ARF-DASHNAKTSUTYUN

INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAT

BRIEFING NOTE

Democratic Backsliding, Political Persecution, and Legal Safeguards in Armenia

Parliamentary hearings of 16 November 2026 and the rejected draft National Assembly statement

20 November 2026

Analysis and Context for Policymakers and the Public

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This note brings together a contextual news report, an English translation of Lilit Galstyan's opening address, and the text of the proposed National Assembly statement with its explanatory memorandum.

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1. Context and Parliamentary Developments

Armenian Opposition Holds Parliamentary Hearings on Democratic Backsliding and Political Persecution

Yerevan, 17 November 2026 — At the initiative of the opposition "Armenia" parliamentary faction, hearings were held at Armenia's National Assembly on November 16 to examine democratic backsliding, political persecution, and the protection of fundamental rights and legal safeguards in the country.

The hearings, formally titled "Democratic Backsliding in the Republic of Armenia, the Protection of the Rights of Persons Subjected to Political Persecution, and Legal Safeguards," brought together members of opposition parliamentary factions, representatives of extra-parliamentary opposition forces, and members of the public.

The proceedings were opened by Lilit Galstyan, a member of the Bureau of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), a parliamentarian from the "Armenia" faction, and Chair of the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Protection of Human Rights and Public Affairs.

In her opening address, Galstyan presented a critical assessment of the state of democracy and the rule of law in Armenia, arguing that formal constitutional and legislative guarantees of fundamental rights were increasingly at odds with political and institutional realities.

She raised concerns about judicial independence, police accountability, the extensive use of pretrial detention, conditions in penitentiary institutions, restrictions on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, and what she described as politically motivated prosecutions targeting opposition politicians, local government officials, civil society representatives, and members of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Galstyan also referred to assessments by international human rights organizations and findings of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), particularly its September 22, 2026 report concerning Armenia's parliamentary elections. She highlighted concerns about selective law enforcement, criminal proceedings targeting opposition figures and their supporters, and the potential chilling effect of such proceedings on political participation.

The hearings took place against the backdrop of a parliamentary dispute over a draft National Assembly statement submitted by the "Armenia" faction, addressing many of the same concerns.

On November 12, the National Assembly's Standing Committee on State and Legal Affairs declined to endorse the proposed statement, which had been presented by Galstyan. The draft described what its authors considered an unprecedented deterioration of democratic governance and fundamental rights in Armenia, alleging widespread political persecution, selective justice, and the misuse of law enforcement and judicial institutions against government critics.

The proposed statement called on the National Assembly to reaffirm Armenia's commitment to democratic principles and fundamental rights, express solidarity with individuals described as political prisoners and victims of political persecution, demand an end to unlawful prosecutions and the release of political prisoners, and prevent interference with judicial independence.

It also appealed to the European Union, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, international human rights organizations, and diplomatic missions accredited to Armenia to address the alleged violations and provide clear assessments of the country's human rights situation.

On November 17, one day after the hearings, the ruling Civil Contract majority voted against including the draft statement on the National Assembly's plenary agenda. The motion received 33 votes in favor, 54 against, and four abstentions. Representatives of the ruling party disputed the opposition's characterization of the country's democratic and human rights record, describing the allegations as unfounded.

The hearings and the proposed parliamentary statement thus formed part of a broader opposition initiative to bring concerns over democratic governance, political persecution, and the rule of law before Armenia's legislature and the international community. While the hearings provided a platform for presenting these concerns and hearing from participants, the rejection of the draft statement prevented the National Assembly from formally considering and adopting the proposed declaration.

The following two sections reproduce Galstyan's opening address and the text of the draft statement, including its explanatory memorandum. The draft statement was not adopted by the National Assembly.

2. Opening Address by Lilit Galstyan

Member of the ARF Bureau; Member of the "Armenia" Faction; Chair of the National Assembly Standing Committee on Protection of Human Rights and Public Affairs | Parliamentary hearings, 16 November 2026

Dear compatriots and colleagues,

Today, we will discuss democratic backsliding in the Republic of Armenia, the protection of the rights of individuals subjected to political persecution, and the legal safeguards intended to uphold those rights.

On the surface, and on paper, human rights and fundamental freedoms in Armenia are protected and guaranteed by both domestic legislation and international conventions.

However, democracy and the rule of law are assessed not by proclaimed objectives, but by the actual independence of state institutions, the administration of justice, and government accountability.

Their true measure becomes apparent when citizens confront the power of the state and experience firsthand how the law operates, how human dignity is protected, whether the courts are independent, whether the police are accountable, and whether government power is constrained by the rule of law.

It is precisely an assessment against these standards, coupled with the nightmarish reality in which we live, that leads us to conclude that we are, de facto, confronting an authoritarian regime in which power is concentrated in the hands of one individual and one political force. The boundaries of checks and balances among the branches of government have simply been erased, and every red line has been crossed.

I am entitled to make such an assessment publicly because it is from this very podium that calls have been made to fill the basements of the KGB with opposition figures, to hang people by ropes, and to carry out dozens of other such directives and objectives.

Armenia's institutional democratic backsliding has also been documented by a number of

international human rights and research organizations. Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Venice Commission, in addressing the fundamental principles underpinning the rule of law in Armenia, have established that Armenia remains a partly free, hybrid political system in which judicial independence remains unresolved, while torture in penitentiary institutions, police unaccountability, the disproportionate use of force, and the erosion of freedom of peaceful assembly are systemic problems.

It has also been documented that judicial and legal reforms, as well as anti-corruption policies, have failed to produce positive results, while the quality of governance, political rights, and civil liberties have steadily deteriorated since 2021.

This is a systemic pattern that clearly demonstrates how far Armenia has strayed from the democratic values it was promised, and how profound the gulf has become between its de jure and de facto realities.

2.1 Police Impunity and Torture

One of the most vulnerable areas concerns police impunity and torture.

As of 2025, not a single police officer had been held accountable for the disproportionate use of force during peaceful assemblies, violence against demonstrators and opposition members of parliament, the torture of persons taken into custody, the use of stun grenades, or injuries inflicted on more than 100 participants in peaceful demonstrations.

The police have effectively been transformed into an instrument serving the arbitrary interests of the political authorities, while the country itself has become a police state.

The proposed 40 percent increase in funding for the Ministry of Internal Affairs, bringing its allocation to AMD 41.5 billion under the draft 2027 state budget, is itself indicative of this trend.

2.2 Rights of Persons Deprived of Liberty and the Penitentiary System

Under international law and the legislation of the Republic of Armenia, pretrial detention is an exceptional measure of last resort involving the deprivation of an individual's liberty.

In Armenia, however, it has become a repressive instrument used to humiliate human dignity, punish political opponents, and even deprive people of their lives.

At present, of the 3,276 individuals deprived of their liberty in penitentiary institutions, 1,552—approximately 48 percent—are being held in pretrial detention. This is the highest rate in Europe and the region.

Courts approve 61 percent of requests for pretrial detention, while hundreds of citizens remain behind bars for four or five years without a verdict.

Given the inhumane conditions prevailing in most penitentiary institutions, this constitutes a direct violation of the constitutional rights to life and personal liberty.

2.3 Conditions in Penitentiary Institutions

The conditions of detention in penitentiary institutions, the inadequate standard of medical care, and the inhumane living conditions constitute another serious concern.

Incidents of self-harm, suicide, and death are not subjected to proper investigation.

In 2025, 24 deaths were recorded in penitentiary institutions, eight of which were suicides. Four deaths have been recorded this year.

These are not merely statistics. They represent a failure to protect the right to life, a fundamental responsibility of the state.

2.4 Freedom of Expression and Journalists' Rights

Numerous problems persist in the area of freedom of expression.

In 2025, the total number of recorded violations of the rights of journalists and media outlets in Armenia rose to 224, compared with 208 the previous year. Fifteen incidents of physical violence were recorded in 2024 and 2025.

Of the 45 recorded cases involving obstruction of journalists' professional activities, targeting, threats, and insults, 33 were attributable to state institutions or public officials.

This, too, points to a systemic increase in repression.

2.5 Persecution of the Armenian Apostolic Church

Despite constitutional guarantees protecting religious organizations and freedom of religion, the ruling regime continues to subject the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church to systematic repression and persecution.

Senior clergy and other members of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin are being arrested, detained, and deprived of the freedom to carry out their duties through unlawful judicial or administrative measures.

These arbitrary acts of retaliation against the Church are manifestly unconstitutional and constitute criminal interference in the internal self-governance of religious organizations. They also violate constitutional guarantees of freedom of conscience and religion.

2.6 Privacy, Fair Trial, and the Presumption of Innocence

The Constitution declares that the human being is the highest value. Yet violations of the inviolability of private life have become widespread.

Mass surveillance, covert recordings, and the targeting of family members have become commonplace.

The authorities' sense of impunity has reached the point where the Investigative Committee itself publicly disseminates unsubstantiated information concerning individuals' private and family lives.

Investigative bodies and the judicial system have effectively been transformed into instruments of political retaliation, applying double standards.

When directives to strip opposition leaders of their assets are issued from this very podium, it becomes impossible to speak meaningfully of proportionality under the law or the right to a fair trial.

The cases involving Bishop Mikael, Archbishop Bagrat, and 17 innocent individuals offer a comprehensive illustration of the state of Armenia's justice system: a manifest intention to demonize political opponents, the repeated dissemination of fabricated accusations of "terrorism," manipulated evidence presented in support of the charges, and, throughout these proceedings, violations by representatives of the political authorities of another fundamental constitutional right—the presumption of innocence.

2.7 Political Prisoners and Persecution of Opposition Figures

Democratic backsliding has reached unprecedented proportions, particularly in view of the large number of political prisoners and individuals subjected to political persecution.

Since 2021, opposition candidates in nearly all local government elections—including those in Kajaran, Goris, Meghri, Berd, Vardenis, Gyumri, Vanadzor, and Stepanavan—have been subjected to political and legal repression.

Tragically, some have paid for their political views with their lives, while others have found themselves behind bars, in some cases together with members of their families.

As in previous cases, the authorities bear full responsibility for the death of Arsen Gevorgyan, a candidate in the Stepanavan local government elections.

Today, the proceedings against the leaders of four major opposition political forces—Robert Kocharyan, Samvel Karapetyan, Gagik Tsarukyan, and Andranik Tevanyan—have nothing to do with the administration of justice.

They are nothing other than political retaliation and revenge, clearly intended to decimate the opposition and instill a climate of fear throughout the country.

The same approach has been applied to numerous other representatives of the political opposition, including Ishkhan Saghatelyan, Armen Ashotyan, Artur Sargsyan, Igor Sargsyan, Narek Karapetyan, Davit Ghazinyan, Gerasim Vardanyan, Avetik Chalabyan, Martun Grigoryan, Mamikon Aslanyan, Vardan Ghukasyan, Khachik Galstyan, Aregnaz Manukyan, Alik Aleksanyan, Liparit Drmeyan, Artur Danielyan, and others.

Many of these individuals should have been here today. Instead, they are either in detention facilities or under house arrest.

Numerous individuals deprived of their liberty fully meet the criteria for classification as political prisoners under Resolution 1900 (2012) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).

In the months preceding the 2026 National Assembly elections, numerous cases were recorded involving criminal prosecutions, searches, arrests, dismissals, and administrative and economic pressure directed against civil society activists, journalists and media outlets, lawyers, and members of the academic community.

The number of university lecturers purged and dismissed from various higher education institutions because of their views, which do not align with those of the authorities, exceeds several dozen.

Arrests have been accompanied by degrading treatment, including the disproportionate use of handcuffs, forcing individuals who offered no resistance to the ground, restrictions on contact with family members—including minor children—obstruction of the right to legal defense, the assignment of cases to judges whose rulings can be anticipated, and restrictions on the right to leave the country.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe also addressed the pressure exerted against political opponents in its Report No. 16486 of September 22, 2026, documenting a number of extremely serious concerns.

In particular, paragraphs 25, 39, 40, 72, 79, 80, and 87 noted the increasing number of law enforcement actions against opposition candidates and activists, the almost exclusive concentration of mass criminal proceedings concerning alleged vote-buying on the opposition and

business circles associated with it, and concerns regarding selective enforcement of the law and guarantees of due process.

The PACE election observation delegation calls upon the Armenian authorities to end selective criminal prosecution of the opposition, ensure all due-process guarantees in election-related proceedings, bring law enforcement practices into conformity with European human rights standards, and guarantee the right of all political forces to peaceful assembly and protest.

The report also makes a particularly significant observation concerning how the Central Electoral Commission's exclusion of the results from several polling stations, together with inadequate legal proceedings, led to the Prosperous Armenia Party losing its parliamentary seats, thereby also violating the electoral rights of thousands of citizens.

2.8 Conclusion

Dear compatriots,

What I have presented today, together with the realities we confront every day, paints a painful picture of a situation that bears no resemblance to universally accepted standards of human rights protection—a reality in which the foundations of the rule of law, democratic statehood, and the country's constitutional order itself have been undermined.

Our hearings today must therefore mark not merely another occasion for documenting these violations, but the beginning of concrete action and the assumption of new responsibilities.

I believe that organizations and initiatives dedicated, in particular, to the protection of human rights and the defense of political prisoners must join forces.

I believe we have the resources to do so.

Thank you.

3. Draft Statement of the National Assembly

Submitted by the "Armenia" parliamentary faction; not adopted by the National Assembly.

Democratic backsliding in the Republic of Armenia has reached unprecedented proportions. It is manifested in gross violations of electoral rights; restrictions on freedom of expression, conscience, and assembly; pressure on the press; unlawful criminal, administrative, disciplinary, and other forms of persecution against individuals who do not share the political authorities' views; selective administration of justice; and an unprecedented number of political prisoners and individuals subjected to political persecution.

Law enforcement agencies, as well as institutions vested with public authority, have been transformed into overt instruments of political persecution, retaliation, unlawful seizure of property, and the dispossession of individuals.

The actions of the ruling regime are aimed at instilling a climate of fear and weakening the institutions that safeguard national and societal resilience. The political majority's determination to retain control of the executive levers of power at any cost undermines the foundations of a state governed by the rule of law, democracy, and social justice.

National institutions are subjected to sustained repression and persecution. Individuals are arrested, detained, deprived of the freedom to carry out their activities through unlawful judicial or administrative measures, or subjected to continuing persecution. Those targeted include:

- The Armenian Apostolic Holy Church; His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians; and senior clergy, members of the clergy, and staff of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin;
- Family members and relatives of servicemen who sacrificed their lives in defense of the homeland;
- Leaders of opposition political parties and alliances, individuals engaged in political activities, and persons critical of the authorities;
- Individuals engaged in civic and public activities;
- Heads of municipalities, members of municipal councils, and employees of local self-government bodies.

Pressure exerted against political opponents has also been documented in Report No. 16486 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), dated September 22, 2026. The report notes, in particular, an increase in law enforcement actions against opposition candidates and activists; the near-exclusive concentration of large-scale criminal proceedings concerning alleged vote-buying on the opposition and business circles associated with it; and concerns regarding selective enforcement of the law and guarantees of due process.

The report also raises concerns about pretrial detention, intimidation of protest leaders, and the chilling effect on freedom of assembly and expression. It further notes that numerous criminal proceedings discouraged some opposition supporters from actively participating in the election campaign.

In paragraph 87, the PACE election observation delegation encourages the Armenian authorities to end selective criminal prosecution of the opposition, ensure all due-process guarantees in election-related proceedings, bring law enforcement practices into conformity with European human rights standards, and guarantee the right of all political forces to peaceful assembly and protest.

Numerous individuals deprived of their liberty fully meet the criteria for classification as political prisoners under PACE Resolution 1900 (2012).

According to that resolution, an individual may be regarded as a political prisoner if:

> *The detention has been imposed in violation of one of the fundamental guarantees set out in the European Convention on Human Rights and its Protocols, particularly freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom of expression and information; and freedom of assembly and association, and has been imposed for purely political reasons*.

Thus, the use of the judiciary and law enforcement institutions to carry out political persecution violates both the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia and Armenia's international obligations, including those arising from its membership in the Council of Europe.

Moreover, these actions are directly instigated and directed by representatives of the country's highest authorities. This undermines the foundations of the constitutional order, erodes public trust, distorts the justice system, and dismantles the foundations of the rule of law.

Such actions constitute crimes against state authority and are inherently incompatible with universally accepted standards of human rights protection.

In light of the assessments concerning political persecution, remaining faithful to the mission

undertaken before the citizens of the Republic of Armenia and to Armenia's international obligations, and guided by the established practice of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe:

The National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia:

1. **Reaffirms** the Republic of Armenia's commitment to restoring democratic values, protecting fundamental human rights, restoring the violated rights of political prisoners and other individuals subjected to political persecution in accordance with international standards, and guaranteeing their freedoms.
2. **Expresses** its full solidarity with all political prisoners, individuals subjected to political persecution, and their families, and demands an immediate end to the unlawful persecution of critics of the political authorities, the release of all political prisoners, and the prevention of any actions that undermine judicial independence.
3. **Draws the attention** of the European Union, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, international human rights organizations, and all diplomatic missions accredited to the Republic of Armenia to the manifestly anti-democratic and unlawful processes currently taking place, and calls for clear assessments of the widespread political persecution and gross violations of human rights occurring in the Republic of Armenia.

3.1 Explanatory Memorandum

The grounds for adopting this statement are the evident deterioration of the rule of law and democracy in the Republic of Armenia, together with the political repression that is intensifying by the day. As a consequence, hundreds of citizens are being subjected to political persecution, either openly or covertly, and are being named as defendants in unlawful criminal proceedings.

Many have been, and continue to be, subjected to unjustified restrictions on freedoms guaranteed by international law and the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia. Many remain deprived of their liberty in penitentiary institutions or under house arrest without lawful judicial decisions, among other violations.

In the overwhelming majority of cases, the principal motivation is the political views or political activities of the individuals concerned.

It is therefore proposed that the National Assembly, as the supreme representative body of the people, vested with a direct electoral mandate, adopt this statement and express a clear political position regarding the present unacceptable and reprehensible situation.

We believe that the assessments set out in this statement serve as a warning to the competent authorities and public officials, offering them an opportunity to reconsider their unlawful conduct, restore the independence of the branches of government, and re-establish the checks and balances that have been undermined.

4. Sources and Editorial Note

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*This publication was prepared by the International Secretariat of the **Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutyun** Bureau.*

The ARF-Dashnaktsutyun is one of the two parties comprising the "Armenia Alliance" parliamentary faction in the National Assembly of Armenia.

Founded in 1890, the ARF-Dashnaktsutyun operates in approximately 30 countries and maintains an extensive international network of political, community, educational, youth, cultural, and advocacy organizations.

It has been a full member of the Socialist International (SI) since 1907 and is an observer member of the Party of European Socialists (PES).

The International Secretariat coordinates the party's international relations and engagement with governments, parliaments, international organizations, and political partners worldwide.

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