AN INVESTIGATION BY THE ANTI-CORRUPTION NATIONAL INITIATIVE (ANI)

LILIT MAKUNTS: WHO TAUGHT WHOM A LESSON IN POWER?

Subject: Lilit Makunts



In May 2018, Lilit Makunts joined Nikol Pashinyan's government amid an almost homespun legend: the prime minister's former English teacher, the story went, had unexpectedly been handed the culture portfolio. Whether she ever actually taught him was never established. Behind that modest image, though, lay a much richer biography: years of opposition activity, ties to the future prime minister's inner circle and serious training abroad in the strategies of civil resistance.

And that training was anything but ordinary. According to the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), about 500 people went through its summer institutes over 11 years, selected from thousands of applicants worldwide. Makunts completed the program and later went on to teach nonviolent struggle strategies to Armenian activists herself. So who was this teacher, barely known to the public, on the eve of the Velvet Revolution?

Her later career raised just as many questions. When Pashinyan called on supporters to block the courts, Makunts turned up outside one of the courthouses. When the prime minister's political line clashed with the position of influential Armenian organizations in the United States, it was Makunts who represented Armenia in Washington, where relations between the embassy and part of the diaspora escalated into open conflict. Her tenure was marked by scandal, criticism and controversial decisions. One thing never changed, however: Nikol Pashinyan's trust in her.

What is more, in August 2026 Makunts became chief of staff to the prime minister, with broad administrative, personnel and financial powers. In eight years she went from a little-known minister to one of the officials closest to the head of government.



Pictured: Lilit Makunts, Anna Hakobyan, Nikol Pashinyan

So who is Lilit Makunts? A political ally whose rise rested on Pashinyan's trust, a disciplined executor of his will, or a far more independent and influential figure than is commonly assumed?

This investigation by the Anti-Corruption National Initiative (ANI) looks past the English-lessons legend and traces Makunts's political path, her connections and her decisions. The real question is no longer whether she taught Pashinyan. It is who, in this long political partnership, actually owes their career and influence to whom.

From her father's lessons to the corridors of power

Lilit Kamoyi Makunts was born on November 7, 1983, in Yerevan, to an engineer and a schoolteacher. Her father, Kamo Makunts, was born in Jermuk and later moved to the capital. Makunts herself says her family's roots go back to Lowland Karabakh.

In a May 2018 interview with the Mediamax news agency she said: "My grandfather always told us that our family has deep roots in Lowland Karabakh." She admitted, however, that neither she nor her father had managed to find detailed records of the family's origins in the archives.

Makunts credits her father with a special role in her upbringing. In the same interview she recalled watching his research work as a child, which later shaped her own choice of profession.

In 1999, after graduating from Yerevan Secondary School No. 195, she enrolled in the Faculty of Romance and Germanic Philology at Yerevan State University. She earned her bachelor's degree in 2003 and completed a master's program at the same faculty in 2005. In 2014 she received a Candidate of Sciences degree in philology.

From 2005 to 2019, Makunts taught at the Russian-Armenian University. Alongside her academic work, she collaborated with foreign organizations. Her official biography says that from 2014 to 2018 she worked on contract at the Yerevan office of Germany's Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and from 2016 to 2018 at the Armenia office of the U.S. Peace Corps.

In the summer of 2015, Makunts completed a certificate course at the Fletcher summer school at Tufts University in the United States. In February 2018 she became head of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation at the Russian-Armenian University, where she stayed until May of that year.

2018 was the turning point in her career. After the change of power in Armenia, on May 12 Makunts was appointed minister of culture in Nikol Pashinyan's government. In the parliamentary elections of December 9, 2018, she won a seat in the National Assembly on the My Step bloc's regional list. She left the culture ministry on January 14, 2019, and went on to lead the My Step parliamentary faction. She is a member of the Civil Contract party.

In August 2021, Makunts was appointed Armenia's ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary to the United States, a post she held until 2025. After returning from Washington, she worked in 2025 and 2026 as chief adviser to Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. On August 3, 2026, she was appointed chief of staff to the prime minister of Armenia.

Sources: National Assembly of Armenia: official biography • Mediamax: interview with Lilit Makunts, May 30, 2018 • Government of Armenia: biographical data • Office of the Prime Minister: appointment, August 3, 2026

Long before the Velvet Revolution

Lilit Makunts, described in some publications as "Pashinyan's favorite teacher," was no random figure swept into power by the 2018 Velvet Revolution. A widely repeated story

has it that she taught Pashinyan English before he came to power. That story, however, was never convincingly confirmed in public.

Her political ties to Pashinyan, on the other hand, can be traced through quite specific events. Her political biography began almost fifteen years before the revolution.



Pictured: Lilit Makunts

As early as 2004, while a master's student at Yerevan State University, Makunts joined the Liberal Party of Armenia. She later sat on its political council and headed the party's youth organization.

After the 2008 presidential election, Makunts joined the opposition youth movement HIMA ("Now"; Armenian: ՀԻՄԱ), which was active amid the mass protests and the tragic events of March 1.

It was during this period, she told EVN Report, that she began working with Nikol Pashinyan.

One more detail stands out: HIMA later produced a whole group of senior officials in Pashinyan's government.

HIMA's founders included Arayik Harutyunyan, who later became minister of education and science and then chief of staff to the prime minister.

Also linked to the movement was Arsen Kharatyan, a prominent figure in opposition youth circles, who in June 2018 became the prime minister's adviser on foreign policy.

Most revealing of all, though, is the account of Arayik Harutyunyan himself.

After the Velvet Revolution, when former HIMA members had taken up government posts, he posted their photos on Facebook with a question: "Do you know what these people have in common, apart from having become part of the system of public administration?"

The answer was that all of them had once been members of the HIMA youth movement.

In the post, reproduced by 168.am on December 30, 2018, Harutyunyan listed 11 former members of the movement who had received government posts after the change of power.



In the group photo, from left to right:

Hakob Arshakyan, minister of transport, communications and information technology; **Lilit Makunts**, acting minister of culture and future head of the My Step parliamentary faction; **Artur Grigoryan**, head of the Inspection Body for Nature and Subsoil Protection; **Arman Yeghoyan**, the prime minister's press secretary; **Narek**

Babayan (husband of Lena Nazaryan), chairman of the State Property Management Committee; **Hripsime Grigoryan**, chair of the State Tourism Committee; **Arayik Harutyunyan**, acting minister of education and science; **Davit Sanasaryan**, head of the State Oversight Service; **Tigran Galstyan**, deputy minister of culture; **Smbat Gogyan**, head of the Higher Qualification Committee.

The other photo showed **Arsen Torosyan**, acting minister of health.



Eleven former members of a single opposition movement ended up in government posts after the Velvet Revolution, and some of them held senior positions in Pashinyan's cabinet.

And Makunts belonged to this political circle long before her name became known to the wider public.

It is also of interest that in the 2012 parliamentary elections Lilit Makunts ran on the proportional list of the opposition Armenian National Congress (ANC) bloc, led by Armenia's first president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan. Makunts was 59th on the list, Nikol Pashinyan 7th.

Their political paths crossed both at opposition protests and in joint party politics.

After the elections, however, Makunts decided to step away from politics. In May 2012 she left the Liberal Party, announcing that she was ending her political activity. She later explained the decision by her disappointment with the election results and her wish to focus on civic and educational initiatives.

Leaving party politics did not mean breaking with Pashinyan's circle, though. By Makunts's own account, she later took part in building Civil Contract, a civic and political initiative that took shape in 2013 and became a political party in 2015. At first, she said, she had no intention of joining the new party.

In her May 2018 interview with Mediamax, Makunts also admitted that before the 2017 parliamentary elections Civil Contract had offered her a chance to run. She turned it down, saying she was not ready for political work and had other projects and commitments.

By the time of the Velvet Revolution, Makunts was no political novice, and her cooperation with Nikol Pashinyan and his circle went back at least a decade. This went beyond knowing the future prime minister. She belonged to a circle of opposition activists that, after the change of power, produced a number of ministers and agency heads.

Sources: EVN Report: Makunts's political activity and role in HIMA • 168.am: Arayik Harutyunyan's post with photos and a list of 11 HIMA members • Hraparak: HIMA members and their later careers • Epress.am: Makunts leaves the Liberal Party in 2012 • Aysor.am: ANC electoral list of March 22, 2012 • CivilNet: how Civil Contract was founded • Mediamax: interview with Makunts, May 2018 • NEWS.am: Anna Hakobyan comments on the rumors, May 2018

The Peace Corps contract: two years of work, one line in a biography

Politics and university teaching were not the whole of Makunts's biography. Long before she came to power, she had gone through international training programs and built working ties with a number of foreign organizations, American ones among them. Her political past can be traced in some detail. Much less is known about what she actually did at some of these organizations.

Her two-year contract with the Peace Corps deserves particular attention.

Lilit Makunts's official biography devotes just one line to her work with the U.S. Peace Corps: from 2016 to 2018 she worked on contract at the organization's Yerevan office. It gives no position, no type of contract, no list of duties and no projects she took part in.

Yet this is no ordinary international NGO, one among many. The Peace Corps is a U.S. government agency, created in 1961 and made an independent federal agency in 1981. Its director and deputy director are appointed by the president of the United States with the consent of the Senate.

Some light on Makunts's work at this American agency comes from Peace Corps Armenia volunteer Liz Barron. In a post dated May 13, 2018, Barron recalled that Makunts had been one of the teachers who helped her learn Armenian after she arrived in the country as a Peace Corps volunteer a year earlier.

That establishes at least one part of Makunts's work: she helped with language training for American volunteers. Barron's account, however, does not say whether that was all she did, or what other duties her contract with a U.S. government agency involved.

The head of the Peace Corps office in Armenia is also worth a closer look. From June 2017 to December 2019, the post of Country Director, Peace Corps Armenia, was held by Sonny Luu, a career officer with more than 23 years in the U.S. Army.



Pictured: Sonny Luu

During his military career, Luu held command and staff positions, including service at the U.S. Pacific Command. According to his official biography, he also worked as a

foreign area officer, representing the United States in diplomatic contacts on regional security and international development in Asia.

Luu went on to head the Peace Corps program in China and later became country director in Thailand.

Part of Makunts's two years with the Peace Corps therefore coincided with a period when the Armenia office was run by a former U.S. military officer with international and diplomatic experience. Open sources do not yet show whether their duties overlapped or how directly they worked together.

This leaves many questions open. What was Makunts's official job title? Was her work limited to teaching Armenian, or did it cover other areas? Which programs did the contract involve? Who was her direct supervisor? Did her job involve contact with the leadership of the Armenia office, and with Sonny Luu specifically?

And finally, why are two years of work at a U.S. government agency by a future minister, faction leader and ambassador to the United States reduced in her official biography to a single line that says almost nothing about what the work was?

Sources: Government of Armenia: official biography of Lilit Makunts • Liz Barron: account of Makunts teaching her Armenian, May 13, 2018 • U.S. Government Manual: legal status and structure of the Peace Corps • Peace Corps Armenia: annual report for 2018 • Sonny Luu: biography, military service and Peace Corps leadership

From the Fletcher School to the techniques of nonviolent struggle

The Peace Corps was not the only American organization Lilit Makunts worked with. Another strand of her work involved studying and teaching strategies of nonviolent civil resistance. And this went well beyond theory, into the very practical business of organizing protest movements.

In May 2018, Peace Corps volunteer Liz Barron, writing about how she came to know Makunts, also mentioned her involvement in programs run by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC).

ICNC was founded in Washington in 2002 by Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall. It specializes in studying and spreading knowledge about nonviolent civil resistance, strategies of public mobilization and political change.

In June 2015, Makunts took part in the Fletcher Summer Institute for the Advanced Study of Nonviolent Conflict, a six-day certificate program run by ICNC together with the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

To be clear, this was no university degree or academic qualification from a prestigious diplomatic school. It was an intensive course held on June 7–12, 2015.

What the program covered, however, deserves a closer look.

Participants at the Fletcher Summer Institute studied how protest movements emerge and grow, methods of mass mobilization, strategic and tactical planning, ways of sustaining protest activity, countering repression and maintaining nonviolent discipline.

Separate sessions dealt with turning spontaneous protests into organized movements, building coalitions, working with outside state and non-state actors, and getting members of the power structures, officials and security forces to switch to the protesters' side or withdraw their support from the government.

Scenarios of democratic transition were also discussed, including transitions brought about by large-scale mass protests.

In other words, the program went beyond the history of nonviolent resistance. It also examined the specific mechanisms through which protest movements can bring about political change.

For Makunts, the Fletcher School was no one-off episode.

In 2016 she became an ICNC Curriculum Fellow and, as part of the program, developed her own online course, Introduction to Civil Resistance: History and Strategies of Nonviolent Struggle.

Materials published by ICNC show that Makunts developed the course concept and teaching materials herself, drew up the syllabus, designed the assessment tools, selected participants and moderated the sessions. The course ran in November–December 2016 on ICNC's online learning platform.

It was aimed at members of civil society, civic and political activists, and students.

Participants studied the history of civil resistance, the concept of people power, why nonviolent campaigns succeed, strategic analysis of protest movements, the choice of tactics and forms of cultural resistance.

A separate unit was devoted to the role of negotiations in nonviolent struggle and how such approaches could be applied in Armenia.

In that same year, 2016, according to her biography on the ICNC website, she launched an academic course on civil resistance at the Department of Political Science of the Russian-Armenian University.

By the end of 2016, Makunts was no longer only studying the theory of nonviolent resistance abroad. She was teaching it in Armenia as well, including to members of civil society and a politically active audience.

In 2017 her work with ICNC continued. Makunts was again among the Curriculum Fellows, this time together with Lusine Arakelyan, one of the founders of the NGO Civil Consciousness.

Together they designed and taught the course Nonviolent Struggle: Why and How It Works, aimed at Armenian activists, organizers of civic movements, non-formal educators and students.

The course ran from October 2 to November 20, 2017, on the ICNC platform and also included in-person sessions.

Its syllabus covered building protest movements, mass mobilization, campaign resilience, strategic analysis, tactical planning and the experience of nonviolent movements in the post-Soviet space.

One of its stated goals was to look at how civil resistance could be made more strategic and effective.

In 2016–2018 this work also overlapped with her contract job at the Yerevan office of the U.S. Peace Corps.

But the next episode is of special interest.

On May 10, 2018, just two days before she was appointed Armenia's minister of culture, Makunts published an article about the Velvet Revolution on ICNC's Minds of the Movement platform.

In the piece, After Armenia's Velvet Revolution, New Colors and Vibes in Country's Politics and Society, she analyzed why the protest movement led by Nikol Pashinyan had succeeded, paying close attention to the organizers' strategic decisions.

Makunts went into detail on the role of mass mobilization, street blockades, strikes, tactical diversity of protest actions and nonviolent discipline. She also pointed to the movement's refusal to appeal to foreign geopolitical patrons and its use of lessons from earlier protest campaigns.

The future culture minister was, in fact, presenting Armenia's change of power through the lens of the very strategies and mechanisms of civil resistance she had studied and taught in ICNC programs.

The resulting timeline is curious. In 2015, Makunts studied strategies of nonviolent resistance in the United States; in 2016–2017 she taught them to Armenian activists; and in May 2018 she analyzed the Velvet Revolution, by then an accomplished fact, on a specialized platform of the same organization.

Some questions remain that the published materials do not fully answer. Who paid for Makunts to attend the summer institute? What were the terms of her Curriculum Fellowship? Did she receive personal compensation or grant support? Who exactly took the courses she designed, and did any of those students help organize the protests in the spring of 2018?

Three years before the Velvet Revolution, Makunts had completed a specialized program on nonviolent resistance in the United States, and over the next two years she herself helped prepare courses on the strategy and tactics of civic and political mobilization in Armenia.

By the time she came to power, Makunts had both years of opposition experience and specialized training in the strategies of nonviolent civil resistance.

Sources: ICNC: the organization's work and status • ICNC: Fletcher Summer Institute 2015, program and session content • ICNC: 2016 Curriculum Fellowship awardees • ICNC: Makunts's 2016 course, content and results • ICNC: 2017 Curriculum Fellows • ICNC: joint course by Makunts and Lusine Arakelyan, 2017 • ICNC: Lilit Makunts's article on the Velvet Revolution, May 10, 2018 • ICNC: biographical profile of Lilit Makunts

"Culture is me": a first appointment and Pashinyan's trust

Lilit Makunts's appointment as Armenia's minister of culture in May 2018 drew plenty of questions and bewilderment. Her name meant next to nothing to the public, and a background as a philologist and English teacher could hardly count as sufficient qualification to run the country's cultural sector.

Lack of relevant experience was no obstacle for Nikol Pashinyan, however. Makunts herself put her appointment down above all to the new prime minister's trust.

"I received the offer from Prime Minister Pashinyan. What mattered to me was that he trusted me," Makunts said in an interview with Mediamax in May 2018.

She acknowledged that she understood public doubts about her candidacy, since she had never been a public figure before. Pashinyan, she said, had chosen her for her

professional skills, her desire for change in the country and her personal qualities, including incorruptibility.



Pictured: Lilit Makunts, Nikol Pashinyan

What made the new minister famous, though, was a different remark:

"Culture is me. It is in me, as it is in each of us."

The phrase caused an uproar, and by May 17 Makunts had to explain to journalists that she had never meant to identify herself with all of Armenian culture. She only wanted to say that every person is part of it and carries it.

Asked about her lack of relevant experience, Makunts replied that the post of culture minister was a political one, and that as a linguist she was connected to culture through language.

On July 17, 2018, commenting on her appointment, Makunts again pointed to the head of government's trust: "The prime minister trusts me, and I will do everything to serve the people in this capacity."

Makunts's public obscurity did not mean she lacked the political experience and training described above. But she had no comparable professional background for running the country's cultural sector. And one of the main arguments for her appointment, by her own account, was Nikol Pashinyan's trust.

Sources: Mediamax: interview with Lilit Makunts, May 2018 • NEWS.am: explaining the phrase "Culture is me," May 17, 2018 • Sputnik Armenia: statement on Pashinyan's trust, July 17, 2018

Pashinyan's soldier: scandals, courts and a split faction

From January 2019, Lilit Makunts led the My Step parliamentary faction. Even before her appointment, the newspaper Zhamanak wrote that there were no plans to bring her back into the government: Civil Contract reportedly considered her tenure as culture minister a failure and her relations with part of the cultural community damaged. The paper also claimed that the faction leader's role would be largely ceremonial, since the main decisions in the political team were made by Nikol Pashinyan anyway.

Her first months in the job brought scandal. When it emerged that governors appointed by the new government were awarding themselves bonuses, the leader of the largest parliamentary faction admitted she did not know how the law regulated the matter, but put it down to low salaries and the need to reward good employees. Meanwhile, Ararat Province governor Garik Sargsyan had given himself a bonus of 104.5% of his monthly salary. Later Makunts came out in favor of transparency in the salaries and bonuses of senior officials.

There were clashes with the press as well. In February 2019, journalists were kept out of the parliament building during a closed My Step meeting attended by Pashinyan. Makunts denied that the order had come from the faction leadership, apologized and promised it would not happen again. Still, the episode was a sharp contrast with the openness the revolutionary government had promised.

Her conduct during the government's conflict with the judiciary was especially revealing.

In May 2019, when Pashinyan called on supporters to block the entrances to the courts, Makunts showed up outside one of the courthouses. Commenting on a broken window, she cited eyewitnesses who said it might have been broken from the inside, perhaps by a judge trying to get into the building through the window. She added at once, though, that she could not claim this herself.

And after a meeting with Pashinyan, it was Makunts who announced an agreement to begin "revolutionary changes" in the judicial system and to discuss mechanisms of transitional justice.

Soon another scandal broke. The newspaper Aravot reported that at a closed faction meeting, deputies had discussed the possibility of "dispersing" the Supreme Judicial

Council and the Constitutional Court, and had criticized Justice Minister Artak Zeynalyan for not being decisive enough.

Makunts called the report outright slander. The paper then produced an audio recording in which the deputies' remarks could be heard. After that, the faction leader began to qualify her words, saying that individual MPs might have had such conversations, but that the issue had not been on the meeting's official agenda. She did admit that complaints about Zeynalyan had been voiced.

In 2019–2020, My Step was actively involved in efforts to change the makeup of the Constitutional Court. The opposition accused the parliamentary majority of trying to subordinate the judiciary to the country's political leadership. Makunts defended the constitutional amendments, rejected accusations of overturning the constitutional order and stressed that the Venice Commission's opinions were only advisory.

Makunts's toughest test, however, was the postwar crisis of 2020–2021.

After the defeat in the 44-day war, Taguhi Tovmasyan, Sofya Hovsepyan, Gor Gevorgyan, Vardan Atabekyan and Anna Grigoryan left the My Step faction. The deputies spoke of fundamental disagreements with the government's policy and the need to take public demands into account.

Deputy Speaker Alen Simonyan acknowledged that disagreements with the departing deputies had existed long before they left, though he presented the loss of five faction members as proof of the team's resilience.

For Makunts, the crisis showed the limits of her influence over the parliamentary majority. She consistently defended the political leadership's decisions and Pashinyan's public position, yet she could not keep the faction united in the postwar split.

Sources: Zhamanak / Yerkir: circumstances of her appointment as faction leader • Yerkir: the governors' bonus scandal • Shant News: statement on bonus transparency • Pastinfo: conflict with journalists • Pastinfo: the broken courthouse window incident • Armenpress: revolutionary changes in the judicial system • Aravot: audio recording of the closed faction meeting • CivilNet: Makunts on the amendments and the Venice Commission • Yerkir: Media Defender monitoring • Armenpress: five deputies leave the faction, February 2021

Washington: an appointment in the face of protests

One of the first to speak publicly about Lilit Makunts's possible appointment as ambassador to the United States was Mikayel Minasyan, Armenia's former ambassador

to the Vatican and son-in-law of former President Serzh Sargsyan. On January 23, 2021, six months before the official appointment, he wrote that Pashinyan intended to send the head of the My Step faction to Washington, calling her "Nikol's English teacher."

Minasyan sharply criticized the expected appointment, calling Makunts unprepared for diplomatic work. And the future ambassador really had no diplomatic experience.

Soon 168.am recalled another episode: a few months before the 44-day war, Makunts had confidently said she did not believe Turkey would intervene in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. The outlet quoted her as saying that Turkey "will not intervene, will not become a party" to the war. Given what happened next, those words became one more reason to criticize her foreign policy judgment.

Back in May 2018, Pashinyan himself had called for rethinking the practice of appointing non-career ambassadors. In Makunts's case, however, her lack of diplomatic experience proved no obstacle.

The upcoming appointment also set off a debate about Makunts's foreign ties. In opposition circles she was called an "American protégée" and sometimes a "Soros protégée." The grounds were the facts we have already covered: her work with the U.S. Peace Corps and her part in ICNC and Fletcher School programs.

It says a lot that protests against her appointment began before she even arrived in Washington.

On February 26, 2021, the Central Committee of the ARF Dashnaktsutyun Eastern Region USA and the Eastern District Committee of the Ramkavar Azatakan Party sent Armenian Foreign Minister Ara Aivazian an open letter demanding that her candidacy be withdrawn.

The authors called Makunts a politically divisive figure, pointed to her lack of diplomatic experience and objected to replacing career diplomat Varuzhan Nersesyan with a political appointee.

Even so, on August 2, 2021, Makunts was appointed Armenia's ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary to the United States.

The presentation of her credentials to the American president soon gave rise to a fresh scandal.

On September 15, 2021, Joe Biden formally accepted Makunts's credentials, but there was no in-person ceremony in the Oval Office of the White House. Instead of the

traditional reception, the exchange of greetings took place in writing. The reason given was restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic.

The Armenian Center for American Studies, reviewing Makunts's first hundred days, called this unprecedented for an Armenian ambassador. The study's authors noted that during the same period Biden kept receiving numerous guests and delegations at the White House, while no personal meeting was arranged for Makunts.

Even without this episode, her mission got off to a difficult start. The new ambassador had to build relations with the U.S. administration and also establish working ties with influential diaspora organizations, some of which had opposed her appointment from the start.

And it was here that the trouble began almost at once.

Sources: NEWS.am: statement by Mikayel Minasyan, January 23, 2021 • 168.am: criticism of the appointment, Makunts's statement on Turkey and Pashinyan's position on non-career ambassadors • ARF and ADL: open letter against Makunts's appointment, February 26, 2021 • Armenian Foreign Ministry: Makunts appointed ambassador, August 2, 2021 • Armenian Center for American Studies: Makunts's first 100 days • U.S. State Department: official dates of presentation of credentials

"Go Home Lilit Makunts": the ambassador against the diaspora?

One of the first public episodes of Makunts's time in the United States was a protest at St. Mary (Surb Astvatsatsin) Armenian Church in Washington. On August 15, 2021, members of the Armenian community greeted the new ambassador with a banner reading "Go Home Lilit Makunts."





That set off a series of conflicts between Armenia's diplomatic mission and part of the organized Armenian-American diaspora, above all the organizations linked to the ARF Dashnaktsutyun.

The next confrontation came in the fall of 2021, when the embassy held a reception to mark the 30th anniversary of Armenia's independence. Young members of the ARF and the Armenian Youth Federation (AYF) gathered outside the mission for a silent protest. They considered a festive reception unacceptable while Armenian prisoners of war were still being held in Azerbaijan.



According to the protesters, embassy staff told them to leave the premises, and when they refused, the U.S. Secret Service was called. The protesters said the officers who arrived found no violation of the law.

The opposition press saw the episode as an attempt by Makunts to break up a peaceful protest with the help of American security forces.

Relations with the community were strained outside Washington as well. In October 2021, Armenian media reported that only about ten people came to Makunts's meeting with the Armenian Bar Association in New York. The press portrayed the low turnout as a boycott.

On November 5, 2021, the conflict moved to direct talks. The leadership of the AYF Eastern Region USA, headed by Vrej Dawli, met with Makunts at the embassy. The young activists spoke out against new concessions to Azerbaijan and Turkey, a possible transport corridor through Syunik and the Pashinyan government's policy on Artsakh.

Their warning left no room for doubt: "No more reckless concessions."

The meetings did not ease the tension, however.

In January 2022, political analyst Suren Sargsyan publicly accused Makunts of never having held an open meeting with the Armenian community of Los Angeles, the largest in the United States, since her appointment. He said that had never happened with previous Armenian ambassadors.

On April 18, 2022, protesters at another rally in Washington were already chanting "Traitor! Traitor!" at Makunts, in protest against Pashinyan's policies.

The most serious incident took place on April 27, 2022, at the U.S. Capitol, after an event marking the 107th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide.

Makunts attended the commemoration as ambassador. As she was leaving the building, two young men approached her; Armenian media linked them to the ARF. During the confrontation, a liquid, presumably water, was thrown at the ambassador. U.S. law enforcement detained the two men, questioned them and later released them.





Soon the press carried accusations that Makunts had personally demanded their arrest. The embassy officially denied this, saying U.S. law enforcement had acted on its own, in line with the host country's duty to ensure the safety of diplomats.

By this point, relations with part of the diaspora had turned into open political confrontation. Opposition Armenian organizations no longer saw Makunts merely as an inexperienced diplomat. To them she was Pashinyan's personal representative on Artsakh and on relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Sources: Yerkir Media: the "Go Home Lilit Makunts" protest, August 2021 • American Studies: analysis of the ambassador's first 100 days • NEWS.am: protest at the embassy

and the call to law enforcement, October 2021 • AYF-ER: meeting with Makunts, November 2021 • Aravot: criticism of Makunts's relations with the Los Angeles community, January 22, 2022 • Aysor: protest against Makunts, April 2022 • NEWS.am: accusations after the incident at Congress • MassisPost: assault on Makunts and the embassy's statement, May 2022

"Dog": extraditing a government critic as a diplomatic task?

Amid her strained relations with the Armenian diaspora in Washington, Lilit Makunts, judging by press reports, also found time to deal with Yerevan's domestic political problems. The case in question involved one of the Armenian government's most controversial critics: video blogger Vardan Ghukasyan, known by the nickname "Dog," whose widely discussed posts regularly took aim at figures in both the government and the opposition.



Pictured: Lilit Makunts and Vardan Ghukasyan

On May 29, 2025, the newspaper Hraparak reported that Makunts had repeatedly approached the U.S. authorities seeking Ghukasyan's extradition to Armenia. The paper said the earlier requests had produced no result, but the ambassador kept trying. Not without irony, Hraparak added that before her diplomatic mission ended Makunts hoped to be of use to the state at least on this matter.

By then Ghukasyan was in custody in the United States. On February 20, 2025, he was detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for violating immigration rules. In Armenia, criminal cases had been opened against him, including on charges of extortion, threats and public calls for violence. Ghukasyan himself denied the charges.

Hraparak's report drew a sharp reaction from the DOK party, which is linked to Ghukasyan. Its representatives accused Makunts of helping to persecute a government opponent abroad for political reasons.

The story took a noteworthy turn after Makunts had left Washington. A May 11, 2026, ruling by the federal court in Nevada found that U.S. immigration authorities had made it a priority to deport Ghukasyan specifically to Armenia, even though he was willing to leave voluntarily for Russia, of which he is also a citizen. At the time, the deportation order was under appeal.

Sources: Hraparak / Sputnik Armenia: reports on Makunts's requests, May 29, 2025 • Armenpress: ICE's official response on Ghukasyan's detention, March 4, 2025 • Pastinfo: DOK party statement against Makunts, May 29, 2025 • U.S. District Court, District of Nevada: Gukasian v. Noem, order of May 11, 2026

Mercury Public Affairs: a Turkish past and more than half a million dollars

One of the most controversial decisions of Lilit Makunts's time as ambassador was the agreement with the Washington lobbying firm Mercury Public Affairs, which she signed on behalf of the Armenian embassy on April 1, 2025. The contract originally ran until March 31, 2026, and provided for $50,000 a month plus reimbursable expenses. Mercury was to represent Armenia's interests before Congress and the U.S. administration and handle strategic communications, media relations and the promotion of economic cooperation.

And the contract went beyond classic lobbying. Its list of services expressly included "strategic communications and media relations services." Formally, the client was the Armenian embassy, rather than Nikol Pashinyan or the Civil Contract party.

OC Media, however, in its analysis of the contract, pointed to the political context: the state was buying strategic communications and media relations services on the eve of the 2026 parliamentary elections.

This raises a very concrete question. Where was the line between promoting Armenia's interests and promoting the political line of the current government? Who drafted the talking points for Mercury? And were communications services paid for by the state

used to burnish the public image of the government and of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan?

The choice of contractor drew a sharp reaction from part of the Armenian diaspora in the United States almost at once. The reason was Mercury's well-known history: the firm had previously represented the Turkish embassy in Washington and provided lobbying and PR services to the Turkish side.

Mercury's work with the Turkish embassy began back in 2018. In February 2020 the contract was renewed for about $1 million, but in October of that year, during the 44-day war, Mercury ended it under pressure from the ANCA and other Armenian organizations.



Its ties to Turkish entities did not end all at once, though: Mercury kept working with the Turkey-U.S. Business Council (TAIK) even after its contract with the Turkish embassy itself was terminated.

Aram Hamparian, executive director of the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA), reacted especially harshly to the choice. Commenting on the Armenian government's decision, he said Pashinyan had picked a firm "with Turkish money in its bank account and Armenian blood on its hands."

All this raised an obvious question: of all the lobbying firms working in Washington, why did the Armenian embassy choose one with such a past?

How much did Mercury receive?

The company's financial filings with the U.S. FARA registry make it possible to establish the actual scale of the payments it reported receiving from the Armenian embassy.

Reporting period	***Reported receipts***
April–June 2025	*$150,461.63*
July–December 2025	*$300,418.58*
January–June 2026	*$91,115.86*
Total	***$541,996.07***

The last report lists two payments, dated February 3 and February 27, 2026, of $50,044.53 and $41,071.33 respectively.

Across the three FARA reports, Mercury declared receiving $541,996.07 from the Armenian embassy.

The story did not end there, however.

On February 27, 2026, Mercury notified the U.S. Department of Justice that its contract with the Armenian embassy had been terminated on February 23, more than a month before the original end date of March 31.

The registration of four Mercury representatives working for the Armenian client was also terminated. The FARA filing gives no reason for the early termination.

Several questions remain, and so far there are no public answers to them.

What exactly did the state-funded strategic communications involve? Where was the line between promoting Armenia's interests and promoting the government's political line? What results were achieved for more than half a million dollars? And why was the contract cut short less than a year in?

Sources: FARA: Mercury's contract with the Armenian embassy, Makunts's signature and the list of services • OC Media: strategic communications and the context of the 2026 elections • FARA: Mercury's contract with the Turkish embassy, February 2020 • ANCA: Mercury ends its contract with Turkey, October 23, 2020 • ArmInfo: Mercury's work with TAIK • Harut Sassounian: Aram Hamparian's reaction • FARA: financial report of August 11, 2025 • FARA: financial report of February 4, 2026 • FARA: financial report of July 22, 2026 • FARA: contract terminated as of February 23, 2026

Makunts's connections: political and otherwise

Nikol Pashinyan remained the central figure in Lilit Makunts's political career throughout. Within the ruling team, however, she also built a circle of political connections of her own.

As early as January 2019, the newspaper Hraparak reported a struggle for influence inside the 88-member My Step parliamentary faction. In the paper's account, Makunts belonged to the group of then-Speaker Ararat Mirzoyan, along with Ruben Rubinyan, Mkhitar Hayrapetyan and Hakob Simidyan. The paper claimed that this group saw itself as the elite of the parliamentary majority.

By June of that year, all of these politicians had joined the board of the Civil Contract party.

For all her public reserve, Makunts also kept up informal relationships with certain members of the ruling party. Photos of her with MP Sona Ghazaryan, for example, appeared on social media with warm, almost family-like captions.



Pictured: Lilit Makunts and Sona Ghazaryan

Arayik Harutyunyan held a special place in Makunts's political circle (in political backrooms there were rumors of a past romantic relationship between them). Their ties

went back to their joint work in the HIMA youth movement. Both later received ministerial portfolios in Pashinyan's government, and after Makunts returned from Washington they ended up side by side again, this time in the prime minister's office.



Pictured: Lilit Makunts and Arayik Harutyunyan

The former ambassador's return, however, came with rumors of far loftier prospects in parliament.

On February 17, 2026, Hraparak reported that after Civil Contract's internal party vote, Makunts had allegedly told friends that Pashinyan was considering her as the next speaker of the National Assembly.

A few days earlier, on February 13, Makunts herself had told journalists she had no such information, and she left unanswered the question of whether she would like to lead parliament.

But on July 3, Hraparak published a different version of events. The paper wrote that Makunts had been seeking one of two posts, speaker of parliament or leader of the majority faction, but had then allegedly given up on both.

The paper attributed this to resentment among some Civil Contract deputies, who had spent several years in parliament defending the government's decisions and taking criticism, while Makunts, just back from the United States, might get the speaker's chair. The paper also claimed that she herself did not want to take part in bruising parliamentary battles in the style of Vahagn Aleksanyan, Artur Hovhannisyan or Ruben Rubinyan, and preferred to stay in the executive branch.

How reliable these backroom explanations are is unknown. Still, events unfolded exactly that way.

After the parliamentary elections of June 7, 2026, Makunts gave up her seat in parliament. And on August 3, Pashinyan appointed her as his chief of staff, replacing Arayik Harutyunyan, who moved to parliament.



Pictured: Lilit Makunts, Nikol Pashinyan, Arayik Harutyunyan

Although the speaker's chair never went to Makunts, her new post was hardly a minor one.

Makunts, whom the press had tipped for speaker of parliament, ended up in a post responsible for the day-to-day administrative support of the prime minister's work. And Pashinyan's trust, which she had cited as far back as her appointment as culture minister in 2018, once again proved an important factor in her career advancement.

Sources: Hraparak / NEWS.am: groups of influence in the My Step faction, January 29, 2019 • Armenian Times: makeup of the Civil Contract board, June 2019 • Instagram: joint photo of Makunts and Sona Ghazaryan • NEWS.am: rumors of her appointment as speaker, February 17, 2026 • NEWS.am: Makunts's answer to journalists, February

13, 2026 • SLAQ / Hraparak: her reported refusal of a parliamentary post, July 3, 2026 • PAN.am: Makunts gives up her parliamentary seat, July 21, 2026 • ARLIS: Makunts appointed chief of staff, August 3, 2026 • Government of Armenia: powers of the chief of staff • Prime Minister of Armenia: Makunts introduced, August 3, 2026

Makunts's property: who was the co-owner?

Over her years in public service, Lilit Makunts's declared annual income grew roughly 5.2-fold: from 4.41 million drams (about $12,000) in 2018 to 23.13 million drams (about $64,000) in 2023, when she was Armenia's ambassador to the United States. Her foreign currency savings grew too, from $3,000 at the end of 2021 to $36,000 at the end of 2024.

One of Makunts's biggest purchases was an apartment in Yerevan's Byureg residential complex, built by Jermuk Group CJSC, which belongs to businessman and former MP Ashot Arsenyan, known by the nickname "Klos."

Other members of the ruling team also bought homes from the same developer. Among them was Defense Minister Suren Papikyan, whose apartment purchase became the subject of a separate media investigation. According to Armenian media, Arayik Harutyunyan and Trdat Sargsyan also became property owners in the complex.

In her declaration for 2025, Makunts listed an apartment worth 35,296,115 drams (about $98,000), acquired as joint property. The acquisition date is given as February 17, 2021.

In her declarations for 2021–2024, however, the apartment did not appear among her real estate. Instead, Makunts listed an interest-free loan of 34.29 million drams (about $95,000) to the developer and mortgage obligations to Armeconombank.

Why did an apartment with an acquisition date of February 2021 appear among her real estate only in the declaration for 2025? Was this linked to registering rights to a home under construction and the later registration of ownership? Another question is just as interesting: who was the apartment's co-owner, and what share of the purchase did that person finance? The materials we examined do not reveal the co-owner's identity.

A billion-dram typo

In May 2026, Makunts's declaration was at the center of another scandal. In the published data for 2025, her total income suddenly exceeded 1.317 billion drams (about $3.6 million), with more than 1.3 billion listed as salary from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Makunts explained the anomalous figure as a technical error: instead of 13,083,512 drams (about $36,000), the relevant field showed 1,308,351,200 drams (about $3.6 million).

The Corruption Prevention Commission confirmed receiving Makunts's notice of the error. In the corrected data, her total receipts came to 22.45 million drams (about $62,000), including salary, a personal income tax refund and a loan she had received.

The billion-dram income turned out to be a mistake rather than a sign that the official had suddenly grown rich. Yet such a large inaccuracy in an official state register raised questions about how carefully the asset declarations of senior officials are checked.

Sources: Corruption Prevention Commission of Armenia: register of declarations • 168.am: the billion-dram error in Makunts's declaration • Hetq: Suren Papikyan's apartment purchase • Yerkir / 24News: officials' property in the Byureg complex

The ambassador's brother: from defense minister's aide to sand quarries

While Lilit Makunts was building a political and diplomatic career, her younger brother Vahe Makunts also spent time in government service and then went into the mining business. His business partners turned out to be people with some very interesting political and family ties.



Pictured: Vahe Makunts

In August 2021, Vahe Makunts was appointed aide to Deputy Prime Minister Suren Papikyan. When Papikyan took over the Defense Ministry, Makunts followed him there as the minister's aide. He left the ministry in December 2022.

By January–April 2023, the former aide to the defense minister had become a partner in four companies at once, all involved in extracting and selling sand and building materials in Armavir Province: X Mining, Sanding Mining, Wolf Mining and First Construction Company.

Hetq established that Makunts did not set up these businesses from scratch. He bought stakes in companies that were already operating.

Vahe Makunts insisted business was nothing new to him. Since 2015, he said, he had lived abroad and worked in construction, extracting, hauling and selling building materials. He paid for the stakes, by his account, with his own money, borrowed funds and bank loans.

Partners with political connections

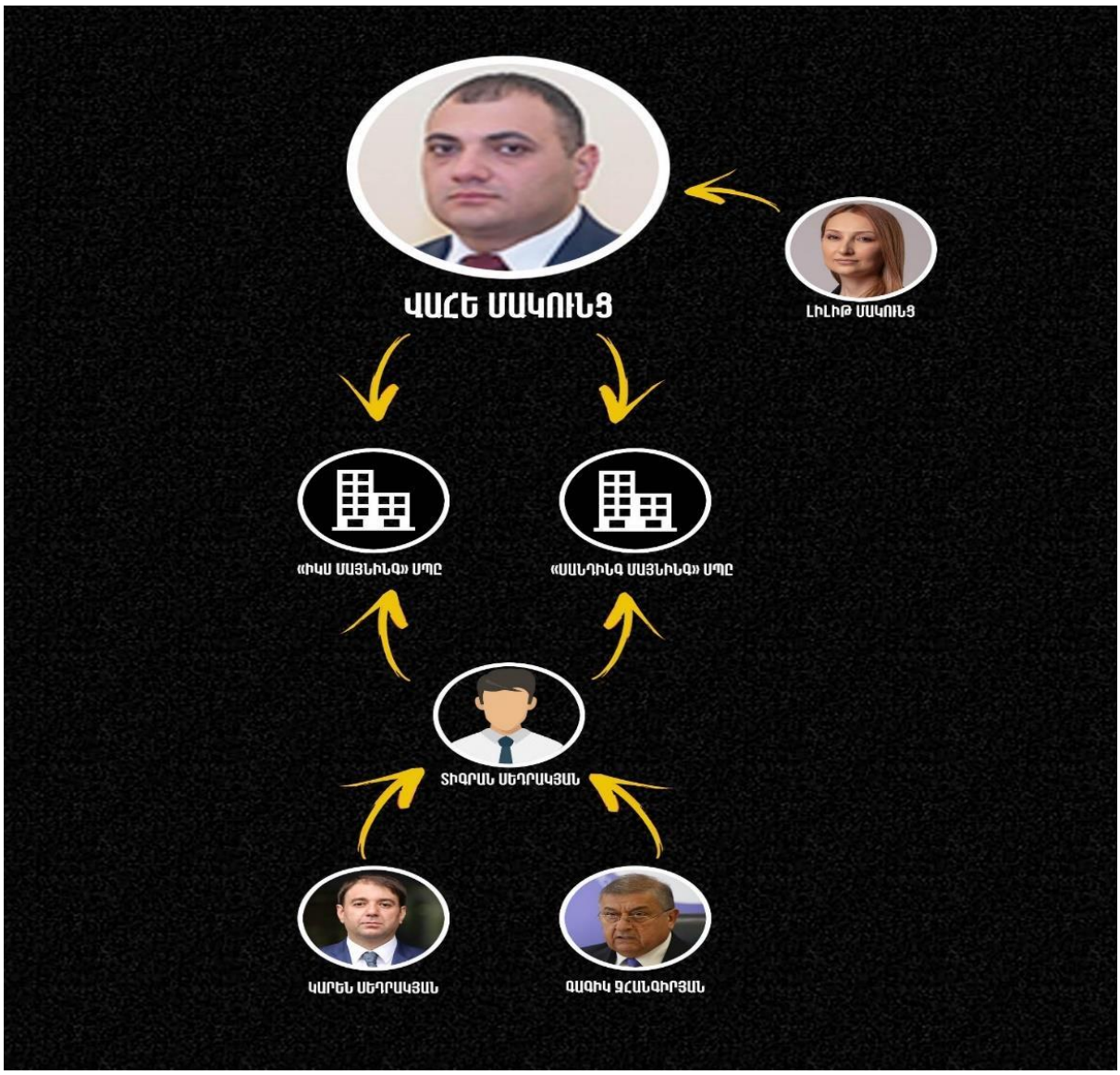
One of Vahe Makunts's main partners was Tigran Sedrakyan, with whom he held stakes in several companies. Sedrakyan is the father of Karen Sedrakyan, a member of Armenia's State Commission for the Protection of Economic Competition. The Sedrakyan family is also related to Gagik Jhangiryan, a former military prosecutor and former acting chairman of the Supreme Judicial Council.

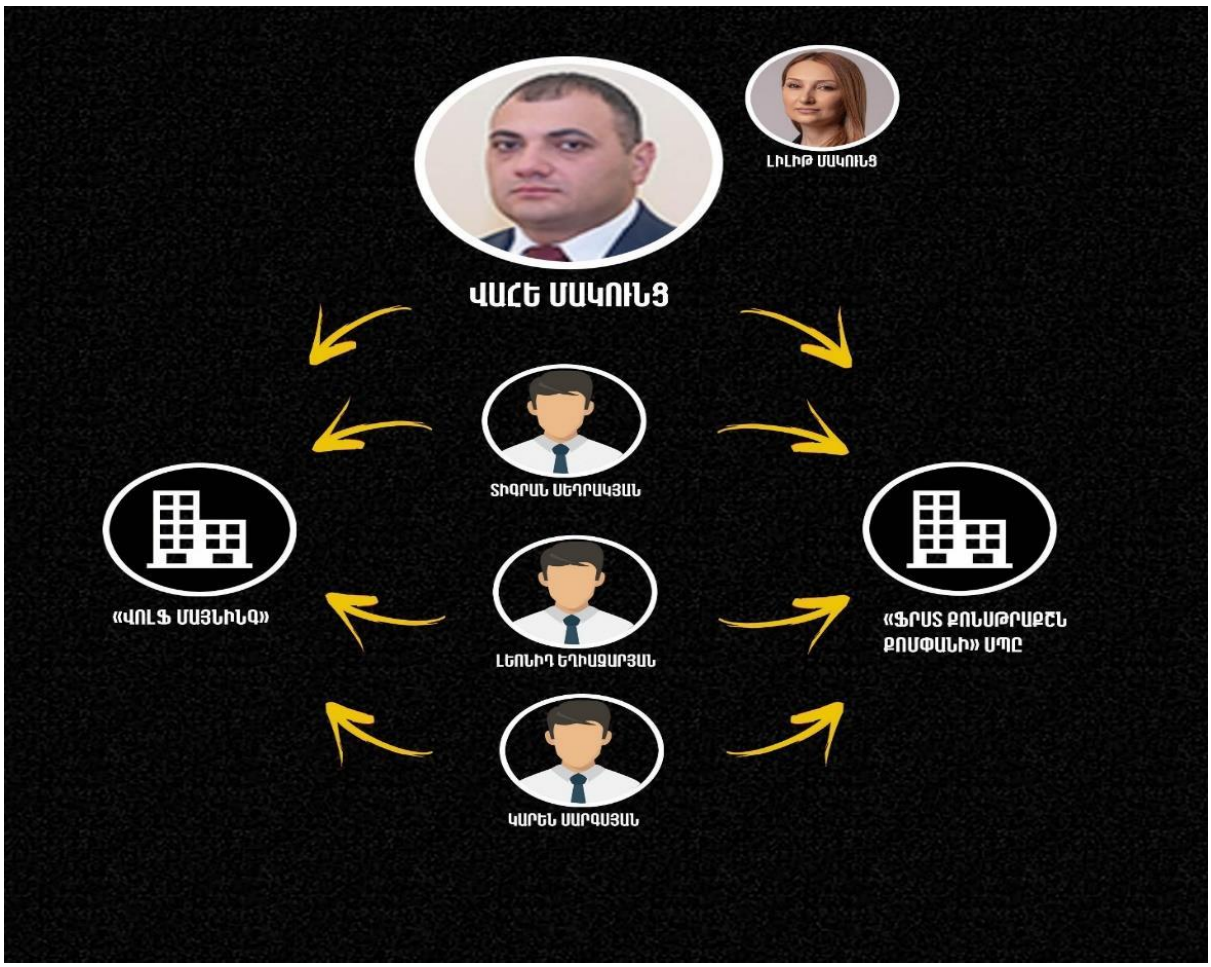
Other partners included former Deputy Minister of Trade and Economic Development Karen Sargsyan and Russian businessman Leonid Yeghiazaryan.

Management of all four companies, meanwhile, was concentrated in one pair of hands: their director was Ara Aramyan.

Vahe Makunts's business grew up among entrepreneurs, some of whom had their own ties to government agencies and to the former authorities.

The most interesting details, however, emerged from the companies' own activities.


ՎԱՀԵ ՄԱԿՈՒՆՑ
ԼԻԼԻԹ ՄԱԿՈՒՆՑ
«ԻԿԱ ՄԱՅՆԻՆԳ» ՍՊԸ
«ԱԱՆԴԻՆԳ ՄԱՅՆԻՆԳ» ՍՊԸ
ՏԻԳՐԱՆ ՍԵԴՐԱԿՅԱՆ
ԿԱՐԵՆ ՍԵԴՐԱԿՅԱՆ
ԳԱԳԻԿ ՅԱՀԱՆԳԻՐՅԱՆ



Quarries, violations and a closed case

On April 28, 2023, Vahe Makunts became the owner of 56.6% of X Mining, which on May 29 of that year received a 20-year permit to extract sand and gravel at the Argavand II deposit in Armavir Province.

The permit was issued at a time when the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure, which oversees mining, was headed by Gnel Sanosyan of the ruling Civil Contract party.

As Hetq found, however, work at the site had been going on before the permit was issued. Staff of the Metsamor community recorded violations, and administrative proceedings were opened.

The story of one of those proceedings stands out. On May 17, 2023, community officials again recorded excavation work with heavy machinery. Administrative proceedings

were opened, but on July 10 the head of the Metsamor community, Vahram Khachatryan, closed the case.

The decision stated that the company had stopped work, corrected the violations and restored the site.

But by the time the case was closed, Vahe Makunts was already a co-owner of the company. Khachatryan himself also represented the ruling Civil Contract party.

Hetq asked how it had been established that the site was restored, and whether the closing of the case had anything to do with the arrival of a new co-owner.

That was not the end of the violations.

In September 2024, staff of the Metsamor mayor's office again found illegal sand mining, this time on farmland owned by X Farming, formerly called Sanding Mining. Vahe Makunts also owned 56.6% of that company.

According to Hetq, the mining violated the designated use of the land and soil protection rules. On November 1, 2024, the mayor of Metsamor fined the company's director, Ara Aramyan, 300,000 drams (about $831).

Companies sold the day after an investigation

Vahe Makunts's exit from two other companies, Wolf Mining and First Construction Company, is another curious episode.

On August 2, 2023, Hetq published an investigation into the sand business of the Armenian ambassador's brother. The very next day, August 3, a change of ownership of both companies was entered in the state register.

Their sole owner became Karlen Minasyan, a businessman and member of the Vayk Community Council of Elders from the Republic Party.

Minasyan told Hetq that the deal had been negotiated with his lawyer by the companies' director, **Ara Aramyan**. After the change of owner, Aramyan kept his management posts at both companies that had been sold, while continuing to run X Mining, in which Vahe Makunts remained a co-owner.

But it is the new owner who is of most interest.



Pictured: Karlen Minasyan

Karlen Minasyan owns the construction company Eco Building, which carries out large government contracts, including for the Defense Ministry, the same ministry where Vahe Makunts worked as an aide to Minister Suren Papikyan until December 2022.

Minasyan explained the purchase of the sand quarries by the need to supply his own construction company with sand and crushed stone.

Eco Building operates on an impressive scale. In 2024 alone, the company signed 14 contracts with government bodies worth a total of 22.5 billion drams (about $62.3 million). Hetq also reported that 12 contracts to build 15 schools were signed with the Urban Development Committee and the Armenian Territorial Development Fund for 17.66 billion drams (about $48.9 million). Two more contracts covered road work in Tavush and Gegharkunik provinces.

Minasyan denied that political connections had helped him win government contracts. He even claimed that government bodies had sometimes asked his company to bid themselves, because nobody else was willing.

The Urban Development Committee, however, officially refuted this, saying it had held no talks with potential bidders and had certainly never approached them with such requests.

So two companies in which the Armenian ambassador's brother had held stakes passed to a businessman whose main company signed government contracts worth 22.5 billion drams (about $62.3 million) the following year. The change of ownership was registered literally the day after a journalistic investigation was published, and the director of the companies that were sold went on running the rest of Vahe Makunts's business as well.

Sources: Hetq: investigation into Vahe Makunts's sand business • Hetq: companies sold to Karlen Minasyan • Hetq: violations found at X Farming • Hetq: Eco Building's 14 government contracts worth 22.5 billion drams

More than English lessons

Behind the image of an unremarkable teacher stood no accidental figure: Lilit Makunts was a seasoned opposition activist who had received specialized training abroad and later led the largest parliamentary faction.

Was her work a success?

Judging by Pashinyan's unwavering trust, he may well have answered that question for himself long ago.

Meanwhile, Makunts's declared annual income grew 5.2-fold, and her brother became a co-owner of several mining companies. The story of the English teacher turned out to be only the simplest part of a far more complicated political biography. Every new detail we looked into added more questions. But the main one remains the same: who actually taught whom a lesson in power?