing so, Cedoca looked into what barriers, if any, existed to filing a complaint or bringing a case to court, both in general, and in the event of problems with influential people from current or previous authorities.

Regarding the police, several sources confirmed general public satisfaction with the Patrol Police.³¹⁴ On this topic, TIAC said that the image of the police improved after the revolution, largely due to the creation of the Patrol Police, which brings the police closer to the people.³¹⁵ DDF also noted that the Patrol Police is the most visible police service and that satisfaction with it is high. This NGO doubted that other police forces enjoyed the same level of trust, as there have been few alterations or personnel changes.³¹⁶ Before the revolution, it was very common to pay bribes to the police on the streets. As this no longer happens, public confidence in the police has increased. Conversely, violent police interventions during demonstrations have a negative impact on trust in the police.³¹⁷

According to both TIAC and DDF, people may be reluctant to go to the police because of a post-Soviet mentality.³¹⁸ Although confidence in the police has generally improved, people often still have the mindset of not going to the police, according to DDF. After the fall of the Soviet Union, contacting the police was seen as problematic. Now, people are more inclined to go to the police and have become more demanding. They insist that the police do their job and protect their rights. Another reason for not filing a complaint, according to DDF, is the fact that many people are not confident that the case will be effectively investigated and handled. The organisation does not believe that people would not file a complaint for fear of retaliation.³¹⁹ In addition, two other sources also mentioned that before the revolution in 2018, it was quite normal not to go to the police in the event of problems. People assumed it would have no effect owing to a climate of impunity.³²⁰

Individuals who have problems with someone from the previous regime and are victims of their former relationships face a moral choice, according to TIAC: maintaining their relationship and trust or severing all ties with their former colleagues or boss and going to the police. The police are required by law to protect this person, but it can take 72 hours before a protection order is actually issued. If the person against whom a complaint was made still has connections within the police, there is a chance that they will be informed. As a result, they may try to track down the person who filed a complaint. In practice, according to this source, people who were themselves part of corrupt networks are unlikely to go to the police. They tend to value and trust their old relationships and networks more than the new institutions.³²¹

³¹³ UIC, 26/03/2024, pp. 7, 18, 22, [url](#)

³¹⁴ TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

³¹⁵ TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

³¹⁶ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

³¹⁷ Sources close to the EU, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024

³¹⁸ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

³¹⁹ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

³²⁰ Local human rights organisation, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024; Established organisation with expertise in human rights in Armenia, interview, 20/03/2024

³²¹ TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

According to TIAC, another reason for not contacting the police or filing a complaint is that people might not be willing to talk about their own part in a particular issue – for example, in corruption cases against influential people from the previous regime. If they complain and want to justify their need for protection, they have to explain how they are connected to them. According to TIAC, people might not be willing to do this. In the event of an acute threat, low-level individuals are presumably more likely to contact the police than mid-level individuals, according to TIAC. A low-level individual who has participated in a corruption network on a small scale a few times is presumably more willing to go to the police in the face of a real threat than someone with greater influence. This source explained that they will weigh up their involvement before going to the police to avoid being arrested themselves and held responsible for their actions.³²²

In the event of a genuine threat due to someone linked to the former government, the authorities are very receptive to helping the victim and investigating the matter further, according to HCA.³²³

Asked about the possible impact of getting protection when someone has problems with an influential figure who has connections with the police, UIC replied that it could be detrimental. According to this source, while it is possible to get information about someone or enjoy certain benefits through connections, punishing or harassing someone through connections is unlikely. The chances are slim, according to UIC, that someone who has done nothing wrong will face problems. When asked whether the police respond when someone is threatened by an influential individual, this source replied that it depends on the nature of the threat. If there are indications of a risk of violence or other serious consequences, the police are likely to respond.³²⁴ If the police do not respond, according to both UIC and DDF, there are other bodies that can act: the Investigative Committee, the Anti-Corruption Committee or the Prosecutor General.³²⁵ One of these agencies will normally take action, according to UIC. Another option is to turn to the press. When the press publishes an article about a crime, there is a good chance that an investigation will follow.³²⁶

As regards the legal system, several sources stated that despite shortcomings, it is functioning better than before the revolution.³²⁷ In terms of trust in law enforcement, there has been little improvement. According to TIAC, this is due to the fact that many people in lower and mid-level positions in law enforcement agencies are the same people as before the revolution. As a result, citizens have little confidence that their safety will be guaranteed when they report something.³²⁸ According to a local human rights organization, the fact that many investigators and prosecutors were not replaced after the revolution and are now in charge of prosecuting a case has a negative impact on confidence in the judicial system.³²⁹

The main problem in the judiciary is the length of legal proceedings and a lack of efficiency.³³⁰ Nevertheless, UIC believes that the courts can be considered accessible and sufficiently independent. It pays to appeal a legal ruling, according to this NGO. Especially in administrative tribunals, the chances of changing a court order are high. Criminal courts, which are open 24/7, regularly refuse a prosecutor's request to remand someone in pretrial detention, according to UIC, especially when the

³²² TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

³²³ HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

³²⁴ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

³²⁵ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

³²⁶ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

³²⁷ Sources close to the EU, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024; TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

³²⁸ TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

³²⁹ Local human rights organisation, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

³³⁰ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

person in question is assisted by a lawyer.³³¹ In addition, UIC and a political analyst noted that courts are not reluctant to rule against government interests, unlike before the revolution.³³²

Multiple sources stressed the importance of a good lawyer.³³³ According to HRH Yerevan, there are many qualified criminal lawyers. Unless it is a high-profile criminal case, there is a good chance of obtaining justice with a good lawyer.³³⁴ The price for a good lawyer can be a hurdle for less affluent individuals. Especially when litigation drags on, legal fees can be high, TIAC stated. There is also a system of public defenders, but their number is limited and they enjoy little trust. There is a perception in society that, partly because of their low wages, they are less able to defend someone properly. A free pro bono lawyer can be used in criminal cases, but they too are understaffed and enjoy little trust. Therefore, most people prefer to put all their resources into a good lawyer. NGOs can also provide legal aid, but have limited resources. They mainly deal with human rights violations and not corruption cases.³³⁵

The criminal law system works adequately, according to HRH Yerevan, even though there is room for improvement.³³⁶ According to a political analyst, ordinary citizens are generally able to defend their rights through existing institutions.³³⁷

Two human rights organisations mentioned that rulings of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) have a significant impact. Judges are increasingly complying with ECHR rulings.³³⁸

5. Protest actions

After the Velvet Revolution, protests were organised on a regular basis. According to Freedom House, protesting has become a new normal, even for ordinary people. After the war in 2020, opposition parties mainly protested against the outcome of the war and the process of negotiating a peace agreement with Azerbaijan. Demonstrators repeatedly called for the resignation of the Prime Minister. Civil society organisations tend to organise actions around social issues, such as the reception of refugees or the situation of prisoners of war.³³⁹

Freedom House has noted for several years in a row that although the law guarantees the right to assemble, this is not always observed in practice.³⁴⁰ On the basis of its monitoring activities, HCA observes that the extent to which police intervene during demonstrations does not depend on its size, but rather on the type of protest action and the organisers behind it. There is a risk of over-policing³⁴¹ during protests with a political agenda organised by the opposition, especially when the action takes place in front of a government building during a government meeting. When the number of participants

³³¹ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

³³² UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; Political analyst, interview, Yerevan, 19/03/2024

³³³ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024; Established organisation with expertise in human rights in Armenia, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024

³³⁴ HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

³³⁵ TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

³³⁶ HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

³³⁷ Political analyst, interview, Yerevan, 19/03/2024

³³⁸ HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024; Established human rights organisation, interview, Armenia, 18/03/2024

³³⁹ Freedom House, 20/04/2022, [url](#)

³⁴⁰ Freedom House, 17/02/2022, [url](#); Freedom House, 09/03/2023, [url](#); Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#)

³⁴¹ In proportion to the number of protesters, a significant number of police officers are deployed to oversee the course of the demonstration, often not only from Yerevan, but also from other Armenian regions. See HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

reaches several thousand, the police regularly act as a barrier. The police usually intervene in civil disobedience situations, according to HCA. For example, clashes can occur between police and protesters when demonstrators try to break through a police line. The police response is not always proportionate, according to HCA. For example, there are a number of cases where the police used unnecessary force against demonstrators or detained a significant number of protesters for the purpose of ending the protest action.³⁴² In addition to HCA, other sources reported that police used excessive force against demonstrators during a number of protests.³⁴³ The circumstances in which the police arrest protesters or use force are discussed further in this chapter.

The following subchapters provide a general view of the course of protest actions by year for the period 2020-2024, followed by a chronological listing of demonstrations during which the police violently intervened or detained multiple participants. The goal is not to provide an exhaustive list of all events involving incidents of violence or arrests, but rather to describe the evolution or trends of police violence and arrests. Protests that were peaceful are not mentioned here. A separate subchapter describes what measures were taken against police brutality and malpractice by law enforcement agencies.

5.1. Chronological overview of arrests, police violence and incidents during protests after the war in 2020

5.1.1. Protest actions in 2020

The conditions in which public meetings took place in 2020 were better than before the Velvet Revolution, according to Freedom House. For example, there were fewer obstacles for demonstrators to take part in protests and fewer police interventions.³⁴⁴

However, on a number of times, there were some serious restrictions on freedom of assembly. The first restrictions were imposed on 16 March 2020 as part of measures to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Meetings with more than twenty people would remain prohibited until 12 Aug 2020. When martial law was introduced at the start of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh on 27 September 2020, a ban on public gatherings also came into effect. This ban remained in effect until 2 December 2020.³⁴⁵

On 14-16 June 2020, hundreds of people took to the streets to show their support for opposition leader Gagik Tsarukyan (Prosperous Armenia) when parliament decided to lift his immunity in order to arrest him as part of a 2017 investigation into tax fraud and vote buying.³⁴⁶ More than 250 people were arrested for violating the ban on meetings under the COVID-19 measures.³⁴⁷

From 11 November 2020, the opposition organised several protests in Yerevan to demand the resignation of the Prime Minister. On several occasions, the police arrested leaders and participants in the protests for violations of martial law.³⁴⁸ Some party leaders were arrested several times and released each time.³⁴⁹ Human rights organisations denied claims that the arrests were politically

³⁴² HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

³⁴³ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; Political analyst, interview, Yerevan, 19/03/2024

³⁴⁴ Freedom House, 03/04/2020, [url](#)

³⁴⁵ USDOS, 30/03/2021, p. 29, [url](#)

³⁴⁶ RFE/RL, 14/06/2020, [url](#); OSW (Górecki W.), 17/06/2020, [url](#); RFE/RL, 21/06/2020, [url](#)

³⁴⁷ Freedom House, 25/02/2021, [url](#)

³⁴⁸ USDOS, 30/03/2021, p. 29, [url](#); Eurasianet (Kucera J.), 11/11/2020, [url](#)

³⁴⁹ RFE/RL, 16/11/2020, [url](#)

motivated, according to the USDOS.³⁵⁰ During protests against Pashinyan in central Yerevan between 22 and 24 December 2020, dozens of demonstrators were detained after clashes with the police.³⁵¹

RFE/RL reported that judges opposed the arrests of dozens of leaders and members of opposition parties and activists protesting against the government after the ceasefire. According to RFE/RL, the judges' stance on these arrests and charges exposed tensions between the government and the judiciary.³⁵²

5.1.2. Protest actions in 2021

Anti-government demonstrations took place regularly in the run-up to the June 2021 parliamentary elections. Freedom House wrote that, despite some violent police interventions and the temporary arrest of demonstrators during a number of demonstrations, demonstrations were largely able to take place without serious obstacles.³⁵³ Freedom House also noted that tensions between different political camps regularly ran high during demonstrations in 2021, but that only a small number of cases involved excessive police violence.³⁵⁴ Both the USDOS and Freedom House mentioned a situation of disproportionate police violence during a peaceful demonstration on 20-21 August 2021 against construction plans in Yerevan. According to the USDOS, the police disproportionately cracked down on a number of protesters during the demonstration, as well as during their arrest.³⁵⁵ According to the USDOS, while a number of criminal cases were initiated against demonstrators, there is no information on any action taken against the police officers involved.³⁵⁶

There were a number of clashes with police during an anti-government demonstration involving several thousand participants on 28 January 2021. At least 21 people were arrested.³⁵⁷ On 23 February 2021, supporters of the Homeland Salvation Movement, an umbrella movement of opposition parties behind the organisation of protests, tried to prevent Pashinyan from entering a building. On the same day, this movement blocked several streets in central Yerevan. More than fifty people were arrested, including some supporters of the Homeland Salvation Movement.³⁵⁸

On 21 April 2021, protests against Pashinyan took place in the southern Armenian region of Syunik. Residents of the region were expressing dissatisfaction with the possible impact on their safety following the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, as the region is to border Azerbaijan again after more than thirty years. Conflict arose between the local population and Pashinyan's bodyguards after the latter's departure from Meghri.³⁵⁹ Caucasian Knot wrote that Pashinyan had ordered law enforcement officials to find and punish the protest organisers.³⁶⁰ According to Azatutyun, a number of citizens and local government representatives were detained. One of them was a local mayor (of the towns of Agarak and Meghri), who was suspected of hooliganism and of organising the protest. According to the Ombudsman at the time, at least two people were mistreated during their detention. The Ombudsman accused Pashinyan of giving illegal orders to the investigators. The police denied receiving instructions

³⁵⁰ USDOS, 30/03/2021, p. 29, [url](#)

³⁵¹ Caucasian Knot (Martirosyan A.), 25/12/2020, [url](#); Freedom House, 25/02/2021, [url](#)

³⁵² RFE/RL, 22/01/2021, [url](#)

³⁵³ Freedom House, 17/02/2022, [url](#); Freedom House, 20/04/2022, [url](#)

³⁵⁴ Freedom House, 20/04/2022, [url](#)

³⁵⁵ USDOS, 12/04/2022, p. 33, [url](#); Freedom House, 20/04/2022, [url](#)

³⁵⁶ USDOS, 12/04/2022, p. 33, [url](#)

³⁵⁷ RFE/RL, 28/01/2021, [url](#)

³⁵⁸ RFE/RL, 23/02/2021, [url](#)

³⁵⁹ Azatutyun (Saribekian G.), 21/04/2021, [url](#)

³⁶⁰ Caucasian Knot, 21/04/2021, [url](#)

and claimed that two or three people were detained for questioning. A local businessman and government critic spoke of about 20 arrests, according to Azatutyun.³⁶¹

In late November 2021, the Liberation Movement, a new movement of opposition figures and activists, organised several protests in Yerevan to prevent the border with Azerbaijan from being established. Among other things, they demanded the resignation of Pashinyan and of President Armen Sarkissian. On 22 November 2021, activists blocked several streets in Yerevan to prevent decisions being taken on the border issue. According to the police, eighteen people were arrested. The group also organised protests in Yerevan on 23, 24, 26 and 27 November.³⁶² Six people were arrested for disobeying the police.³⁶³

5.1.3. Protest actions in 2022

Anti-government demonstrations led by the opposition continued into 2022. A statement by Pashinyan about potential concessions on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh as part of the negotiation process with Azerbaijan led to weeks of protests between 1 May and mid-June 2022.³⁶⁴ Protesters blocked several streets in the capital for weeks during this period. According to the USDOS, there was disproportionate police violence against demonstrators and journalists on several occasions, as well as arbitrary arrests of protesters. There were also some skirmishes between citizens with opposing political views, as well as incidents where citizens used violence to provoke the police.³⁶⁵

On 2 May 2022, the police arrested a total of 244 people, according to the Armenian press channel Factor.³⁶⁶ Eurasianet reported that the protesters were detained while blocking streets in the capital. According to this source, activists criticised the brutal treatment of protesters and journalists by the police.³⁶⁷ Representatives from the quick response team of the Human Rights Defender of Armenia (or Ombudsman) visited a total of 151 detainees in eight different police departments on 2 May 2022. Several procedural violations were identified in the process. For example, there were several situations in which those arrested were not informed of the reasons for their arrest, and others were detained for longer than the three-hour period permitted by law (to administratively detain someone without charge). In addition, the Ombudsman expressed concern about some cases of disproportionate police violence against demonstrators. At the same time, this body noted that some demonstrators provoked police officers, by using abusive language or tearing off their badges and shoulder straps.³⁶⁸

Demonstrators continued to be arrested in the following days, but most were released.³⁶⁹ For example, according to RFE/RL, more than 200 protesters were detained on 3 May 2022.³⁷⁰ On 16 May 2022, the police arrested more than 90 drivers who were blocking streets in the capital with their cars.³⁷¹ On 17 May 2022, there was a record 400 arrests in Yerevan. Again, this involved protesters blocking dozens of streets.³⁷² On 30 May 2022, there were clashes between protesters and the police when a group of protesters tried to get through a police cordon. Two police officers were hospitalised. According to opposition leaders, some protesters were also injured, but this information could not be independently

³⁶¹ Azatutyun (Saribekian G.), 22/04/2021, [url](#)

³⁶² Caucasian Knot, 26/11/2021, [url](#); Caucasian Knot, 28/11/2021, [url](#); Aravot, 02/12/2021, [url](#)

³⁶³ Caucasian Knot, 26/11/2021, [url](#); Caucasian Knot, 28/11/2021, [url](#)

³⁶⁴ OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 15/06/2022, [url](#)

³⁶⁵ USDOS, 20/03/2023, p. 26, [url](#)

³⁶⁶ Factor (Vardanyan R.), 02/05/2022, [url](#)

³⁶⁷ Eurasianet (Mejlumyan A.), 02/05/2022, [url](#)

³⁶⁸ Human Rights Defender of Armenia, 02/05/2022, [url](#)

³⁶⁹ OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 11/05/2022, [url](#)

³⁷⁰ RFE/RL, 03/05/2022, [url](#)

³⁷¹ Azatutyun (Khulyan A.), 16/05/2022, [url](#)

³⁷² RFE/RL, 17/05/2022, [url](#)

verified, according to RFE/RL. A total of 111 people were arrested.³⁷³ Eight of them were not immediately released and risked criminal charges, according to OC Media.³⁷⁴ The Human Rights Defender also continued to criticise acts of police violence and procedural violations during arrests in the above-mentioned protests, reporting regularly on the basis of monitoring activities and visits to those arrested.³⁷⁵

On 3 June 2022, violence escalated between the police and protesters. The police deployed stun grenades to disperse protesters in front of the Prime Minister's residence.³⁷⁶ It was one of the most violent demonstrations since protests began in early May 2022, according to RFE/RL.³⁷⁷ Some fifty people, including 39 police officers, were injured during clashes between the police and protesters.³⁷⁸ According to Daniel Ioannisyanyan from the UIC, the protesters behaved aggressively and opposition leaders provoked fights, but the police failed to prevent the violence.³⁷⁹

OC Media reported on 11 May 2022 that more than twenty criminal cases were opened against protesters on charges of hooliganism, violence against government personnel and obstruction of traffic.³⁸⁰ By the end of the protests in mid-June 2022, Azatutyun quoted an opposition leader who spoke of more than thirty opposition activists and supporters still detained following the protests. The majority had been charged with assaulting a police officer or government loyalists. Opposition leaders called these accusations politically motivated.³⁸¹ Regarding unlawful police actions, OC Media wrote on 1 June 2022 that the Investigative Committee had opened 25 cases since the protests began.³⁸²

In a report by the HCAV on human rights violations by the police published in February 2023, the NGO stated that the police cracked down on demonstrations between late April 2022 and mid-June 2022. The NGO wrote that police reactions were becoming increasingly unpredictable and that there were situations in which officers were unable to control themselves. In addition, HCAV said it was unacceptable that during the protests in April-June 2022, police officers on duty without insignia and masked people in civilian clothes were used. According to the NGO, this practice was becoming more common.³⁸³

During a peaceful demonstration at the Yerablur Military Memorial on 21 September 2022, organised by relatives of soldiers killed during the war with Azerbaijan, the police violently arrested at least 37 people. Some demonstrators were injured in the process. In response, a group of local human rights organisations called for the resignation of Vahe Ghazaryan, the chief of police in Yerevan.³⁸⁴ In January 2023, Ghazaryan was appointed Minister for Home Affairs. In April 2023, Azatutyun wrote that no police officers had yet been held accountable or sanctioned.³⁸⁵

³⁷³ RFE/RL, 30/05/2022, [url](#)

³⁷⁴ OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 01/06/2022, [url](#)

³⁷⁵ Human Rights Defender of Armenia, 04/05/2022, [url](#); 05/05/2022, [url](#); 06/05/2022, [url](#); 10/05/2022, [url](#); 16/05/2022, [url](#); 17/05/2022, [url](#); 31/05/2022, [url](#)

³⁷⁶ Freedom House, 09/03/2023, [url](#); OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 03/06/2022, [url](#)

³⁷⁷ RFE/RL (Saribeikian G. & Museyelyan S.), 04/06/2022, [url](#)

³⁷⁸ OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 15/06/2022, [url](#); Human Rights Defender of Armenia, 04/06/2022, [url](#)

³⁷⁹ OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 15/06/2022, [url](#)

³⁸⁰ OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 11/05/2022, [url](#)

³⁸¹ Azatutyun, 14/06/2022, [url](#)

³⁸² OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 01/06/2022, [url](#)

³⁸³ HCAV, 20/02/2023, [url](#)

³⁸⁴ Freedom House, 09/03/2023, [url](#)

³⁸⁵ Azatutyun (Khulian A.), 14/04/2023, [url](#)

5.1.4. Protest actions in 2023

According to Freedom House, protests were very common in 2023, as in previous years. Political parties, citizens and civil society organisations alike organised numerous protests on a variety of social and political issues. The main reason for organising demonstrations remained potential safety risks in the context of the conflict with Azerbaijan.³⁸⁶ Several anti-government demonstrations followed Azerbaijan's offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh on 19 September 2023, and the subsequent surrender of the region.³⁸⁷ Freedom House pointed to a number of situations of excessive police violence during these demonstrations.³⁸⁸ At the same time, the organisation mentioned that demonstrators had challenged police officers in a number of cases, but that the police had also responded with force without provocation.³⁸⁹ According to the USDOS, the number of cases where the police used excessive force during these protests was limited, as was its use of stun grenades.³⁹⁰

Protests following the Azerbaijani offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh peaked on 25 September 2023 with 7,000 participants, and had gradually died down by the end of September 2023, according to the HCA, a local NGO that monitors protests. According to the HCA, a number of clashes between police and protesters occurred during these demonstrations.³⁹¹ On 19 September 2023, the police deployed stun grenades without prior warning and at least 34 people were injured, including 16 police officers.³⁹² The HCA referred to data from the Ministry for Home Affairs, which showed that more than five hundred people had been arrested. Sixty people were charged, 37 of whom were remanded in pretrial detention for twenty days to two months and five were placed under house arrest.³⁹³ Most were charged with hooliganism, participation in mass riots, violence against or assault of a police officer.³⁹⁴ According to the USDOS, 28 defendants were still in pretrial detention as of 3 November 2023. According to this source, the Investigative Committee had launched investigations into 58 people, 46 of whom had been officially charged in connection with the September 2023 protests.³⁹⁵

One of those charged was Levon Kocharyan, the son of former President Robert Kocharyan. He was accused of assaulting police officers. His lawyers claimed that Kocharyan was severely beaten by the police during his arrest.³⁹⁶ In November 2023, Kocharyan replaced a retiring Armenia Alliance MP, allowing him to leave the detention centre after two months in pretrial detention.³⁹⁷ The case remained ongoing after his release.³⁹⁸ No information was found on the outcome.

Both Azatutyun and CivilNet wrote that most of those on trial for participating in the protests in late September 2023 were university students. CivilNet reported the violent behaviour of some officers from a police special unit, identifiable by their red berets. According to the article, they randomly arrested university students, forcibly carried them away in police vehicles and detained them for longer than the maximum legal period of three hours.³⁹⁹ Azatutyun wrote in early November 2023 that the majority of the hundreds arrested were released after a few hours. At least 48 people, most of them

³⁸⁶ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

³⁸⁷ Freedom House, 29/02/2024, [url](#); HCA, 16/11/2023, pp. 4-5, [url](#); CivilNet, 21/09/2023, [url](#); RFE/RL, 22/09/2023, [url](#); Azatutyun, 24/09/2023, [url](#)

³⁸⁸ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

³⁸⁹ Freedom House, 09/04/2024, [url](#)

³⁹⁰ USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 27, [url](#)

³⁹¹ HCA, 16/11/2023, pp. 4-5, 24, [url](#)

³⁹² HCA, 16/11/2023, pp. 4-5, 18, [url](#)

³⁹³ News.am, 22/10/2023, [url](#); HCA, 16/11/2023, p. 24, [url](#)

³⁹⁴ HCA, 16/11/2023, pp. 4-5, 18, [url](#)

³⁹⁵ USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 28, [url](#)

³⁹⁶ OC Media (Barseghyan A.), 06/11/2023, [url](#)

³⁹⁷ Armen Press, 06/11/2023, [url](#)

³⁹⁸ OC Media (Barseghyan A.), 06/11/2023, [url](#)

³⁹⁹ CivilNet, 19/10/2023, [url](#)

university students, were charged with participating in mass riots. As of mid-October 2023, 31 people remained in pretrial detention pending investigation. On 1 November 2023, four more people were arrested for their participation in the September 2023 protests, according to the same article. The opposition called the arrests politically motivated, which the Investigative Committee denied. According to the same source, several human rights activists also expressed concern about the motives behind the arrests, given the choice of remand rather than house arrest.⁴⁰⁰

According to the USDOS, the authorities opened thirteen criminal investigations into allegations of excessive police brutality.⁴⁰¹

Several independent news agencies, including Eurasianet, RFE/RL and CivilNet, also reported on some other protests in 2023 during which participants were administratively detained. On 8 January 2023, for example, dozens of activists and civilians were detained in front of the Russian military base in Gyumri during a protest of about a hundred participants calling for Armenia's withdrawal from the CSTO.⁴⁰² On 8 August 2023, the police detained fourteen people from a group of war veterans while they were blocking traffic in the centre of Yerevan. The group was demanding that the authorities take measures against the months-long blockade of the Lachin corridor in order to bring humanitarian aid supplies to Nagorno-Karabakh. According to Azatutyun, they were arrested for disobeying police orders, but were soon released.⁴⁰³

5.1.5. Protest actions in 2024

A new wave of protests emerged in late April 2024 following the announcement of the handover of four Azerbaijani exclaves in the Armenian province of Tavush to Azerbaijan as part of the demarcation process. These protests, led by the archbishop of Tavush, Bagrat Galstanyan, continued until mid-June 2024. During this period, people took to the streets both in Tavush and in the capital to express their discontent and demanded the resignation of the Prime Minister. On 9 May 2024, when Galstanyan arrived in Yerevan with his march, the number of participants reached a peak⁴⁰⁴ with, depending on the source, 20,000 to 44,000 marchers.⁴⁰⁵

Several independent press outlets, including OC Media, RFE/RL and Azatutyun, reported on these protests on a regular basis. The police arrested demonstrators on several occasions. For example, on 24 April 2024, the police dispersed an anti-government demonstration in the capital organised by an opposition group called Armenian National Alliance. At least 96 people were arrested in the process. According to Azatutyun, the extraordinary reaction by the law enforcement officials resulted from an incident earlier in the day, when several government critics insulted Pashinyan and his wife during a memorial ceremony in Tsitsernakaberd.⁴⁰⁶ On 13 May 2024, the police arrested more than 170 people blocking streets in the capital. According to Azatutyun and OC Media, the anti-riot police used force.⁴⁰⁷ The Ministry for Home Affairs reported that 156 of the 171 arrested had been released by late afternoon.⁴⁰⁸ Azatutyun wrote on 14 May 2024 that, since the protests began, five journalists had been injured on the job.⁴⁰⁹ On 27 May 2024, RFE/RL reported more than 270 arrests. These again

⁴⁰⁰ Azatutyun (Bulghadarian N.), 01/11/2023, [url](#)

⁴⁰¹ USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 28, [url](#)

⁴⁰² Eurasianet (Gavin G.), 09/01/2023, [url](#)

⁴⁰³ Azatutyun (Yeghiazarian N.), 08/08/2023, [url](#)

⁴⁰⁴ Common Space (Poghosyan B.), 26/05/2024, [url](#)

⁴⁰⁵ Eurasianet, 10/05/2024, [url](#); Common Space (Poghosyan B.), 26/05/2024, [url](#)

⁴⁰⁶ Azatutyun (Bulghadarian N.), 29/04/2024, [url](#); ArmInfo (Mkrtchyan M.), 25/04/2024, [url](#)

⁴⁰⁷ OC Media (Avetisyan A.), 13/05/2024, [url](#); Azatutyun (Khulian A., Galstian S. & Khachatryan M.), 13/05/2024, [url](#)

⁴⁰⁸ Azatutyun (Khulian A., Galstian S. & Khachatryan M.), 13/05/2024, [url](#)

⁴⁰⁹ Azatutyun (Bulghadarian N.), 14/05/2024, [url](#)

involved people blocking traffic in the capital.⁴¹⁰ There are images showing police officers from the special unit beating Ashot Simonyan, a member of parliament from the opposition ARF party. According to the Ministry for Home Affairs, an internal investigation was launched and one of the officers involved has been suspended. No criminal investigation was opened.⁴¹¹ A group of local NGOs, including TIAC, HCAV and Protection of Rights Without Borders (PRWB), responded to the events of 27 May by saying that years of impunity had led to violence becoming the primary pressure tactic used by law enforcement officials.⁴¹²

On 12 June 2024, the situation escalated when protesters attempted to storm the parliament building and the police tried to stop them.⁴¹³ The police fired at least twenty stun grenades in response to protesters throwing bottles and other objects at law enforcement officials, according to CivilNet. These were the worst incidents of violence between protesters and the police in years, according to this source.⁴¹⁴ The HCA came to the same conclusion. This NGO described in a detailed report how the situation escalated up to the point when the police threw stun grenades at the crowd. The report also mentioned attempts by police officers to calm members of the anti-riot Red Berets when the latter violently confronted protesters, as well as other incidents of police violence against protesters.⁴¹⁵ A group of local NGOs and human rights activists said in a joint statement that the rally was generally peaceful and that the demonstrators were unarmed, but that some attendees used violence. They criticized the fact that, instead of isolating specific individuals, the police took extreme measures without proper warning by deploying stun grenades against the crowd.⁴¹⁶ In a July 2024 Byline Times article, Richard Giragosyan, Director of the independent Armenian think tank Regional Studies Centre (RSC), spoke of an initial overreaction by the police and law enforcement officials, but believed the authorities were very careful to avoid an escalation. According to the article, the authorities managed to prevent initial police violence from turning into a situation of severe repression.⁴¹⁷

According to the Ministry of Health, a total of 101 people were injured on 12 June 2024, including 17 police officers⁴¹⁸ and at least 10 journalists.⁴¹⁹ At least 98 people were arrested. Along with a group of local NGOs and human rights activists, Amnesty International expressed concern about excessive police violence on that day and called for a swift and impartial investigation into the police response.⁴²⁰ In addition, the Human Rights Defender also urged an independent investigation into any credible report of disproportionate use of force by the police.⁴²¹ As of mid-September 2024, no police officer has yet been charged for the violence on 12 June 2024.⁴²²

The Investigative Committee opened an investigation into demonstrators who used violence against law enforcement officials.⁴²³ According to RFE/RL, the Investigative Committee identified forty people involved. A lawyer linked to the opposition spoke of 28 people still detained as of 13 June 2024 who risked criminal charges.⁴²⁴ On 17 June 2024, RFE/RL wrote that twelve criminal cases had been

⁴¹⁰ RFE/RL, 27/05/2024, [url](#)

⁴¹¹ Azatutyun (Bulghadarian N.), 28/05/2024, [url](#); OC Media (Barseghyan A.), 30/05/2024, [url](#)

⁴¹² TIAC, 28/05/2024, [url](#)

⁴¹³ HCA, 20/06/2024, [url](#)

⁴¹⁴ CivilNet (Dovich M.), 13/06/2024, [url](#)

⁴¹⁵ HCA, 20/06/2024, p. 8-13, [url](#)

⁴¹⁶ TIAC, 14/06/2024, [url](#)

⁴¹⁷ Byline Times (Neal W.), 15/07/2024, [url](#)

⁴¹⁸ Amnesty International, 13/06/2024, [url](#)

⁴¹⁹ RSF (Cavelier J.), 14/06/2024, [url](#); Panorama, 13/06/2024, [url](#)

⁴²⁰ Amnesty International, 13/06/2024, [url](#); TIAC, 14/06/2024, [url](#)

⁴²¹ CivilNet (Dovich M.), 13/06/2024, [url](#)

⁴²² Azatutyun (Bulghadarian N.), 12/09/2024, [url](#)

⁴²³ Amnesty International, 13/06/2024, [url](#)

⁴²⁴ RFE/RL, 13/06/2024, [url](#)

opened. Eight of these charges involved participation in large-scale riots and hooliganism. Two of the defendants had been placed under house arrest and one person had been banned from leaving the country. The lawyer for one of them called the criminal cases against the protesters politically motivated. He believed the authorities were thereby trying to justify police violence.⁴²⁵ An article by Azatutyun published on 12 September 2024 mentioned one person charged with participating in mass riots and fourteen others with hooliganism.⁴²⁶

5.2. Consequences due to participation in anti-government demonstrations

Cedoca asked multiple sources during its fact-finding mission in Armenia about potential implications for people arrested during or owing to participation in a protest. The answer was that they generally do not experience any problems.⁴²⁷ Most people are released after a few hours,⁴²⁸ unless they have committed a criminal offence.⁴²⁹ However, the manner in which these arrests are carried out, sometimes with disproportionate force, raises some concerns, according to multiple sources.⁴³⁰

Asked about the lawfulness of arrests during demonstrations, UIC explained that the police have the right to intervene when a demonstration is not peaceful. According to this source, the reason for detaining someone is usually because that person is not peaceful. Everyone is usually released within three hours. This is the legal deadline for deciding whether or not to launch a criminal investigation. In a limited number of situations, detainees remain detained. According to UIC, even in the case of individuals whose arrest is considered unlawful, there is generally always some sort of justification that a crime was committed, such as throwing a rock at the police. There is no guarantee that there will be sufficient arguments to actually bring every case to court. Generally, it is the most aggressive individuals who have to appear in court. The worst outcome, according to this source, is the risk of an administrative fine of 50,000 AMD, equivalent to 115 euros. However, courts are often reluctant to accept such police requests, according to UIC. UIC also notes that protests are becoming increasingly aggressive, and that the police intervene by force in such cases, as is within their remit. According to the NGO, this happened once in 2023 and several times in 2022. For example, during a demonstration in front of the Prime Minister's residence on 3 June 2022 – one of the most violent demonstrations in this period –, everyone, barring a few exceptions, was released after a few hours. Some individuals who remained detained were charged with criminal offences and were referred to court. People who behaved aggressively and whose behaviour was captured on footage were remanded in pretrial detention. In the other situations, the charges were dropped. UIC is not aware of any situations where peaceful protesters were detained. Asked about any repercussions following an arrest, UIC responded that there were absolutely no consequences, either legal or otherwise. Even individuals who have to undergo integrity checks as part of selection processes for law enforcement agencies are not affected by this. This is not taken into account, according to this source. Moreover, such information is not retained, UIC said.⁴³¹

A political analyst stated that most individuals are held for two to three hours. A limited number of people are detained beyond the time permitted, sometimes for days. This may be because the person

⁴²⁵ RFE/RL, 17/06/2024, [url](#)

⁴²⁶ Azatutyun (Bulghadarian N.), 12/09/2024, [url](#)

⁴²⁷ Sources close to the EU, e-mail, 30/05/2024; Political analyst, Yerevan, 19/03/2024; UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

⁴²⁸ Sources close to the EU, e-mail, 30/05/2024; HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024; UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

⁴²⁹ Political analyst, Yerevan, 19/03/2024; UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

⁴³⁰ Sources close to the EU, e-mail, 30/05/2024; HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024; DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

⁴³¹ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

in question has actually done something wrong – for example, used violence against the police – but it also could be the result of a mistake made by the police or justice system. If people were wrongfully detained, there are some options for restoring their rights. People arrested during demonstrations cannot be considered political prisoners, according to this source.⁴³²

When asked how likely it is to be arrested during a protest, HCA responded that it depends upon the nature of the demonstration. If there is a high-level political order to end a protest, the chances of being arrested are greater. There are also some situations, according to this source, where people have been detained for no reason, such as when leaving the location of the protest. If the police judge that a certain action or behaviour is illegal, there is a chance of being arrested. Even if this has no further legal implications for the person in question, such situations still have a chilling effect, according to HCA. It may influence their behaviour during future demonstrations or prevent them from participating in other protests.⁴³³

HCA also mentioned that most people detained during protest actions were held for up to three hours, but that there were also some cases of people who were detained for several days, being remanded in pretrial detention for two months or more thereafter. According to HCA, in such situations, it is often clear from the start that a lawsuit will accomplish nothing, but a prosecutor nevertheless decides to refer the case to court, where it often drags on for a long time. The case usually ends with the acquittal of the defendant after a long period in pretrial detention. In this way, pretrial detention can be considered a punishment in itself. In addition, this source spoke of a change in the approach of law enforcement officials towards demonstrators, given that a number of demonstrators are also facing criminal charges in connection with their participation in protest actions. HCA was referring to the arrest of 11 people in September 2023 during a demonstration following Azerbaijan's offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. None of them had a political profile, according to the NGO. Most of them were young and from Nagorno-Karabakh. While the rationale for detaining them was unclear to HCA, the NGO considered it a troubling response. If it was a political decision, the authorities may have wanted to send a message that, as guests, they should not organise protests.⁴³⁴

In January 2024, EVN Report reported on the situation of the eleven people arrested on 19 September 2023, during a protest following the Azerbaijani offensive. The eleven were detained for two months and charged with hooliganism and inciting large-scale riots. A verdict is still pending at the time of writing this report. A lawyer representing several people involved said the decision to detain them was arbitrary and that pretrial detention was being used as a punitive rather than preventative measure. According to the Code of Criminal Procedure, pretrial detention may be imposed as a preventative measure to prevent a defendant from fleeing or committing another crime. Another reason may be to ensure that a defendant complies with a court order, such as a ban on communicating with witnesses. The purpose of pretrial detention is to induce the defendant to behave properly while awaiting trial, according to EVN Report. In addition, since July 2022, other preventative measures exist, such as house arrest, but judges do not make sufficient use of them. Pretrial detention is still the most commonly used preventative measure.⁴³⁵

HCA further mentioned that there was a risk for participants in anti-government demonstrations of being called up as reservists to participate in military training⁴³⁶. According to HCA, this happened at the beginning of a series of anti-government demonstrations in the spring of 2022, following a

⁴³² Political analyst, interview, Yerevan, 19/03/2024

⁴³³ HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

⁴³⁴ HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

⁴³⁵ EVN Report (Karapetyan A.), 10/01/2024, [url](#)

⁴³⁶ The military training sessions for reservists aims to enhance their military capabilities and knowledge, while also serving as a means to provide additional manpower to the Armenian military along the border. See EVN Report (Abrahamyan G.), 04/10/2022, [url](#)

statement by Andranik Kocharyan, the chairman of the parliamentary committee on defence and security affairs and MP for the Civil Contract party.⁴³⁷ In May 2022, he suggested identifying individuals who actively participated in the protest actions, forwarding their names to the Ministry of Defence, and calling them up for military training. He insinuated that a number of protesters had evaded military service or failed to respond to previous periodic calls for reservists.⁴³⁸ According to HCA, there are no rules regarding the selection of individuals invited to participate in military training. The organisation was aware of at least 25 prominent opposition political figures and influencers who had been called up to participate in military training as reservists after participating in an anti-government demonstration in 2022. This figure refers to individuals who self-reported. In addition, there are others who participated in military training without reporting it, as well as some who were rejected on medical grounds, making it difficult to obtain an estimate of the exact number, according to the NGO. Regardless of the number who were actually summoned, the apparent collaboration between the government and the military to summon people in this manner is a cause for concern, according to HCA. The risk of being called up for military training owing to participation in a protest has a chilling effect, according to this source.⁴³⁹

A few days after the beginning of anti-government demonstrations in early May 2022, Azatutyun wrote that a number of Armenian human rights activists had expressed concern over Kocharyan's announcement.⁴⁴⁰ A week after the government announced new training sessions on 23 June 2022, an opposition leader from the ARF party stated that he knew of dozens of opposition activists who had been called up. They were reportedly arrested during demonstrations and were members of his party.⁴⁴¹ On 14 September 2022, during opposition demonstrations against an Azerbaijani attack on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border earlier that day, a ruling party MP argued that the protesters had "earned a voucher" to report to a military commissariat and be sent to the front. Armine Sadikyan, an expert on human rights in the army for the HCAV, argued that military service should not be punitive in any way and, therefore, disapproved of these statements.⁴⁴² Human rights activist Sakunts from the HCAV also argued that the transmission of personal information about individuals detained during the protests was illegal.⁴⁴³

Cedoca asked several sources during the fact-finding mission about the conditions under which the police used force against protesters and the likelihood of being subjected to police violence during an arrest. Multiple sources reported that in several situations the police responded violently to protesters who had behaved in a hostile manner, provoked or used violence.⁴⁴⁴ The likelihood of police violence is higher when the political opposition is behind the organisation of the protest, according to HCA. The risk of being exposed to police violence is highest shortly before or at the time of arrest, according to HCA. Police violence may also occur in a police vehicle. At detention facilities, it is far less prevalent, according to the organisation, although there have been some reports of ill-treatment in detention. In general, police officers remain unpunished, even in situations where footage of their violent behaviour is available.⁴⁴⁵

In addition, HRH Yerevan mentioned that there had been several reports of mistreatment at police stations in recent years. It may become problematic again if it becomes habitual, according to the

⁴³⁷ HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

⁴³⁸ Azatutyun (Badalyan S. & Zargaryan R.), 05/05/2022, [url](#)

⁴³⁹ HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

⁴⁴⁰ Azatutyun (Badalyan S. & Zargaryan R.), 05/05/2022, [url](#)

⁴⁴¹ Azatutyun (Saribekyan G.), 01/07/2022, [url](#)

⁴⁴² EVN Report (Abrahamyan G.), 04/10/2022, [url](#)

⁴⁴³ Azatutyun (Badalyan S. & Zargaryan R.), 05/05/2022, [url](#)

⁴⁴⁴ Established organisation with expertise in human rights in Armenia, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024; TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; Political analyst, Yerevan, 19/03/2024

⁴⁴⁵ HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

organisation. ECHR rulings, according to the NGO, have ensured that torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement officials have not been a structural problem for more than a decade. Since Ghazaryan's appointment as Minister for Home Affairs in January 2023, civil society organisations have been concerned about backsliding in this area. Three to four cases of mistreatment have been identified in recent years, according to the NGO. The NGO considers it unlikely that a person who has been arrested is at risk of police violence in the presence of a lawyer. As with HCA, this source stated that police violence, particularly beatings rather than torture, occurred mainly in the early stages, for example on the way to the police station before a lawyer is present.⁴⁴⁶

Both UIC and a political analyst stated that police violence against arrestees during demonstrations occurred, but that it is not a widespread problem.⁴⁴⁷ When arrests are made during demonstrations, a lawyer is usually present at the police station, which makes the police more cautious. According to UIC, police violence against detainees may occur in other circumstances, for example in the case of petty crime, such as drug trafficking or theft. In such situations, the police may ill-treat someone to obtain testimony or identify their accomplices. There are no statistics on police violence, according to UIC, but the NGO had the impression that there has been a decline in police violence since 2022. Based on a survey of 1,200 on the work of law enforcement officials people published on 26 March 2024, UIC concluded that the number of people reporting mistreatment by the police was limited.⁴⁴⁸ Out of a total of 1,200 people, 230 reported having experienced police interrogation, of whom 1.7% reported having experienced police violence/beatings and 2.2% reported having witnessed it. The presence of the Patrol Police on the streets reduces the incidence of police violence in police vehicles, according to UIC.⁴⁴⁹

Another source stated that police violence had been commonplace for many years, but that it was much less common now. However, this source described as unacceptable a number of situations of police violence and coercive measures during demonstrations.⁴⁵⁰ Like several others, this source referred to an excessive police response towards family members of fallen and missing soldiers during a protest action in September 2022.⁴⁵¹ Another example cited by multiple sources was the violent way in which former President Kocharyan's son was tackled in a police vehicle after a rally in late September 2023.⁴⁵²

5.3. Measures against police violence and malpractice of law enforcement officials

Local NGOs, international organisations such as HRW, and the USDOS reported for several years in a row that police officers typically went unpunished for violence against arrestees or violence during demonstrations.⁴⁵³ Criminal investigations into violence by law enforcement officials are usually closed

⁴⁴⁶ HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

⁴⁴⁷ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; Political analyst, Yerevan, 19/03/2024

⁴⁴⁸ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

⁴⁴⁹ UIC, 26/03/2024, [url](#)

⁴⁵⁰ Established organisation with human rights expertise in Armenia, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024

⁴⁵¹ Established organisation with expertise in human rights in Armenia, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024; TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; Political analyst, Yerevan, 19/03/2024

⁴⁵² Established organisation with human rights expertise in Armenia, interview, Armenia, 20/03/2024; HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

⁴⁵³ HCA, 16/11/2023, p. 24, [url](#); TIAC, 14/06/2024, [url](#); HCAV, 20/02/2023, [url](#); HCAV, 03/07/2023, [url](#); HRW, 17/01/2021, [url](#); HRW, 07/01/2022, [url](#); HRW, 27/12/2022, [url](#); HRW, 11/01/2024, [url](#); USDOS, 23/04/2024, p. 1, [url](#)

because no crime could be established, or suspended because no suspect could be identified, according to HRW.⁴⁵⁴

The Criminal Code lists torture as a crime, as opposed to other forms of cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment. In practice, according to the USDOS and HRW, situations of torture by law enforcement officials are usually not investigated as such, but rather on the grounds of abuse of power, which carries a lighter penalty.⁴⁵⁵ DDF also pointed this out during Cedoca's fact-finding mission. The organisation explained that there are problems in qualifying police violence. The bar for qualifying a crime as torture is very high, according to DDF. The fact that only torture is included in the Criminal Code as a criminal offence whereas other forms of ill-treatment are covered by the article on "exceeding official powers", for which the penalty is much lower, creates a situation where ill-treatment cannot be adequately punished. According to the NGO, although there is a willingness to investigate the cases, the relevant authorities lack sufficient expertise.⁴⁵⁶

The first and only conviction for torture occurred in 2022. A former prison employee was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison.⁴⁵⁷ Since July 2023, even in the case of serious and very serious crimes, an offender who actively repents can be exempted from criminal liability. Civil society organisations fear that this change in the law will make impunity official and violate victims' rights. Another concern is the possible selective application of this law as a political tool.⁴⁵⁸

Since July 2022, a specialist department within the Investigative Committee has been empowered to investigate situations of torture. Investigators from this body are not experienced enough to carry out this task properly, according to human rights activists.⁴⁵⁹ If the Investigative Committee is guilty of torture, it is the National Security Service that investigates. Human rights lawyers argue that the latter body lacks independence and transparency. The fact that both old and new situations of mistreatment by law enforcement officials go unpunished ensures that the problem persists, according to the USDOS. Moreover, suspected perpetrators are often able to continue in their positions or are promoted.⁴⁶⁰

The USDOS wrote that in 2023, according to local NGOs, there had been a notable increase in reports of violence, abuse and torture by law enforcement officials during detentions. This was happening both in Yerevan and outside, but the situation was worse at regional police stations, human rights activists were quoted by the USDOS as saying.⁴⁶¹ In a joint statement in July 2023, NGOs spoke of hidden situations of violence and torture at police departments and other law enforcement agencies. One explanation is the failure of the police to fight crime, for example drug-smuggling. The NGOs argued that extracting confessions to solve a crime is often the only reason to torture someone. In today's police system, solving crimes is more important than collecting evidence. Such police practices are the result not only of the authorities' failure to respond, but also of inadequate police reforms.⁴⁶² Unlike at prisons and at police detention facilities, no public monitoring happens at police stations. Only a limited number of police stations have camera surveillance.⁴⁶³

In an HCAV report on human rights violations by the police published in February 2023, the organisation analysed practices of police violence and disproportionate responses in the context of

⁴⁵⁴ HRW, 07/01/2022, [url](#); HRW, 27/12/2022, [url](#)

⁴⁵⁵ USDOS, 23/04/2024, pp. 5-6, [url](#); HRW, 11/01/2024, [url](#)

⁴⁵⁶ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

⁴⁵⁷ HRW, 27/12/2022, [url](#)

⁴⁵⁸ USDOS, 23/04/2024, pp. 5-7, [url](#)

⁴⁵⁹ USDOS, 23/04/2024, pp. 5-6, [url](#); DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

⁴⁶⁰ USDOS, 23/04/2024, pp. 5-6, [url](#)

⁴⁶¹ USDOS, 23/04/2024, pp. 1, 6-7, [url](#)

⁴⁶² HCAV, 03/07/2023, [url](#)

⁴⁶³ USDOS, 23/04/2024, pp. 1, 6-7, [url](#)

demonstrations. It concluded that there had been an increase in police violations in 2022 versus the first few years after the revolution. Moreover, illegal actions were not being sufficiently investigated, perpetrators were not being identified and held accountable, and certain actions were being encouraged. In addition, numerous procedural violations occurred at police stations. There was a general impunity for law enforcement officials.⁴⁶⁴

In November 2023, the HCA wrote in a monitoring report on protests that police officers who use force, make unlawful interventions or detain protesters without justifiable reasons generally go unpunished. According to the report, the authorities either justified the police's behaviour or ignored such acts.⁴⁶⁵

In response to police violence against protesters on 12 June 2024, a group of local NGOs and human rights activists declared that no police officers had been held accountable for violence against demonstrators and journalists in recent years, nor for using extreme and unnecessary means against protesters. An additional cause for concern was the fact that certain violent police actions had been ordered, encouraged and approved at the highest political level, according to these sources. After the events on 12 June 2024, Pashinyan announced that the police had acted correctly. Such statements not only affirm police impunity, but affect the objectivity and independence of investigations into police violence, the NGO and human rights activist group argued. Another observation was that the Investigative Committee had been in the habit of launching criminal proceedings only in cases of suspected illegal actions by demonstrators, but not into cases of violence by police officers. This raised concerns about the independence and impartiality of the law enforcement system, including the Prosecutor General and the Investigative Committee.⁴⁶⁶

During the fact-finding mission, Cedoca asked various sources about the potential steps that can be taken when someone is a victim of police violence. The main concern in this area, according to the sources consulted, was the general impunity of police officers.⁴⁶⁷ Another cause for concern was three incidents of police violence against lawyers in 2023 – something unheard of in Armenia.⁴⁶⁸

HCA explained that no police officer had been convicted of police violence during demonstrations. However, there are plenty of clear cases that have been captured on camera. The only response to police violence has been political statements, some disciplinary proceedings and some dismissals. This, according to HCA, is insufficient to influence police officers' behaviour and deter them from using force.⁴⁶⁹

Both UIC and DDF said that the police system protects itself.⁴⁷⁰ According to UIC, some police officers have been investigated, but these cases usually drag on for a long time. In one situation, the suspected perpetrator was promoted during the ongoing investigation.⁴⁷¹ The usual response, is to fire the police officer involved. In doing so, the authorities try to show that they are doing something, but that is not the desired accountability, according to DDF. When pressure is applied – for example, when a case is

⁴⁶⁴ HCAV, 20/02/2023, [url](#)

⁴⁶⁵ HCA, 16/11/2023, p. 24, [url](#)

⁴⁶⁶ TIAC, 14/06/2024, [url](#)

⁴⁶⁷ HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024; HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024; DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

⁴⁶⁸ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024; TIAC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024; HRW, 11/01/2024, [url](#); USDOS, 23/04/2024, pp. 6-7, [url](#)

⁴⁶⁹ HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024

⁴⁷⁰ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024; DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

⁴⁷¹ UIC, interview, Yerevan, 21/03/2024

publicised in the media – the case is more likely to be investigated and the perpetrators charged. In the absence of publicity or public interest, there is a greater chance of impunity, according to DDF.⁴⁷²

Despite general impunity, several sources recommended hiring a lawyer and seeking justice in cases of police violence.⁴⁷³ According to HRH Yerevan, people are usually not afraid to denounce police violence or take a case to court. Lawyers regularly turn to media outlets to raise awareness of a case.⁴⁷⁴ In addition, the Ombudsman can also bring such events to the attention of the public.⁴⁷⁵ According to DDF, people are generally not afraid to report police violence, but a lack of confidence that the case will be handled effectively is the main reason for not filing a complaint.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷² DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

⁴⁷³ HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024; HCA, interview, Yerevan, 26/03/2024; Political analyst, Yerevan, 19/03/2024

⁴⁷⁴ HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024

⁴⁷⁵ HRH Yerevan, interview, Yerevan, 25/03/2024; Political analyst, Yerevan, 19/03/2024

⁴⁷⁶ DDF, interview, Yerevan, 20/03/2024

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