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Armenia

Country:

[Armenia](#)

Year:

2018

Regime Classification:

Semi - Consolidated Authoritarian Regime

Electoral Process:

6.00

Civil Society:

3.75

National Democratic Governance:

6.00

Independent Media:

5.50

Local Democratic Governance:

5.75

Judicial Framework and Independence:

5.50

Corruption:

5.50

Democracy Score:

5.43

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
National Democratic Governance	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00
Electoral Process	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00
Civil Society	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75
Independent Media	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.5	5.50
Local Democratic Governance	5.50	5.50	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75
Judicial Framework and Independence	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50
Corruption	5.5	5.5	5.50	5.25	5.25	5.25	5.25	5.25	5.25	5.50
Democracy Score	5.39	5.39	5.43	5.39	5.36	5.36	5.36	5.36	5.39	5.43

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. If consensus cannot be reached, Freedom House is responsible for the final ratings. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s).

Score changes:

- **Corruption rating declined from 5.25 to 5.50** due to the solidification of systemic corruption as a consequence of the HHK's consolidation of executive, legislative, and judicial power, and due to accumulated evidence of government unwillingness to root out high-level abuse of office.

As a result, Armenia's Democracy Score declines from 5.39 to 5.43.

Executive Summary:

The year 2017 was relatively stable for democratic and foreign affairs, as Armenia's government continued to consolidate structural and constitutional changes introduced in recent years. Armenia's ongoing transition from a semipresidential to a parliamentary republic dominated the political arena, which featured the first national elections to take place under a new constitutional and electoral system. The new system was approved by a referendum in December 2015, after the proposed governance changes were pushed through the legislative process by the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (HHK) with little debate or consultation. The 2015 referendum was heavily flawed, with observers noting abuse of administrative resources, fraudulent voting, alteration of votes, and voter intimidation—staples of Armenia's electoral process in recent years. Parliamentary elections held in April 2017 confirmed the continuation of this electoral standard when the HHK swept the vote amid wide reports of major violations.

The lead-up to the elections was relatively uneventful, with parties leading campaigns based more on personal politics than ideology or policy. The opposition continued to show signs of disunion and fragmentation following a number of splits and mergers in 2016. The two most significant opposition developments were the return to politics of Gagik Tsarukyan, a prominent oligarch and former leader of the Prosperous Armenia Party (PAP), and the growth of the Yelq (Way Out) alliance, which formed in late 2016 and won parliamentary representation in 2017. Tsarukyan announced his return in early January, after having left public office in 2015 amid severe disagreements with President Serzh Sargsyan. The campaign period and election day were both marked by low levels of protest and violence, in contrast to many recent elections. To some observers, the scarcity of protests was a sign of the electorate's low faith in the possibility of effecting change through the electoral process. Municipal elections in Yerevan, held in May, also featured low voter engagement as well as reports of vote-buying, voter intimidation, and abuse of administrative resources. The HHK dominated the polls, winning more than 70 percent of the vote. Yelq came in second with 14 out of 65 seats—a significant showing for a new opposition entity.

Media houses and professionals continued to experience harassment, interference, and small-scale violence. In one case, a fact-checking platform and its leader faced 30 simultaneous defamation lawsuits after publishing investigative reporting about the HHK's abuse of administrative resources. Separately, before the parliamentary elections, digital rights watchdogs reported coordinated efforts to distort Armenia's online information landscape. Members of civil society and the press reported attempts to infiltrate their email and social media accounts. In addition, suspected Twitter bots circulated a fake email about U.S. attempts to influence the election, and were also suspected of triggering the suspension of four Twitter accounts belonging to civic and media leaders the day before the vote. Although these cases were quickly addressed—the U.S. embassy debunked the fake email, and Twitter quickly restored the four accounts—they highlighted emerging vulnerabilities in Armenia's information landscape.

The year featured a lower level of violence compared to 2016, which saw a major spike in fighting across the contact line between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh (an Armenian-backed territory that declared independence from Baku in 1991); serious clashes between protesters and police; and an internal security crisis sparked by an armed takeover of a police station in Yerevan by a fringe opposition group, the so-called Sasna Tsrer, or the Daredevils of Sasun. Thirty-two individuals accused of involvement in the takeover stood trial in 2017. The proceedings, politicized by the media and government officials, were fraught with reports of due process violations, including denials of visitation rights and physical abuse of defendants, as well as harassment and threats against lawyers representing them. The trials underscored the deep flaws of the judicial system, which lacks independence from the executive and is one of the country's least trusted institutions. Efforts to reform the judiciary continued, and a new judicial code was under consideration at year's end.

Public demonstrations were largely concentrated around two developments in 2017. In March, civil society organized protests in Yerevan following the death of a man arrested in 2016 for delivering food and supplies to the Sasna Tsrer group during their siege. The protestors, who called for an investigation into conditions surrounding the death, were dispersed by police without major incidents of violence. While authorities launched an investigation, its status was unclear at year's end, and investigators were unforthcoming with information. In November, students mobilized against a bill proposing significant limits to army deferment options. The protesters boycotted classes, held hunger strikes, and organized a sit-in, criticizing the bill for undercutting educational and professional opportunities for young men, who already face significant limitations due to economic factors. Although government and academic officials agreed to negotiate with the students, the National Assembly nevertheless passed the bill.

Besides electoral events, the political arena was largely business as usual. Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan's cabinet, which took office with promises of major socioeconomic improvements and an anticorruption drive, did not make major advances in 2017. The year closed with a dismal report from the National Statistical Service noting that the poverty rate in 2016 was 29.4 percent, or 0.4 percentage points better than 2015, calling into question the government's ability to meet its goal of decreasing poverty to nearly 17 percent by 2022.⁴Corruption, another nominal target of the Karapetyan government, remained rampant, and revelations about high-level corruption that came to light through investigative journalism in 2016 did not lead to proper criminal investigations in 2017. In December, Karapetyan called for a new anticorruption strategy. Also that month, Armenia signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Policy Agreement with the European Union (EU), which will be the basis of Armenia's closer integration into EU agencies, policies, and programs in future years. The agreement sparked speculation about Armenia's relationship with Russia—Armenia is a member of the Russia-led European Economic Union (EEU), and Russian pressure to join the EEU was suspected to be the cause of Sargsyan's turn away from a closer relationship with the EU, in the form of an Association Agreement, in 2013.

Outlook for 2018: The year 2018 will have a number of key inflection points for the future of Armenian governance. President Sargsyan's second term will expire early in the year, at which time the full governance transition from semipresidentialism to parliamentarism will theoretically take place. Questions linger about whether Sargsyan will pursue formal public office—for example, as the new prime minister, who will hold most executive power—or influence politics from behind the scenes as leader of the HHK. His choice, and the filling of the prime minister's seat if he chooses not to take it, will have fundamental ramifications for institutions at the national level, and will also serve as a strong indication of ruling elites' true intentions regarding the constitutional changes. The year will also be a testing ground for Armenia's ambitious foreign policy, particularly for its ability to balance closer cooperation with the EU with its heavy dependence on Russia.

Electoral Process:

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00

- The electoral process is neither free nor fair. Incumbent forces abuse administrative resources to their advantage, and opposition parties are at a disadvantage in seeking to gain power through formal mechanisms. Parliamentary elections held in April and local elections during the year showcased the showcased a range of shortcomings in Armenia's electoral process, including abuse of state resources, vote-buying, and voter intimidation.
- The April elections were the first national polls held under the new political system. In line with the 2015 constitutional changes, legislators passed a new electoral code in 2016—initially in May, with changes adopted in June and October. The short period of time between the finalization of the code and the April 2017 elections caused concern, and civil society organizations (CSOs) noted that the complexity of the new system could be difficult for voters to understand.¹⁴ Although the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) applauded the “4+4+4” consultative format—in

which four members each from the ruling coalition, opposition factions, and civil society met to discuss and negotiate the code—as open and inclusive, CSOs widely complained that their views were misrepresented or not thoroughly addressed by the government.¹⁵

- The final version of the code, implemented in 2017,¹⁶ retained a number of positive new features—in particular, the publication of signed voter lists, the use of voter identification technology, and video recording of election day activities at polling stations. Such changes were expected to raise public trust in the electoral process and improve its quality, especially by eliminating fraud. However, the parliamentary elections demonstrated that the electoral code did not go far in reaching these goals.
- There were 101 directly elected seats at stake in the National Assembly, down from 131 seats in the previous system. Voting was conducted through a two-tier proportional system with a national list, as well as 13 district lists covering Armenia’s provinces and different parts of the capital Yerevan. The new electoral code also introduced, for the first time, four seats reserved for ethnic minorities, bringing the total number of seats in parliament to 105. Parties and coalitions were able to include a sub-list on their national lists for candidates representing Assyrian, Kurdish, Russian, and Yezidi minorities. In order to qualify for parliamentary representation, parties must pass a 5 percent threshold, and electoral alliances must pass a 7 percent threshold.¹⁷ Civil society and international watchdogs had recommended eliminating the difference in thresholds.
- Although there were high levels of outreach by candidates, the campaign was largely superficial, with candidates placing little focus on policy or ideology.¹⁸ The Central Election Commission (CEC) reported a turnout of 61 percent.¹⁹ Both the campaign and election day featured low public protest—a sign, according to some analysts, of low levels of public trust in the electoral system, particularly if contrasted with the mass demonstrations that accompanied the 2015 constitutional referendum and several socioeconomic issues in recent years.²⁰ In its final observation mission report, the OSCE/ODIHR pointed to lack of public trust in the integrity of the elections as a significant problem, and noted that widespread allegations of vote-buying and voter intimidation, as well as inadequate response to complaints by the responsible authorities, contributed to this phenomenon.²¹
- The CEC and electoral law significantly constrained the activities of observer groups. For example, the CEC refused to invite half a dozen international groups that expressed an interest in observing the elections.²² Also, the electoral code retained a provision requiring organizations to have had a democracy or human rights focus in their charters for at least one year in order to qualify as observers.²³ However, observers were generally able to conduct their work freely in practice. Both the OSCE/ODIHR and local observer groups reported serious campaign and election day irregularities, and found the responses of the CEC, its regional counterparts, the general prosecutor, and the courts to be inadequate. This was partly due to political influence on these agencies, and partly due to legal limitations. For example, under the new electoral code, only candidates who are physically present at a polling station can challenge the voting results of that station.²⁴
- Abuse of administrative resources was widespread during the campaign. The Independent Observer Alliance, composed of four local NGOs, documented several instances of such abuse, noting that the HHK committed a majority of violations. In its final report, the group noted the location of campaign offices in state buildings, the use of state employees for campaign work, and most egregiously, pressure on public servants to vote for the HHK. The Union of Informed Citizens, a member of the Independent Observer Alliance, conducted an undercover investigation into allegations that the HHK had pressured directors of public schools and kindergartens to support the party, and found that 114 directors had collected the names of potential voters—generally parents—to submit to the HHK.²⁵ The CEC and the police rejected complaints based on this reporting, and only one case—that of a principal in Gyumri who admitted to severe voter intimidation—led to an investigation.²⁶ Following the elections, many of the directors contacted by the Union of Informed Citizens sued the NGO for defamation, basing their complaints on the fact that the NGO’s representatives had claimed to be HHK officials (see Independent Media).²⁷
- Employees of private enterprises were also subject to pressure. Shortly after election day, the Hayastan24 media outlet released a recording of a staff meeting at SAS Group, a major supermarket group, in which a male voice instructed attendees to recruit votes for Artak Sargsyan, the company’s owner and an HHK candidate, and threatened to dismiss those who did not.²⁸ The Special Investigative Service (SIS) launched a criminal case, but closed it in September for lack of proof. Sargsyan, a member of the National Assembly since 2004, won a seat; the voice on the recording was later revealed to belong to his brother.²⁹
- Observers also reported widespread vote-buying throughout the country, noting that party representatives gave or offered cash, food, gifts, and promises of bonuses or services in exchange for a vote. OSCE/ODIHR voiced concern that the practice is an entrenched part of Armenia’s political culture, and easily propagated due to the scarcity of economic opportunity, particularly in the regions.³⁰ This very notion—that of a vote as a trading chip, rather than an expression of political choice—is a powerful sign of the frayed fabric of Armenia’s electoral process.
- The electoral code increased the minimum quota for each gender on candidate lists from 25 to 30 percent, but this provision will only come into effect in 2021.³¹ Although female candidates already made up 30 percent of national and district lists in 2017, only 18 women (17 directly elected and one minority representative) took seats in the National Assembly, or 17 percent.
- Elections to Yerevan’s municipal council in May were free of significant protest or violence, but also featured vote-buying, voter intimidation, and abuse of administrative resources.³² Civic engagement in the lead-up to the vote was relatively low, and serious debate about issues important to voters—particularly public service delivery—was notably absent from the campaign period.³³ On election day, police assaulted mayoral candidate Zaruhi Postanjyan—head of Yerkir Tsirani, a newcomer to the political scene in 2017—and her daughter while escorting them out of an HHK office that the two had entered to investigate alleged vote-buying.³⁴ Postanjyan’s daughter was hospitalized following the incident.³⁵ The SIS launched an investigation into the incident,³⁶ but it remained unclear whether this led to any disciplinary action. Postanjyan’s party filed a complaint asking the CEC to cancel the election results because of widespread vote-buying, fraud, and violence, but the CEC rejected the request. The party’s appeal also failed.³⁷
- In December, the National Assembly heard and approved a proposal to make further changes to the Electoral Code, specifically in order to address voter intimidation and abuse of administrative resources. The process was ongoing at year’s end.³⁸

Civil Society:

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75

- Armenia’s civil society is relatively healthy in a region that has seen severe crackdowns in recent years, enjoying freedom from the excessive financial and administrative restrictions facing counterparts in many post-Soviet states. Armenia scored the second-highest in Eurasia in the 2016 USAID CSO Sustainability Index, which also registered a second consecutive year of improvement for the country.³⁹ Despite this positive regional standing, CSOs are rather weak in their capacity to influence policy through formal channels.

- As of October 2016, there were close to 6,000 registered public organizations, foundations, and legal entity unions in the country, a modest increase from 2015.⁴⁰ The greatest challenges facing NGOs are weak capacity and financial sustainability.⁴¹ Domestic organizations are heavily dependent on foreign grants, though many are striving to diversify funding sources. Improving digital literacy has been a significant avenue toward this goal, with CSOs increasingly turning to online crowdfunding platforms in recent years.⁴²
- Following extended consultations with civil society, in late 2016 the National Assembly adopted a new Law on NGOs and amended several pieces of legislation concerning public organizations and foundations.⁴³ Local groups and activists lauded the government's cooperation with civil society, and the changes, entering into effect in February 2017, were expected to provide more operational ease to organizations.⁴⁴ Among other positives, the legislation eased registration processes and allowed organizations to engage in entrepreneurial activities, which is expected to help civil society improve its financial sustainability.⁴⁵ CSOs organized a number of trainings on the new legislation in 2017 in order to educate organizations about compliance and emerging opportunities.⁴⁶ The law's effects on the civil society sector were difficult to assess at year's end.
- CSOs were highly engaged during the 2017 electoral period. The CEC reported that more than 28,000 individuals from 49 domestic organizations registered as observers, although some civil society members voiced concerns that proxies of political parties were among those registered.⁴⁷ Domestic groups like the Independent Observer Alliance were instrumental in creating a thorough record of electoral conduct, even if authorities did not adequately investigate the violations documented (see Electoral Process).⁴⁸
- In recent years, major protest movements have had—either from the onset or as part of their evolution—an antisystemic character. Most of these have been grassroots movements organized by informal activist groups, rather than by traditional organizations. The limited ability of the formal civil society sector to influence policy, and the government's continued neglect of sources of public discontent, has elevated the role of more nontraditional activism. This has included not just grassroots social movements but radical groups as well. In 2016, the Sasna Tsrer became the most radical iteration of antisystemic sentiment, both drawing influence from and reviving the robust history of political violence in Armenia.⁴⁹ The government's response has typically been to zealously prosecute radical groups, while maintaining a dismissive attitude toward reformist civil society, leaving a gap in terms of opportunities to influence public policy that erodes trust in the public sphere.
- In March, civil society organized protests in Yerevan to call for an investigation into the death of Artur Sargsyan, nicknamed the "Bread Bringer," who had been arrested in 2016 for delivering food and supplies to the Sasna Tsrer group during their two-week siege.⁵⁰ In February, while detained after failing to appear for a SIS meeting, Sargsyan declared a hunger strike and developed health complications; he passed away shortly after being released for medical treatment.⁵¹ Police broke up the protests but did not use violence or arbitrary detention, and the government ignored calls by some protesters for the justice and health ministers to resign. State investigators opened a case, but were generally uncooperative and unforthcoming with information in the months that followed.⁵²
- Students mobilized in November to push back against proposed changes to military service requirements, boycotting classes, holding protests, staging hunger strikes, and organizing a sit-in. Existing legislation allows students to defer military service to enter university, and those who pursue higher education for an extended period of time can avoid service completely. The new bill proposed a system in which young men are drafted at age 18 to serve for two years unless they sign a contract with the Defense Ministry to serve three years after completing their studies.⁵³ Critics condemned the bill for undercutting educational and professional opportunities for young men, who already face significant economic limitations, and in turn weakening Armenia's development. Some also decried the potential disproportionate effect on the middle and working classes, who, unlike the elite youth who use connections or money to avoid service or serve under favorable conditions, will have no opportunity to do so under the new system.⁵⁴ Government and academic officials met with the students to negotiate, but the National Assembly nevertheless passed the legislation, which will come into effect in 2021.⁵⁵ To some, the new law signaled the government's commitment to its controversial "nation-army concept," a vague but far-reaching social militarization paradigm unveiled after the April 2016 violence in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁵⁶
- Trade unions remain weak and generally unengaged in policy discussions.

National Democratic Governance:

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.00

- While Armenia's constitution and laws ostensibly enshrine the principles of democracy, autocratic practices pervade governance in practice. National governance in 2017 was generally stable, with ruling elites focusing on solidifying Armenia's constitutional transformation—a plan, approved in a 2015 referendum, to change the country from a semipresidential system to a parliamentary one. The most significant step of the year in this transformation took place in April, when parliamentary elections were held under the country's new electoral system. The ruling Republican Party of Armenia (HHK), which controls all three branches of government, comfortably retained its dominance in the elections and throughout the year.
- The opposition and many political analysts saw the constitutional overhaul as a move by President Serzh Sargsyan and the HHK to retain and strengthen their hold on power, particularly after Sargsyan's second presidential term expires early in 2018.² A primary undercurrent in the new constitution is the notion of stability, and particularly that of a "stable parliamentary majority," which the new electoral code was crafted to create. The parliamentary elections held on April 2 realized this goal, solidifying the status quo within the National Assembly. HHK won a majority of seats (58/105), while its nominal rival, the Tsarukyan Alliance led by oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan, took second with 31. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) returned to parliament with seven seats, while a newcomer to the political scene, the Yelq (Way Out) alliance, also cleared the threshold with nine.
- The HHK formed a ruling coalition with the ARF, honoring a cooperation agreement that the parties had signed in 2016, when ARF joined the HHK in government. Although the HHK held a parliamentary majority on its own, with ARF the coalition has a three-fifths majority. This gives the coalition the votes for big-ticket decisions, such as changes to the electoral code or legislation related to referendums, as well as important appointments like Constitutional Court judgeships and Central Election Commission membership.³ The HHK thus is in position to dominate executive and legislative functions, as well as the judiciary.
- Formal opposition within the National Assembly remained limited. Perennially weak and disunited, the opposition showed signs of further fragmentation in the lead-up to the elections, with several new parties emerging or splitting from established ones. In January, Tsarukyan—one of the country's wealthiest oligarchs and former head of the Prosperous Armenia Party (PAP)—announced that his return to politics. Tsarukyan resigned from the National Assembly and PAP in 2015, following heated disagreements with President Sargsyan. Rumors circulated that Tsarukyan's return had been orchestrated through an agreement with Sargsyan, although PAP denied this to be the case and Sargsyan publicly expressed his displeasure at the oligarch's return.⁴ Considering that Tsarukyan had framed his 2015 exit as a move to avoid "bloodshed"⁵ between

his supporters and the government, it is unlikely that his return took place without at least the acquiescence of Sargsyan. Overall, his return had a limited effect on people's political choices—as a leading member of Armenia's oligarchic and corrupt elite, he does not represent a true political alternative. Moreover, Tsarukyan's wealth and commercial interests, while fueling his political achievements, are also what make him politically vulnerable, as was evident in 2015, when government threats to use its regulatory and investigative powers forced him to back down from challenging the HHK.

- At year's end, Sargsyan's intentions for his political future remained unclear. Although he had declared in 2014 that he would not seek the presidency or premiership,⁶ Sargsyan avoided questioning on this issue in 2017, but noted in March that he would like to remain involved in national security.⁷ Some public figures voiced their support for Sargsyan to remain in politics, with some explicitly stating that it would be "right" for him to become prime minister.⁸
- Sargsyan could pursue formal office or choose to exercise control from behind the scenes as the leader of the HHK. Any bid for formal power will require navigating international attention and pressure, as well as dynamics within the HHK and with Prime Minister Karapetyan, who is slated to serve until 2022. Taking office following a cabinet reshuffle in 2016, Karapetyan has gained independent favor by cultivating an image of himself as business-minded outsider—a politician without entrenched links to the corrupt oligarchy—who is devoted to reform and economic improvement. If he retains a good relationship with the country's elites, he may become Sargsyan's successor.⁹ Karapetyan's cabinet continued to focus on its reform agenda in 2017, but could not claim major achievements by year's end.
- Governance and security in Nagorno-Karabakh, events which have immediate repercussions in the Republic of Armenia, were significantly more stable in 2017 than in 2016. The territory continued to deal with the fallout from the "April War" of 2016, a four-day period of the deadliest violence in the region since the signing of a ceasefire with Azerbaijan in 1994. The violence resulted in Azerbaijan gaining a small amount of territory and, to both domestic and international audiences, emphasized the fragility of the ceasefire and likelihood of renewed conflict in the region. In a bid to consolidate control and with the 2016 war as a justification, the local authorities of the region held a February 2017 referendum to approve a new constitution, under which the territory will go from a semipresidential to a fully presidential system.¹⁰ The changes call for a transitional period during which the parliament, rather than the people, elects the president. In July, the parliament chose incumbent Bako Sahakyan, allowing him to retain executive power past the expiration of his second consecutive term in office.¹¹
- The direct impact of April 2016 violence and Nagorno-Karabakh's overall security situation on Armenian politics was clear in the case of Samvel Babayan, a leading general in the 1992–94 war, who returned to Armenia due to the "April War." He had left for self-imposed exile in Russia after becoming active in opposition politics and falling out of favor with the ruling elites. In 2017, Babayan was arrested and prosecuted for alleged weapons smuggling—a case that suggests government efforts to curtail the old guard of Nagorno-Karabakh elites.¹²
- Armenia continued to seek to balance relations with Russia and the West. In December, the country signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Policy Agreement with the EU, which will provide a framework for closer and more robust cooperation, albeit short of what was included in the Association Agreement that Armenia rejected in 2013. Meanwhile, Armenia continued its deeper cooperation with Russia. In October, the National Assembly ratified an agreement to create a joint Armenian-Russian military group, with only Yelq voting against.¹³ Armenia and Russia are already allies as members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Armenia is the only member of the Eurasian Economic Union to have such a formally close relationship with the EU, a position that holds as much potential advantage as volatility.

Independent Media:

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.50	5.50

- Although television remains the most popular source of news and information, online media continue to grow in popularity and influence. Connectivity is inexpensive, and according to the International Telecommunications Union, approximately 67 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2016.⁵² In contrast to television stations, which face significant influence from their owners, online and print media have greater levels of editorial freedom. The internet remains largely beyond the control of the authorities and serves as an alternative and increasingly popular source of information as well as an influential tool on politics. That said, worrying signs emerged in 2017 about manipulation of the country's online information landscape.
- The Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (CPFE), a local media rights group, called 2017 a "tense and complicated" year for journalism, pointing to heightened political pressures around the parliamentary and local elections.⁵³ While fewer media workers and outlets faced violence in 2017 than in 2016, the CPFE recorded nearly twice as many cases of pressure—a category that includes legal intimidation. Most alarmingly, there were 60 new defamation and insult lawsuits launched against the media in 2017—the highest number since the offenses were decriminalized in 2010.⁵⁴
- Thirty lawsuits alone were brought against one outlet—Sut.am, a fact-checking website founded by the Union of Informed Citizens—and its leader, Daniel Ioannisyan. The plaintiffs, 30 directors of schools and kindergartens that Ioannisyan had called while investigating the involvement of public education employees in the HHK general election campaign, based their suits on Ioannisyan's publication of the recorded calls and accompanying analysis. All 30 suits, seeking AMD 2 million (\$4,200) in damages each, were filed at the same time using similar language, leading watchdogs to suggest an orchestrated effort.⁵⁵ The plaintiffs all withdrew their complaints on the same day in July.⁵⁶
- Media professionals reported several cases of violence, obstruction, and interference against the press during the parliamentary elections as well as local polls. Sisak Gabrielyan, a correspondent for RFE/RL, and Shoghik Galstyan, a reporter for Araratnews.am, were assaulted during the National Assembly elections while investigating suspected bribery at the headquarters of an HHK candidate. A local resident attacked Galstyan while she and her operator were recording activities at the station, and another assaulted Gabrielyan as he tried to record the attack on Galstyan.⁵⁷ The authorities launched a criminal investigation, and charged two local residents with using violence against the journalists and obstructing their professional activities. The case was ongoing at year's end.⁵⁸ Gabrielyan was also assaulted during the Yerevan municipal elections in May while investigating signs of bribery—a group of men threatened, insulted, and attacked Gabrielyan when he inquired about activities at an HHK office.⁵⁹ Investigators launched a criminal case, which was ongoing at year's end.⁶⁰
- Judicial and law enforcement bodies are biased in dealing with cases that involve independent media. Investigations into violence against journalists covering public assemblies in 2015 (during the #ElectricYerevan demonstrations) and 2016 (during protests surrounding the Sasna Tsrer crisis) have been shallow and ineffective. Very few complaints have reached the court system, and those that did continue to move through the legal process slowly.⁶¹

- In the lead-up to the parliamentary elections, watchdogs noted efforts to distort the online information landscape. In March, suspicious Twitter accounts shared a fake email—ostensibly from USAID—about U.S. attempts to influence the vote in favor of the opposition. The tweets were widely shared, although telltale errors in the email as well as a statement from the U.S. Embassy in Yerevan quickly debunked the fake. According to the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Lab, the circulation of the email bore typical signs of a coordinated effort by bot accounts, likely originating in Russia.⁸⁷ Bot activity was also suspected of triggering the temporary suspension of four influential Twitter accounts—those of well-known journalist Gegham Vardanyan, political analyst Stepan Grigoryan, the media organization Civilnet, and the investigative journalism network Hetq—on the eve of the election.⁸⁸ The accounts were all restored within hours.

Local Democratic Governance:

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
5.50	5.50	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75	5.75

- Decentralization is relatively limited in Armenia, leaving local governance weak. There is a high reliance on the central government for funding and a generally low capacity to provide public services. More than a third of the country's three million people live in Yerevan, which enjoys the highest level of administrative and financial independence; most cities and villages have small populations, which in turn translate into small tax revenues.⁶⁹ A thorough reform of local governance continued in 2017, and a number of local elections—most importantly, a municipal vote in Yerevan—took place.
- An ongoing program of territorial and administrative reform, launched in 2015, will consolidate the country's 915 municipalities into approximately 200 municipalities organized into "clusters."⁷⁰ Administration of these clusters will be conducted similarly to how municipalities are governed today, just on a much larger geographic scale. The program, which has extensive backing from foreign donor organizations, aims to increase capacity and efficiency. Among other things, the program will centralize the delivery of public services into one-stop-shop "citizen offices" and boost citizen engagement, including through frequent polling and access to online information management tools. In May, the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Development published an interim progress report, noting success in the use of citizen offices and online information management.⁷¹ The program is slated to continue through 2018.
- In December, Prime Minister Karapetyan requested that all governors submit a regional annual plan for 2018, and required them to focus on activities geared toward economic development—including attracting investment, improving agricultural capacity, and increasing regional income per capita.⁷² Some observers noted that Karapetyan's request was at odds with his own party. For the HHK, regional governors are primarily important for the cultivation of electoral support, while poverty and low economic activity in the regions have not been priorities.⁷³ In framing his request, Karapetyan emphasized that 2018 will be a "meaningful" year and stressed that economic growth is a major gubernatorial responsibility.⁷⁴
- Elections to Yerevan's 65-seat municipal council took place in May, a month after the National Assembly vote. Only three parties or alliances participated—the HHK, Yelq, and Yerkir Tsirani, a party established in March by Zaruhi Postanjyan, who formerly led the Heritage party.⁷⁵ Voter turnout was 41 percent, and engagement during the campaign was relatively low.⁷⁶ The HHK won 71 percent of the vote and 46 seats, Yelq captured 21 percent of the vote and 14 seats, and Yerkir Tsirani took less than 8 percent of the vote and 5 seats. Taron Margaryan of the HHK returned for a second consecutive term as mayor.
- The Yerevan elections highlighted the extent to which HHK dominates all levels of governance, with some analysts suggesting them to be evidence of Armenia's continuing trend towards one-party dominance.⁷⁷ The ruling party was able to capitalize on widespread voter fatigue in the aftermath of the National Assembly vote, as well as low competitiveness at the local level.⁷⁸ Just as in the National Assembly, Yelq members in the city council proved to be the HHK's only genuine voice of opposition during the year.

Judicial Framework and Independence:

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.50

- Armenia's judiciary is heavily dependent on the executive branch, and judicial accountability mechanisms are weak. Bribery and the leveraging of political influence are common at all levels of the judicial system, and the courts remain among the most mistrusted institutions in the country.⁷⁹
- The government has proclaimed judicial reform to be a key objective, and the new constitution envisages a number of changes to the judicial system.⁸⁰ A new judicial code was under deliberation by the government in 2017.⁸¹ It places particular focus on judicial self-governance, with Article 173 empowering a new independent body, the Supreme Judicial Council, to lead the appointment, promotion, and dismissal of judges, as well as the initiation of disciplinary action. The council's 10 members are to include five judges from all levels of the judiciary, each possessing at least 10 years of professional experience, and five legal experts appointed by the National Assembly. These changes are meant to shift power away from a current self-governing body, the Justice Council, which is notorious for abusing its powers.⁸²
- The Venice Commission published a generally positive evaluation of the draft judicial code in October, and welcomed the call to establish the Supreme Judicial Council.⁸³ Both the Commission and local organizations, however, criticized the code for not providing judges with the right to appeal the council's disciplinary decisions, noting that an appeal process is imperative for ensuring accountability and independence.⁸⁴ Among other things, the Venice Commission and local CSOs also criticized unclear criteria for the selection of judges, as well as weak provisions for preventing conflicts of interest in judicial cases, which occur frequently because of judges' engagement in commercial activity.⁸⁵ Lawyers' associations also decried provisions that give judges broad powers to fine lawyers or remove them from the courtroom for a wide range of infractions, noting that the provisions leave excessive room for abuse.⁸⁶ The code had not passed at year's end.
- A few judicial officials faced prosecution for abuse of office during the year, although the incidents were isolated and did not indicate a systemic crackdown on corruption within the system. In June, police arrested two judges and a prosecutor in the Gegharkunik region for accepting bribes in return for favorable judgments or charges.⁸⁷ In a separate case, prosecution continued against a Yerevan district court judge who had been caught on video in 2016 accepting a bribe.⁸⁸

- Judicial proceedings continued against 32 individuals accused of belonging to or supporting the Sasna Tsrer, the group that seized a police station in Yerevan in 2016. The group consists primarily of veterans of the 1992–94 Nagorno-Karabakh war and is associated with a radical fringe opposition movement, Founding Parliament, whose leader was jailed on weapons and conspiracy charges shortly before the Sasna Tsrer siege.⁸⁹ The trials have been marred by serious violations, with judicial and law enforcement authorities acting as enforcers of executive power. Prison authorities regularly denied visitation to the defendants' family members as well as civil society groups, including the Prison Monitoring Group, which advises the Justice Ministry.⁹⁰ Prison officials held at least one defendant in solitary confinement without justification.⁹¹ Several defendants reported that police and prison authorities beat and abused them, and authorities also denied or delayed medical attention to defendants.⁹² Following a physical skirmish between four defendants and police during a court session in June, prompted by police forbidding a defendant from passing a note to his lawyer, the defendants reported being temporarily removed from the courtroom and assaulted by officers.⁹³ Faced with domestic and international reports of the defendants' ill-treatment following this incident, the SIS launched a criminal investigation.⁹⁴ However, there was little indication of the body's true commitment to a thorough and fair investigation.⁹⁵ In March, the death of defendant Artur Sargsyan, the "Bread Bringer," emerged as a symbol of the gross mismanagement of the trials (see Civil Society). Sargsyan, who suffered serious health issues due to a month-long hunger strike, was only granted medical release from pretrial detention following pressure from opposition politicians, some of whom personally posted bail for Sargsyan.⁹⁶
- Lawyers representing the Sasna Tsrer reported harassment by police, court officials, and civilians. In June and July, police officers arbitrarily searched some lawyers before granting them entry to the courtroom.⁹⁷ In one instance, court officials barred two lawyers from entering without submitting to a search, leaving the lawyers' clients to undergo a hearing without representation. The presiding judge sanctioned the lawyers for absence for an "unacceptable" reason, leading other defense lawyers and the defendants themselves to boycott the proceedings.⁹⁸ Separately, in August lawyer Arayik Papikyan received messages threatening his safety and that of his family due to his work in the Sasna Tsrer case.⁹⁹
- In December, following months of heated debate, the National Assembly passed legislation against domestic violence. The legislation defines the offense, establishes standards for police action, and mandates the creation of resources for victims, among other things.¹⁰⁰ While overall a landmark step, the law contains some counterproductive features, including a partial focus on "restoring family harmony"—a component added to the law after HHK members criticized the initial bill for undermining "traditional family values."¹⁰¹ Such attitudes, as well as institutional factors like scarce victims' resources and a history of police failure to treat allegations seriously, are likely to undermine the effectiveness of the law if not thoroughly addressed.

Corruption:

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
5.5	5.5	5.5	5.25	5.25	5.25	5.25	5.25	5.25	5.50

- Corruption is rampant through the government and remains a significant point of tension with the Armenian public. Despite promises by Prime Minister Karapetyan to curb corruption, very little progress was made by the close of 2017.
- In its 2017 findings, the Caucasus Barometer, an annual survey by the Caucasus Research Resource Center, asked Armenians about their trust in various institutions, among other questions. Respondents named the president, executive branch, courts, National Assembly, and political parties among the institutions that they "fully distrusted."¹⁰² According to Transparency International's 2016 Global Corruption Barometer, which examined 119 countries, corruption and distrust of the government's ability to address it remain major concerns for the Armenian public. Just under a quarter of those surveyed in Armenia reported paying bribes for public services, suggesting that high-level, systemic corruption, rather than petty abuse of office, is likely the main source of popular grievance. Alarming, 77 percent of Armenian respondents—the highest proportion of any country—considered reporting corruption to be socially unacceptable, and 67 percent said that they would not feel obliged to report corruption even if they directly witnessed it.¹⁰³
- The government passed several laws that, if effectively implemented, could improve anticorruption efforts. In June, legislators adopted a proposal to establish the Corruption Prevention Commission, an entity empowered to monitor conflicts of interest and ethical conduct by public officials, receive and analyze income and asset declarations, and request prosecution of officials that it finds to engage in misconduct. Similar bodies have existed in the past with virtually no success.¹⁰⁴ A currently existing entity, the Anticorruption Council, was established in February 2015 and had not produced any significant results by the end of 2017. The new commission is expected to begin activities in 2018. Also in June, legislators approved a measure to establish a dedicated website for corruption reporting.¹⁰⁵
- Despite the constant lip service that ruling elites pay to the fight against corruption, evidence of commitment remained low.¹⁰⁶ A few low-ranking officials faced prosecution for abuse of office in 2017.¹⁰⁷ However, high-ranking members of the political elite and their inner circles remain immune to anticorruption efforts.
- Former chief judicial enforcer Mihran Poghosyan, who resigned in 2016 after investigative journalists exposed his off-shore assets based on the Panama Papers cache, escaped prosecution in 2017. The SIS dropped its investigation into his case in January,¹⁰⁸ and in April, Poghosyan won a seat in the National Assembly as an HHK candidate.¹⁰⁹ In December, the Association of Investigative Journalists—the publisher of the popular outlet Hetq—sued the SIS for denying it access to the official document stating the agency's decision to drop the case.¹¹⁰
- The Council of Europe's Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO) published its latest compliance report on Armenia in December. While GRECO noted that the government had met some anticorruption recommendations, notably the criminalization of a wide range of corruption-related offenses, the body also emphasized that Armenia remains far from an acceptable level of compliance with its standards. Most significantly, the report noted that the government had not addressed any of its recommendations for preventing corruption among members of the National Assembly.¹¹¹
- In December, Karapetyan called for the formation of a sweeping new anticorruption strategy. He also requested that his government form monitoring and assessment tools for currently ongoing anticorruption activities.¹¹² It remains unclear whether this call to renew anticorruption efforts will be accompanied by more commitment than the many others issued by officials in the past.

Author: Elen Aghekyan is an independent researcher and former research analyst at Freedom House, where she managed Europe and Eurasia content for the organization's *Freedom in the World* and *Freedom of the Press* surveys. She holds a B.A. in history and government from Cornell University, with a dual focus on Soviet history and post-Soviet transitions.

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