



**Regional Center
for Democracy
and Security**

Armenia's Parliamentary Elections and Hate Speech Against Nagorno-Karabakh Refugees: Final Report 2026

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1. General Framework and Monitoring Methodology

The campaign for Armenia's June 2026 parliamentary elections took place in a deeply polarized political environment. Following the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, more than 100,000 refugees settled in the Republic of Armenia, facing serious socioeconomic, psychological, and civic integration challenges. Tens of thousands of people from Nagorno-Karabakh had already moved to Armenia following the 2020 war. While state and international institutions focused primarily on housing and social assistance programs, hate speech against Nagorno-Karabakh refugees increased significantly in the public sphere and was systematically instrumentalized for political purposes.

To document and analyze these developments, the Regional Center for Democracy and Security (RCDS) monitored and documented hate speech targeting refugees in [March](#), [April](#), [May](#), and [June](#) 2026. This research was based on the United Nations definition of hate speech: "Any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender or other identity factor."

The monitoring covered public statements and posts by candidates on the electoral lists of participating political forces, media outlets and other platforms associated with them, as well as statements and posts by several social media users with large audiences. The monitoring confirmed that hate speech against refugees was not simply a series of isolated emotional outbursts. It operated as an organized system consisting of recurring narratives, actors systematically disseminating those narratives, media amplifying hate speech, and institutional tolerance.

2. Main Hate Speech Narratives

During the election campaign and the period immediately following the elections, rhetoric against refugees revolved around three mutually reinforcing narratives intended to delegitimize, marginalize, and exclude Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh from civic and political life.

2.1 The "Deserters" and "Runaways" Narrative

The main narrative targeting Nagorno-Karabakh refugees portrayed them as deserters who had refused to fight for their country and fled, leaving soldiers from Armenia alone on the battlefield.

This narrative was used by various senior government officials.

As documented in RCDS's [March report](#), Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan used this narrative during a campaign event in the Yerevan Metro on March 22. Pashinyan confronted Armine Mosiyan, a displaced person from Nagorno-Karabakh who had refused to accept a

campaign badge from the ruling party. Raising his voice, he declared: “Next time, you runaways, don’t try to say that I gave away Karabakh.”

During an official press conference on March 26, Pashinyan repeated this narrative, claiming that, according to intelligence data, 80–90 percent of the weapons and ammunition in Nagorno-Karabakh had remained unused during the September 2023 attack, openly casting doubt on the fact that Nagorno-Karabakh had resisted. This claim directly contradicts official data indicating that the Azerbaijani side suffered [more than 700 casualties](#), including 205 fatalities, during that one-day war.

The narrative intensified sharply in May 2026 during the official election campaign. As documented in RCDS’s [May report](#), at an election campaign meeting held in Yerevan’s Arabkir administrative district on May 18, Pashinyan showed a video of masked armed men speaking in the Karabakh dialect. Based on the video, Pashinyan made sweeping accusations against all refugees, publicly describing them as people who had “*fled Karabakh in Ferraris*,” “*abandoned the battlefield*,” and “*stabbed our children in the back*.”

Later that afternoon, when Pashinyan argued with Arthur Osipyan, a political activist from Nagorno-Karabakh who had participated in the 2020 war, the prime minister responded in a raised voice: “*Get lost, you people. Who the hell are you, anyway? ‘I am Arthur Osipyan.’ You should have smashed your head against a wall and died in place of our boys. ‘I am Arthur Osipyan,’ you thieving animals. Why are you alive? Why are you alive, so that you can talk about 5,000 dead, you scumbag? Why are you alive?*”

These narratives, voiced at the highest level, were systematically amplified by pro-government social media personalities with large audiences.

On April 28, pro-government lawyer Alexander Sirunyan, whom the ruling Civil Contract party had nominated in January 2025 as a candidate for membership of the Supreme Judicial Council (his nomination was withdrawn following public outcry), published a Facebook post distorting the casualty figures from the Karabakh wars. Sirunyan claimed that Armenia’s cities had suffered 25,000 fatalities, while “60,000 healthy Karabakh men” had fled. In reality, official data indicate that approximately 2,000 of those killed between 1991 and 1994 [were from Armenia](#), while 2,700 were from Nagorno-Karabakh. Of the more than 4,000 people killed or reported missing during the 2020 war, approximately [794 were residents of Nagorno-Karabakh](#).

Pro-government blogger Roman Baghdasaryan repeatedly referred to refugees during livestreams as “*animals*” and “*inhuman beasts*” who had “*soiled their pants out of fear*,” “*left 18-year-old soldiers in the trenches*,” and “*stabbed Armenian soldiers in the back*.”

In June, pro-government bloggers Tatul Asilyan and Aram Avetisyan published a video titled “*The Scum of Artsakh*.” In it, Avetisyan claimed that no one from Nagorno-Karabakh had ever served on the front lines, calling them “*cattle*,” “*bastards*,” and using “Down syndrome” as an insult. He also claimed that their children had been “*lying on the couch at home or studying at universities in that Niva with a 90 license plate*.”

2.2 The “Ungrateful” and “Free-Rider” Narrative

The second dominant narrative targeting refugees portrayed people from Nagorno-Karabakh as ungrateful individuals who lived at the expense of Armenian taxpayers and had no moral right to express political views or criticize the authorities.

This narrative manifested itself in statements by government representatives and in the actions of local self-government officials.

In May 2026, Tavros Sapeyan, head of the Talin community, entered the home of a displaced woman from Nagorno-Karabakh to distribute Civil Contract campaign leaflets. When the woman stated that she was politically neutral, the Talin mayor responded that a person should not be ungrateful. Sapeyan demanded to know who had paid for her home, conflated the state with the ruling party by [declaring](#), “*We are the ones at the head of the state, Nikol Pashinyan,*” and threatened her: “*You won’t live long in the Republic of Armenia with this attitude... I’ll buy you a ticket to Russia.*”

Blogger Roman Baghdasaryan repeatedly accused refugees of being “*parasites*” who had “*looted Armenia for 35 years*” and drove luxury cars purchased with stolen public funds.

In May, pro-government activist Anita Harutyunyan [published a livestream](#) wearing Civil Contract campaign clothing and shouting: “*Haven’t we done anything for you, you scumbags? Isn’t the 50,000 drams you receive anything? Day after day... I am becoming more convinced that there are no people more despicable than those from Karabakh.*”

Pro-government media outlets Medianews.site and Araratnews.am [circulated](#) posts by unreliable users who called refugees expressing political dissent “*chushka*” (an offensive slang term for an uneducated or low-status person) and “*unwashed*,” arguing that refugees who criticized the authorities should be stripped of Armenian citizenship.

2.3 Dehumanization, Denial of Identity, and the Construction of a “Collective Enemy”

The third narrative sought to strip refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh of their national identity and portray them as an “internal enemy” linked to external forces.

Specific examples documented in RCDS reports include:

Constructing the image of a collective enemy: Following the June elections, Facebook user Ara Nersisyan claimed in widely circulated [posts](#) that “Karabakh and the people of Karabakh are Armenia’s number one enemies”, purportedly because they had “*sold themselves to Putin.*”

Calls for expulsion: In a Facebook post, pro-government activist Tatul Asilyan [wrote](#): “*The tongues of those Karabakh people who talk too much should be cut out at the root. Dear Prime Minister, expel them from our country.*” Asilyan had previously conducted public polls asking whether people from Karabakh should be allowed to remain in Armenia and had called for the complete elimination of the Karabakh dialect.

3. Targeting by actors from different political camps

RCDS's March report documented cases in which opposition figures also targeted refugees based on their political preferences. Edgar Ghazaryan, a former regional governor who was included on the electoral list of the Strong Armenia alliance and became a member of parliament following the 2026 elections, published a photograph of a refugee from Nagorno-Karabakh working at the Aragatsotn Regional Administration who had thanked Prime Minister Pashinyan for government assistance programs. Ghazaryan publicly compared the refugee to a Jew thanking Adolf Hitler for The Holocaust at Auschwitz.

This demonstrates that people from Nagorno-Karabakh were targeted not only by the ruling party when they sought to participate in civic or political life. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that cases of hate speech targeting refugees by opposition representatives were isolated during the monitoring period and were not comparable in scale to the activities of pro-government actors.

4. Actors Disseminating Hate Speech and the Distribution Infrastructure

RCDS monitoring indicates that hate speech against Nagorno-Karabakh refugees was disseminated through a network of politicians, digital influencers, media outlets linked to the authorities, and a clearly identifiable ecosystem that legitimized hate speech.

Among the senior officials who disseminated hate speech against people from Nagorno-Karabakh were Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, National Assembly Speaker Alen Simonyan, who held the position from 2021 to 2026, and Tavros Sapeyan, mayor of Talin.

Among the pro-government actors spreading hate speech were Roman Baghdasaryan, Tatul Asilyan, Natalie Aleksanyan, Anita Harutyunyan, Alexander Sirunyan, Ara Nersisyan, and Aram Avetisyan. They targeted refugees with dehumanizing insults ("animals," "parasites," and "ungrateful Kurdish dogs"), called for their expulsion, and engaged in online harassment campaigns.

Another group involved in spreading hate speech consisted of media outlets linked to the ruling party, notably Araratnews.am, Medianews.site, and Civic.am. These outlets generated false narratives, distorted actual events, and widely circulated social media posts containing hate speech.

4.1 The Infrastructure for Disseminating Hate Speech

Hate speech was disseminated through a structured, multistage chain designed to maximize reach and public impact.

Various incidents were used to target refugees, often by distorting what had actually happened. For example, following the March incident in the metro, Araratnews.am produced a video falsely claiming that Armine Mosiyan had told the prime minister that she *"does not*

accept Armenia, is not interested in Armenia, does not give a damn about Armenia, and does not need the Republic of Armenia for herself or her child.”

CivilNet fact-checkers [debunked](#) this claim, confirming that Mosiyan had made no such statement.

The false claim was also circulated by other media outlets linked to the ruling party, particularly Medianews.site.

Araratnews.am is linked to Khachatur Sukiasyan, a former member of parliament from the ruling party. Former National Assembly Speaker Alen Simonyan and former MP Emma Palyan have previously served as editors of the website.

Medianews.site is affiliated with Taron Chakhoyan, a former deputy chief of staff of the prime minister who is now a member of parliament.

Pro-government bloggers Roman Baghdasaryan, Anita Harutyunyan, and others also actively spread these false claims, targeting refugees on Facebook and TikTok.

4.2 Official Legitimization and Normalization

An important factor enabling the spread of hate speech was the public legitimization of prominent hate speech disseminators by senior state officials.

As documented in RCDS’s [April report](#), National Assembly Speaker Alen Simonyan met publicly with pro-government blogger Natalie Aleksanyan in Istanbul, presenting her with a watch bearing his official signature, sweets, and a badge featuring a map of Armenia. Criminal [proceedings](#) had previously been initiated against Aleksanyan for spreading hate speech against refugees.

On April 25, Citizen’s Day, National Assembly Speaker Alen Simonyan publicly posed for friendly photographs with Tatul Asilyan, who is known for his statements and actions targeting refugees. Days earlier, Asilyan had published photographs and videos of himself with Prime Minister Pashinyan.

Public interactions between senior state officials and individuals who target refugees send a signal to society that hate speech against refugees is acceptable.

5. Systemic Inaction by Law Enforcement and Selective Justice

One of the central conclusions of all four RCDS monitoring reports is that Armenia’s law enforcement and judicial systems have acted with profound reluctance, inconsistency, and inaction regarding hate speech against Nagorno-Karabakh refugees.

Article 329 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia explicitly criminalizes public speech aimed at inciting or spreading hatred, discrimination, intolerance, or hostility on the

grounds of ethnicity, national origin, or social status, prescribing imprisonment for such violations.

Despite these clear legal prohibitions, law enforcement authorities have failed to consistently hold those spreading hate speech against refugees accountable.

The Roman Baghdasaryan case: On April 15, 2026, RCDS submitted a crime report to the Prosecutor General's Office and the Investigative Committee concerning a video in which Roman Baghdasaryan referred to people from Nagorno-Karabakh as "animals" and "inhuman beasts." He accused them of "fleeing" and "looting Armenia's budget," and claimed that "the majority of people from Karabakh are not normal people," that they "did not fight for their homeland," and that they "hit soldiers in the back during the war," among other statements.

Only after RCDS made repeated written inquiries and telephone calls did the Investigative Committee, two and a half months later, verbally inform the organization that a decision not to initiate criminal proceedings had been sent to the Prosecutor's Office. In 2025, criminal proceedings had been initiated based on a Facebook post by Baghdasaryan targeting people from Nagorno-Karabakh, but no charges were brought.

The report concerning Ara Nersisyan: In June 2026, RCDS submitted a report concerning Ara Nersisyan's public posts in which he described people from Nagorno-Karabakh as "*Armenia's number one enemies*." The Investigative Committee refused to initiate proceedings in this case.

5.1 Selective Justice and Double Standards

The inaction of law enforcement stands in stark contrast to the swift and punitive measures applied when hate speech is expressed by government critics. Opponents of the authorities who use hate speech are generally arrested and prosecuted quickly, while pro-government figures using identical or more severe rhetoric enjoy complete legal impunity.

The most prominent example is the [case](#) of producer Armen Grigoryan, who was arrested on charges of publicly humiliating national dignity over statements he made in an interview about residents of the Shirak region and the Ararat Valley. He suddenly died while in custody, during a court hearing in his case.

The official treatment of blogger Roman Baghdasaryan also illustrates institutional double standards. Rather than being prosecuted for systematically spreading hate speech over a period of years, Baghdasaryan was granted state protection by an investigator's decision in 2024. At public events, he was accompanied and protected by criminal police officers.

This creates a serious institutional paradox: Armenia's law enforcement system actively uses state resources to protect one of the main disseminators of hate speech against refugees while ignoring crime reports submitted by the targeted community.

6. Conclusion

In June 2026, hate speech against refugees was systematic and supported by a clear dissemination infrastructure. It was characterized by the top-down formation of narratives, the active participation of media outlets linked to the authorities and pro-government public figures, inaction by law enforcement, and official legitimization.

The deliberate generation of polarizing “us versus them” rhetoric by these actors deepens the trauma of a vulnerable population subjected to ethnic cleansing and threatens the prospects for refugees’ civic and political integration.

The inaction of the law enforcement system, in turn, creates a culture of impunity. When hate speech carries no legal or political cost, online hostility inevitably turns into everyday social discrimination, undermining the long-term civic integration of Nagorno-Karabakh refugees in the Republic of Armenia.

Recommendations for International Partners and Armenian Civil Society

1. Hate speech remains an overlooked issue in programs supporting the integration of refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh. Most integration programs focus on socioeconomic and documentation assistance. However, the existence, spread, and encouragement of hate speech can lead to the failure of the integration process. International organizations and foundations should give greater attention to this issue, particularly by strengthening and supporting legal instruments to combat hate speech.
2. Armenia’s international partners should keep the issue of hate speech against refugees consistently on their agenda, raising it both in private discussions with representatives of the Armenian government and, where necessary, through public statements.
3. In July 2026, RCDS [approached](#) the embassies of Western countries accredited in Armenia, calling for sanctions against five individuals spreading hate speech against refugees. These individuals were selected from a broader range of documented cases, taking into account the particularly extreme nature of their rhetoric, the size of their public audiences, and their role in intensifying hostility toward the forcibly displaced population. Even limited sanctions against actors spreading hate speech

and dehumanizing narratives about refugees could serve as a deterrent to others involved in this process.

4. Promote the adoption of international best practices in media regulation and combating discrimination.
5. Develop community-level awareness initiatives to highlight the dangers of hate speech and disinformation. Use high-profile messaging to counter harmful narratives targeting Nagorno-Karabakh refugees.
6. Train Armenian journalists, activists, and community leaders to counter hate speech. Cooperate with international organizations to implement workshops and campaigns that promote inclusion and social cohesion.
7. Provide platforms for refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh to share their experiences and counter negative stereotypes.
8. Cooperate with independent fact-checking organizations to counter disinformation.

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