



Եվրոպայի Հայկական Միությունների Ֆորում  
ԵՀՄՖ  
Forum of Armenian Associations of Europe  
FAAE

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Bratislava 26.01.2026

Dear Members of the OSCE/ODIHR Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief:

Freedom of religion or belief in Armenia faces an unprecedented crisis. The Armenian Apostolic Holy Church, which for seventeen centuries has anchored the nation's spiritual life and identity, is now subject to escalating sustained and systematic state interference and persecution. Since October 2025, this escalation has taken the form of a deliberate state strategy aimed at dismantling the institutional authority, leadership and autonomy of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church. These attacks have been accompanied by a broader breakdown in judicial independence, the misuse of criminal proceedings for political ends, and the erosion of constitutional safeguards — together amounting to a grave deterioration in the rule of law and the protection of fundamental rights in Armenia.

The Forum of Armenian Associations of Europe (FAAE) represents numerous Armenian organisations and individuals, from across the 2 million Armenians who make up the Armenian diaspora in Europe. Its goal is to facilitate co-operation and solidarity among the European communities of Armenians and to promote the interests of Armenia globally. While residing outside of Armenia, significant portions of FAAE members, and its leadership, are devout followers of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church.

The Armenian Government appears intent on creating a state led religious schism, through the use of illegitimate criminal proceedings, assets seizures, and smear campaigns directed at those who stand with the Church. These actions are being undertaken with the clear intention of silencing a vital, independent voice in Armenian Society. It is on the basis of the religious conscience of our members, the issues laid out below and concern for the long-term implications for religious freedom, pluralism and the rule of law in Armenia, that we are compelled to raise our concerns with the Panel.

As an OSCE participating State, Armenia has freely undertaken to abide by the very commitments on freedom of religion or belief that you are charged with defending. When those commitments are being hollowed out in practice, your role is not abstract: you are the body ODIHR relies on to flag systemic violations, to spell out where a State has crossed the line, and to advise on what must change. We are therefore asking the Panel to treat the situation in Armenia as a matter of the highest priority – to scrutinize the laws and practices being used against the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church and its supporters, to issue an expert assessment of their incompatibility with OSCE standards, and to recommend concrete steps ODIHR and participating States should take in response.

In recent years, the government of Armenia's interference in religious matters has escalated from symbolic acts to open repression. Following the Church's criticism of Armenian constitutional reforms and the government's handling of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, Prime Minister Pashinyan ordered the removal of the Catholicos's New Year's address from national television — a deliberate effort to silence the Church's public voice. Soon after, police physically barred the Catholicos and senior clergy from attending the national commemoration at the Sardarapat War Memorial while the Prime Minister presided alone. When the Catholicos later spoke at an international conference condemning the destruction of Armenian cultural heritage, the Prime Minister retaliated publicly, deriding Armenia's churches as "closets cluttered with junk." Within weeks, clergy were detained, religious property was raided, and criminal charges were brought against archbishops for "usurpation of power." The Prime Minister has continued to attack the Catholicos and episcopate on social media, using language that is completely unbecoming of the leader of a democratic country.

Most extraordinarily, he has also sought to convene a "coordinating council" to institute a range of reforms within the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church. These internal reforms include such drastic measures as removing the incumbent Catholicos of All Armenians, appointing an interim leader in place of the Catholicos, adopting a new church charter



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and electing the Catholicos of All Armenians in accordance with established procedures. This unprecedented interference in the internal affairs of the Church will have profound theological and ecclesiological implications. Together, these actions form part of a sustained, illegal campaign to bring a historic faith institution—the very heart of Armenian identity—under state control.

The Armenian government’s campaign against the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church has since October 2025 escalated into a systematic assault on its leadership, worship, and internal autonomy. The confrontation deepened at the end of October, when Prime Minister Pashinyan attended a public liturgy led by a defrocked priest formally disciplined by the Mother See for misconduct—an unprecedented act of state intrusion into ecclesiastical governance that the Supreme Spiritual Council condemned as a violation of canon law and religious freedom. In early November 2025, the brother and nephew of Catholicos Karekin II were arrested and detained on the basis of a rarely used provision of the criminal code. These arrests appear to be a cynical and calculated attempt to place further pressure on the Catholicos and episcopate. In early December 2025, National Security Service officers surrounded the main cathedral in Gyumri, expelled priests loyal to the Catholicos, and allowed a government-approved liturgy to proceed under armed guard. Across the country, clergy have been summoned and warned not to pronounce the Catholicos’s name during services, while the Prime Minister himself has publicly boasted that he “mediates” to ensure that liturgies he attends omit any reference to His Holiness, now portrayed as a threat to national security. Churches have been sealed before services, parishioners forcibly removed, and a fourth senior cleric—Archbishop Arshak Khachatryan, Chancellor of the Mother See—arrested on implausible, years-old charges of drug possession and placed in pre-trial detention alongside other imprisoned bishops.

In parallel, the government has moved to fracture the Church’s hierarchy from within. On 27 November 2025, Prime Minister Pashinyan met with a group of bishops who soon issued a public declaration denouncing Catholicos Karekin II and pledging loyalty to the government. It was an extraordinary act of political manipulation, intended to delegitimise the Church’s canonical leadership and manufacture an internal schism. Even from detention, Archbishops Bagrat Galstanyan and Mikael Ajapahyan issued a joint statement reaffirming their allegiance to the Catholicos and condemning those who have aligned with state authorities, underscoring both the moral courage of the imprisoned clergy and the spiritual depth of the persecution they face. These events mark not merely interference but an overt campaign to subjugate the Church to political authority and suppress its capacity for independent moral witness.

It is therefore no surprise that the Supreme Spiritual Council has taken the unprecedented step of publicly denouncing “illegal pressures,” “unlawful persecution,” and direct interference by state authorities, including coercive attempts to force the Catholicos’s resignation. When priests are driven from their altars, the liturgy itself censored, senior hierarchs are imprisoned, and the Church’s highest governing body declares that the state is waging a campaign against it, this is no longer a church–state dispute but the criminalisation of faith itself. These acts cut to the heart of freedom of religion or belief: the right of a community to worship, to name its own Patriarch in prayer, and to govern its internal affairs without fear of political reprisal. As an OSCE participating State, Armenia has pledged to uphold precisely these principles. The pattern now visible—systematic intimidation of clergy, state orchestration of schism, and the instrumentalisation of criminal law against religious actors—demands the closest scrutiny and a clear, principled response from this Panel of Experts.

International concern about this church–state confrontation has also sharply increased since 20 October 2025. On 17 November, a delegation from Christian Solidarity International (CSI) concluded a visit to Armenia and warned of “a progression in the state’s campaign against the Church” — from verbal attacks to the arrests of supporters, clergy, their family members and astoundingly Alexander Kochubaev, the lawyer of Archbishop Balstanyan. CSI called for the release of imprisoned clergy and “its lay patron Samvel Karapetyan,” an end to attacks on the Church, and respect for its constitutional autonomy. The organization also urged foreign governments and human-rights bodies to attend court hearings, engage the Armenian authorities directly, and publicly condemn these violations.



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Recent investigative reporting has revealed that the Armenian government hired a U.S. public-relations firm to mount an influence campaign against the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church and reshape international perceptions of the conflict. The move has been widely described as an attempt to whitewash its campaign against the Catholicos and his supporters.

The frontal attack undertaken by the Armenian Government on the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church extends beyond the Catholicos and the clergy. Samvel Karapetyan, one of the major benefactors and supporters of the Church, was detained for more than 6 months, for two brief, ambiguous statements of solidarity with the Church. Seen together with the arrests of clergy and direct interference in liturgy, the length and formulaic justifications for his detention, as well as the parallel stripping of his core business assets, illustrates how the Armenian authorities are using criminal process and economic coercion to punish those who stand with the Church.

From the standpoint of your mandate, what matters is not only the severity of these measures, but the reason they are being imposed. Seen together with the arrests of clergy and direct interference in liturgy, the length of, and formulaic justifications for, his detention and the parallel stripping of his core business assets illustrate how the Armenian authorities are using criminal process and economic coercion to punish those who stand with the Church. It is precisely this intersection of freedom of religion or belief with abuse of prosecutorial power that makes critical the Panel's close and urgent attention.

For a State that is party to the ICCPR and the ECHR and that participates in the OSCE, this combination of direct interference in Church governance and the targeted persecution of its leading lay supporter amounts to a frontal assault on freedom of religion or belief and on the rule of law itself. It goes to the very core of what your Panel was created to address: protecting religious communities from arbitrary state interference, preventing the misuse of security and criminal law against religious actors, and ensuring that participating States honour both their domestic constitutional guarantees and their international commitments.

The pattern, now especially evident since the grave developments of 20 October, in Armenia is precisely the kind of systemic violation that should command your closest attention. We therefore respectfully ask the Panel to undertake a focused review of Armenia's laws and practice on freedom of religion or belief and to issue an expert opinion identifying where current measures depart from OSCE standards. The ultimate aim must be clear: to bring Armenia's conduct back into line with its obligations as a participating State, and to restore the protections for faith, conscience, and the rule of law that the OSCE system was created to defend.

Given the pace and escalating severity of these developments, we urge the Panel to act swiftly. Each week brings new detentions, fresh acts of intimidation, and further erosion of the Church's autonomy.

Sincerely,  
Dr. A. Grigorian  
President of the Forum of Armenian Associations of Europe