INVESTIGATION BY THE ANTI-CORRUPTION NATIONAL INITIATIVE (ANI)

SECRET CHURCH: HOW SECTS ARE TURNING ARMENIA INTO A LAUNCHPAD FOR FOREIGN INFLUENCE

Key figure in the dossier: *Sectarian Organizations in Armenia*



For many years, the activities of nontraditional religious organizations in Armenia have been viewed primarily through the lens of freedom of conscience. This framing is legitimate in itself: the Constitution guarantees everyone freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as equality and autonomy for religious organizations. Yet there is another side to this issue, one that is discussed far less openly: the ability of closed religious communities to evolve into ready-made networks for social mobilization, with internal discipline, strong horizontal ties, their own sources of funding, and leaders who command authority over their followers.

This is where religion ceases to be solely a theological matter. It becomes a political technology.

While the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) wages a centuries-long struggle to preserve the identity of the Armenian people, a far more dangerous process is unfolding in the shadows. Sectarian organizations, including Word of Life, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Embassy of God, and dozens of others, have developed into an extensive network that has entangled the country's political leadership, economy, and security services.

The figures are staggering. According to the Center for Assistance and Rehabilitation of Victims of Destructive Cults, 350,000 people are involved in sects - more than 10% of Armenia's population. These organizations have an annual turnover of approximately $1 billion. Every year, another 5,000 to 7,000 new victims join their ranks. By comparison, the global average is 1–1.5%, making Armenia's level of involvement anomalously high.

There are wars that never appear in official reports. No one is killed, no cities are destroyed, and no capitulation agreements are signed. There is only the slow, almost imperceptible fading of what makes a people a people: their memory, their faith, and their ability to resist. This is precisely the kind of war being waged against Armenia today. It is fought not by armies, but by "missionaries." It is financed not through military budgets, but through "charitable foundations." Its outcome is not occupied territory, but an occupied consciousness. When every tenth citizen falls into the networks of sectarian organizations, when their annual turnover reaches $1 billion, and when recruitment manuals almost verbatim reproduce intelligence-service training materials, this is no longer a question of freedom of conscience. It is a question of the state's survival.

Betrayal never comes exclusively from abroad. It always finds agents at home—people who receive money, positions, and "spiritual" legitimacy in exchange for loyalty and silence.

Today, the Armenian Apostolic Church remains the last institution not subordinated to political expediency. That is precisely why the government is arresting its archbishops, barring the Catholicos from leaving the country, and publishing a report arguing that he should be removed from office. At the same time, a "Prayer Breakfast" is being held in Yerevan with the participation of representatives of the White House and the U.S.

Department of State, where the prime minister declares Armenia the “Promised Land.”
None of this is coincidental. What we are witnessing is a clear pattern, unfolding in a deliberate sequence: first, delegitimize the Church’s canonical leadership; then, legitimize the state as the new intermediary between the people and God. This is what betrayal looks like today when it dons a religious mask. This is what the creeping occupation of Armenia looks like.

ANI’s investigation examines who is financing this war, who is coordinating it, who stands to benefit, and who is paying the price. It investigates the network of sectarian organizations, the money flowing from across the ocean, and the officials whose names must be revealed.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: HOW THE LAUNCHPAD FOR BUILT

The 1988 Vacuum as an Entry Point

The roots of Armenia’s “sectarian question” are geopolitical, not religious. In the aftermath of the devastating 1988 earthquake, which claimed tens of thousands of lives and left half a million people homeless, the country was plunged into a state of profound psychological distress.

One week after the earthquake Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles—the second-highest governing body of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—met with Soviet Ambassador Yuri Dubinin and his wife, Liana, in Washington to express his condolences and present a check for humanitarian aid.



Photo: Russel M. Nelson Sr. — religious leader and former surgeon, the 17th president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

To help earthquake victims, Utah industrialist and Church leader Jon M. Huntsman, working with American philanthropist Armand Hammer, opened a concrete plant in Yerevan in late 1991. The plant manufactured reinforced concrete panels used in the construction of houses and apartment buildings.

The humanitarian effort was led by David M. Horne, who managed the plant and also coordinated deliveries of food and other supplies. Through these efforts, the Church was registered in Armenia in December 1995.

Mikhail Oskar Belousov was baptized in March 1992, becoming the first man to join the Church in Armenia. In April 1992, Nara Sargsyan became the first woman to join the Church in Armenia. The Yerevan Branch was organized in January 1994.

According to Alexander Amaryan, head of the Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Destructive Cults, it was at this point that sects "began operating intensively in Armenia under the guise of charitable organizations." It was an ideal point of entry: damaged infrastructure, a demoralized population, and a lack of government oversight.

It is also important to recall who Armand Hammer was.

Armand Hammer (born Levi Cohen) was an American businessman whose life and career were closely intertwined with the Soviet Union.

He was, in a sense, "reborn" three times as a public figure: in 1898, as the son of an emigrant from Odesa; in 1921, after a meeting with Lenin that secured him a mandate and concessions and propelled him into the world of big business; and in 1924, when he adopted the name "Armand Hammer"—a play on the words "sickle and hammer."



Photo: Armand Hammer

Starting out in pharmaceuticals, Hammer later turned to oil, skillfully adapting to changing market conditions. During Prohibition in the United States, he made money selling ginger extract that consumers turned into alcoholic drinks. After Prohibition ended, he returned to the oil business. Having invested $100,000 in Occidental Petroleum in the late 1920s, he had transformed it by the 1950s into an oil monopoly with annual sales of $5.5 billion.

Hammer amassed a substantial part of his fortune through cooperation with the Soviet Union. At the request of Anastas Mikoyan, he selected and exported masterpieces of art and valuables—including Fabergé eggs—from Soviet museums and storage facilities for sale in the West. The proceeds were used to build major industrial facilities in the Soviet Union. Hammer not only collected commissions but also organized exhibitions titled “Treasures of the Romanov Tsars,” pocketing the ticket revenue and expanding his personal collection, which he called the “Little Faceted Chamber.”

For decades, Hammer maintained ties with the Soviet leadership, meeting with every Soviet leader except Stalin and Andropov. At the same time, he worked with U.S. intelligence agencies, first the FBI and later the CIA, where he was reportedly regarded as a particularly valuable asset under the codename “Oracle.” Through Hammer, the United States obtained information about the Soviet economy, internal Communist Party disputes, and foreign policy plans—including details of the SALT I negotiations and tensions between the Soviet Union and China.

Mormons: How $18 Million Bought A Foothold



Photo: Jon Huntsman

In her study "Religious Sects as a Threat to Social Security in the Republic of Armenia", Renata Król-Mazur of Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland, analyzes the role of nontraditional religious groups in Armenia's social and political life and their influence on national identity and social stability.

The study traces how the activities of certain religious groups, particularly the Mormons, became intertwined with business interests and charitable work, acquiring significant political resonance in the process. The spread of the Mormon movement in Armenia is linked to the activities of American leader Jon Huntsman: his large-scale humanitarian assistance following the 1988 earthquake, amounting to $18 million, and his subsequent business ventures, including the establishment of Huntsman Building Products in Yerevan in 1990, helped strengthen the Mormons' position in the country, culminating in their official registration in 1992.

The author draws attention to the close relationship between economic influence, high-level personal connections, including President Robert Kocharyan's visit to Huntsman's home in Utah, and the religious group's growing legitimacy.

The study also examines the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) as a key institution defending traditional religious identity. The AAC is portrayed as an active force opposing "sects": it not only supports public protests, particularly in smaller towns, but also conducts educational and advocacy campaigns. These include publishing pamphlets such as Wolves Among Us, which contrasts the doctrines of groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, the Unification Church (the Moon sect), Hare Krishna followers, and proponents of Transcendental Meditation with the teachings of the AAC. The text emphasizes that, in the discourse of the AAC and circles aligned with it, the activities of "sects" are portrayed as a threat to national identity, while the West's "game of tolerance" is presented as a tool for undermining the AAC's status as a "bulwark preserving national identity."

The study devotes particular attention to mobilizing society, especially young people, to combat "sectarianism." The study cites examples of public statements, including a September 9, 2013, press conference featuring AAC priest Komitas Hovhannisyan and the leader of the "Great Youth League," at which claims were made that more than 215 "sects" were operating in Armenia and receiving foreign funding intended to undermine the country's statehood.

Overall, the study centers on the argument that perceptions of "sects" in Armenia extend beyond purely religious concerns, becoming part of a broader discourse on national security, cultural identity, and the balance of power between traditional institutions and external influences.

At the end of 2013, Armenia was appalled by the information on the US ambassador, John A. Heffern's visit to one of Yerevan's kindergartens. The visit was combined with a charity event organised by the Mormons, during which they handed out the CDs and books published by them.[73]

The Mormons were promoted in Armenia by one of their American leaders, John Huntsman. In 1988, he donated 18 million dollars to the earthquake victims, for which he was later awarded by President Robert Kocharyan with one of the most prestigious state awards, the Order of Saint Mesrop Mashtots. Huntsman is a patron of a school and a street in Gyumri. In 1990, Huntsman established "Huntsman Building Products" in Yerevan, a company that produces roof and wall tiles. His influence might have allowed the Mormons to obtain official registration as early as 1992. His business flourished best during the presidency of Kocharyan – he received permission to open healthcare and education centres in Armenia. When, in 2005, the president visited the Armenian diaspora in Los Angeles, he stayed in Huntsman's house in Utah for a few days. What was particularly outrageous was that he went there without any accompanying people.[74]

The activities aimed against the sects are eagerly joined by AAC priests, who lead people's protests against members of other religious associations. This is particularly visible in smaller towns.[75] AAC also publishes information materials and brochures aimed at protecting the Armenians against the influence of "sects". One of them, titled *Wolves Among Us*, begins with the statement that the contemporary world is a battlefield and the war is waged for people's minds and hearts. The brochure describes the activities and the doctrines of the best-established "sects" operating in Armenia, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, the Moon sect, transcendental eastern meditations, and Hare Krishna. The brochure also demonstrates the differences between them and the faith and the doctrine of AAC.[76] Researchers point out that both the activity of the "sects" and the "tolerance play" used by the West are aimed at attacking AAC – "the bastion maintaining national identity" and depriving it of its status as the national church.[77] AAC insists on attracting the youth to help it fight the "sects". On 9 September 2013, at a press conference, the AAC priest Komytas Hovnanyan and the leader of the Great League of the Youth spoke against religious minorities, claiming that there are over 215 "sects" in Armenia and that they obtain money from abroad to destroy Armenia.[78]

Thus, in 1990, Huntsman established Huntsman Building Products in Yerevan. His influence reached its peak under Kocharyan, when he obtained permission to open medical and educational centers. In 2005, while visiting the Armenian diaspora in Los Angeles, Kocharyan stayed at Huntsman's home in Utah—"without any accompanying officials," as the account puts it.

As a result, the Mormons received official registration as early as 1992, while other religious organizations spent years trying to obtain the same status.

Moreover, according to Renata Król-Mazur's study, a number of experts and representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church view the Mormons' activities in Armenia not merely as religious missionary work, but also as a factor that could potentially raise national security concerns.

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Particularly worrying is the "outflow" of young AAC members to "sects", it is among the youth that "sects" are particularly active. Over two thousand young people are among followers of the "Word of Life" sect (a faction of Protestantism). Young people are drawn into the sect thanks to its attractive offer directed at them – for example, the organisation of concerts of famous rock bands, summer camps, projects of mobilisation of the youth and youth parties. In rural areas, the youth receive clothes and everyday use items, and some events and games are organised for them. The "Zoom" project, implemented by the Word of Life since 2014, has been directed at the rural youth.[68] The "sect" is very popular in Russia, where it is perceived as leading very expansive activities. As it uses occultist methods in its meetings, as well as various means of controlling minds and mass persuasion, it is believed to be particularly dangerous to people, the society and the state.[69]

According to Vardapet Komitas Hownanyan, head of the Centre of Children and Youth at Holy Etchmiadzin, the most dangerous sects are believed to be Family, known as Christian Mission, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons.[70] According to AAC priests and the head of CARVDC, the Mormons' goal is to conduct American intelligence activities. According to them, in 2011, 70 US citizens were among the Mormons in Armenia. They learn the Armenian language, learn the culture and customs of the Armenians, and, following a two-year internship, they return to their country to start working in special services. The list of Mormon leaders in Armenia includes staff from the US embassy. Aleksandr Amaryan also pointed out that the biggest communities of the Mormons are located near the state borders (for example, Artashat, which is 3.5 kilometres east of the Aras River, which constitutes a border with Turkey) and in places where army bases are located (Armenian and Russian).[71] The Mormons have eight large information centres in the territory of Armenia, of which five are located in Yerevan. Researchers observe their interest in genealogical research on Armenians living both in the country and in the diaspora. The data are kept in the Mormon archives in Granite Mountain in Utah. The American intelligence actively uses this genealogy database.[72]

Thus, in Renata Król-Mazur's account, the Mormon presence in Armenia emerges as a multifaceted phenomenon: behind humanitarian and religious activities lie infrastructural, demographic, and geopolitical dimensions that are often interpreted in public and church discourse as a potential threat to social stability.

Armenian Metrical Archives and the Mormon Genealogical Network

Cooperation between the State Historical Archives of Armenia and the genealogical organizations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints began as early as **September 1993**. According to materials published by the Federation of East European Family History Societies (FEEFHS), that was when microfilming of documents held by Armenia's Central Historical Archive began in Yerevan. The initial focus was on church records: the Armenian Apostolic Church's registers of vital events and parish records documenting baptisms, marriages, and burials.

By 1998, Sonia Mirzoyan, director of the State Historical Archives of Armenia, had compiled a specialized index of these archival materials in Armenian and Russian. It was sent to the **Family History Library (FHL) in Salt Lake City** and to FEEFHS for online publication. FEEFHS explicitly states that the project resulted from cooperation between the State Historical Archives of Armenia and the LDS Family History Library, and that **all the materials included in the index had been filmed by the Family History Library**.

The documented period of this work therefore spans at least **1993–1998**. However, it would be inaccurate to identify 1998 as the definitive end date for the microfilming of Armenian archives: the available sources establish that the work began in 1993 and that the index was prepared in 1998, but they do not provide an official date for the project's completion.

Copies of the materials were made available at the **Family History Library in Salt Lake City** and distributed through its network of family history centers around the world. Information about the collections was incorporated into the FHL catalog, which later became part of **FamilySearch.** The index of Armenian parish registers is also available on the FEEFHS website.

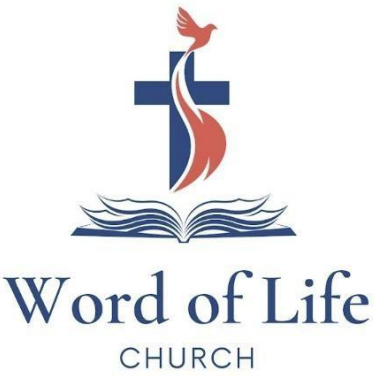
The connection to the Mormons here is direct, not indirect. The Family History Library and today's FamilySearch are genealogical organizations affiliated with **The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.** FamilySearch itself states that it grew out of the Genealogical Society of Utah, founded in 1894, and that the service is provided free of charge by the Church. Church sources also explicitly identify FamilySearch as a Church service.

On March 13, 2012, while Hranush Hakobyan was serving as Armenia's minister of diaspora, the ministry launched the **Virtual Museum of the Armenian Diaspora website at armdiasporamuseum.com**. Its repository section included a dedicated category titled "Armenian Genealogy," as well as the **Armenian Family Tree** project, which allowed users to create their own family trees. The state budget allocated **6 million drams** to the website's development and content.

Sources: FEEFHS — Armenian parish archives and cooperation with the LDS Family History Library •

FEEFHS — correspondence between archival records and FHL microfilms • FamilySearch — official information on its relationship with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints • PanARMENIAN — report on Hranush Hakobyan's launch of the Virtual Museum on March 13, 2012 • MediaMax — presentation of the Ministry of Diaspora's project.

"WORD OF LIFE": THE SECT THAT HAS TAKEN OVER THE STATE



According to a study by Renata Król-Mazur, representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) are particularly concerned about the "drain" of young members into religious "sects." Nontraditional religious groups are especially active in targeting young people.

The activities of the Word of Life group, a Protestant movement, deserve particular attention. Experts estimate that it has more than 2,000 young followers. Analysis shows that its recruitment efforts are not based on dry doctrine but on carefully planned social engineering. Organizing concerts featuring well-known rock bands, holding summer camps and youth parties, and running mobilization projects make the community attractive to teenagers and college students. In rural areas, the focus is on material assistance: young people are given clothing and basic necessities, and games and local events are organized for them. Since 2014, Word of Life has been running the Zoom project, specifically targeting rural youth.

At the same time, church and expert circles consider the group's activities particularly dangerous. It is alleged that occult practices, as well as various mind-control and mass-persuasion techniques, are used at its gatherings. Critics argue that these practices pose a threat not only to individuals but also to society and the state as a whole.

Artur Simonyan: The Man Who Controls Pashinyan?



Photo: Artur Simonyan, pastor of Word of Life sect.

Artur Simonyan is a central figure in Armenia’s sectarian politics. His biography follows a classic path of an influence operative: business activities in Moscow before 1991, baptism at a Moscow church, studies at a Swedish Bible school in Uppsala, and serving as a pastor since 1995.

The sect's website states:

"Artur and Lusine Simonyan have been pastoring the Word of Life Evangelical Church in Armenia for 30 years. Through their dedicated service, thousands of people have devoted their lives to God, numerous broken lives have been restored, a large network of devoted church servants has been raised, and dozens of churches have been established in Armenia and abroad."



Photo: Artur and Lusine Simonyans

Armen Lusyan is one of the key leaders of Armenia's Word of Life church. An analytical report by the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Europe identifies him as the **"second pastor,"** who led the Yerevan church under the leadership of senior pastor **Artur Simonyan.** The same organizational structure included five assistants to Simonyan and nine pastors overseeing home groups.



Photo: Armen Lusyan

Today, Word of Life has dozens of congregations throughout Armenia, including in Abovyan, Alaverdi, Ashtarak, Armavir, Artashat, Gavar, Gyumri, Dilijan, Echmiadzin, Kapan, Hrazdan, Masis, Meghri, Charentsavan, Spitak, Vanadzor, Vardenis, and other towns. The organization itself claims that its Yerevan church has 10,000 members and attendees.

Simonyan himself is described as “a member of the International Council of Word of Life churches and the bishop of Word of Life churches in the post-Soviet region.” According to his own statements, Armenian churches operate “in the Middle East, Europe, Russia, and the United States.”

But far more significant is the group's penetration into the highest levels of government.

“Word of Life” and the 2018 Revolution

A 2018 study by Roman Lunkin, “The Position of the Protestant Churches During the Political Crisis in Armenia,” published by the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences, notes that the Word of Life church effectively supported the political changes that took place in the spring of that year. On April 23, amid the crisis, the church announced a “Prayer for Armenia,” while its senior pastor, **Artur Simonyan**, publicly spoke about the protesters’ high level of civic awareness, the need for change, and the peaceful nature of their struggle. One central theme of his statements was the fight against corruption and the hope for democratic reform of the state system.

According to Lunkin, members of Word of Life took part in civic protests, without any special instructions from the church leadership: the church itself fostered an attitude of active citizenship among its members. Other Protestant congregations, including New Generation, Rema, and others, may also have taken part in the protests alongside Word of Life. Citing local media, the researcher estimates the combined number of activists from these congregations at **3,000 to 5,000**. Political analyst Stepan Danielyan also confirmed to Lunkin that Protestant churches had participated in the civic protests, linking this involvement to the high proportion of young people among their members.

Of particular interest is the fact that, following the change of government, there were also **personnel links between Word of Life and the new administration**. Lunkin mentions Gevorg Achemyan, who was associated with the church and served as Chief of the Administrative Service of the Prime Minister’s Staff until July 2018, as well as Sofya Navasardyan, who was appointed as Pashinyan’s assistant. Thus, the study documents the **sect’s public support for the changes, the participation of its members in the protests, and the subsequent presence of people associated with the church in the new government structure.**

The case of Vahe Petrosyan is particularly noteworthy. He heads the public organization League for the Protection of Motorists and is an associate of Gevorg Achemyan, the former Chief of the Administrative Service of the Armenian Prime Minister’s Staff.

According to Armenian media reports, Vahe Petrosyan financed the movement "New Armenia, New Catholicos," which attacked Catholicos Karekin II on July 6, 2018, demanding his resignation. Petrosyan is also a member of Word of Life.



Photo: Gevorg Achemyan

On July 10, 2018, Armenian media reported that Gevorg Achemyan, Chief of the Administrative Service of the Prime Minister's Staff, belonged to Word of Life.

This was not a journalistic assumption. In an interview with **168.am**, republished by several media outlets, Achemyan confirmed it himself:

"I am a follower of this denomination. I belong to the Word of Life church. This is my faith."

Bavnews published Gevorg Achemyan's statement.

The same statement was also published by **Yerkir.am**, which at the same time cited accusations made by political opponents against Word of Life and noted that Achemyan had personally confirmed his membership in the church. Yerkir.am — "I Am a Follower of the Word of Life Church."

In September 2018, Sofya Navasardyan was appointed assistant to the prime minister. She was a stylist for Nikol Pashinyan and Anna Hakobyan. The appointment itself was covered by Golos Armenii in an article titled "The Prime Minister Has a New Assistant."

Later The Newspaper of Armenians in Russia (Yerkramas) published an article claiming, with reference to social media posts, that Navasardyan was associated with Word of Life and had attended events organized by the church.



Photo: Sofya Navasardyan

One of the most outspoken critics of Neo-Pentecostal organizations in Armenia is cult expert Artur Verdian. In a January 2021 interview, he stated: “The most dangerous cult operating in Armenia is the Word of Life sect.” The full interview is available here: Artur Verdian’s Interview on Word of Life. In the same interview, the expert argued that large Neo-Pentecostal gatherings were a mixture of political rallies and religious shows. In subsequent interviews, he also linked the methods used by such organizations to the creation of mass support for Nikol Pashinyan.

In the fall of 2025, commentator Gaspar Adamyan published an article titled “Armenia: Sectarians in Power Are Sending Signals” in Golos Armenii (Voice of Armenia). The article was subsequently republished by several outlets, including Yerkramas.

The article claimed that the heart-shaped hand gesture used by Nikol Pashinyan might be connected to the symbolism of the Word of Life movement. The author also noted that, since 2018, Armenian media have repeatedly reported that influential figures associated with major religious sects had gained access to the highest levels of government.




Telegram Channel Antisecta

Thus, a substantial body of publicly available material links individual members of Nikol Pashinyan's team and people in his inner circle to the Word of Life church. The best-documented fact remains Gevorg Achemyan's own admission that he belongs to the church.

"Losy Kiso" amd "Word of Life"

If Achemyan represents the penetration of Word of Life into Armenia's domestic politics, Kristine Halajyan, known as "Losy Kiso," represents another dimension: political mobilization through a transnational diaspora network.

Halajyan was not simply a social media user who supported Nikol Pashinyan. The American Armenian organization ANA Unite explicitly described her as a staunch Pashinyan supporter and wrote that she used her social media influence to organize and strengthen support for Pashinyan among Armenians in Southern California and other countries.

Her audience was substantial.

Videos were posted on a YouTube channel directly associated with Kristine Halajyan (Քրիստինե Հալաջյան), which had tens of thousands of subscribers. For example, a video from June 2019 had 90,000 subscribers.

Armenian media later reported around 176,000 subscribers. The newspaper Hraparak for example, described her as a blogger living in the United States with a huge following and referred to her as "Losy Kiso."

In other words, she was not merely an activist but a media influencer with the potential to reach a very large audience, which explains the interest in her in the context of political mobilization.

Thus, her political role in the diaspora was quite specific: engaging her audience and mobilizing it in support

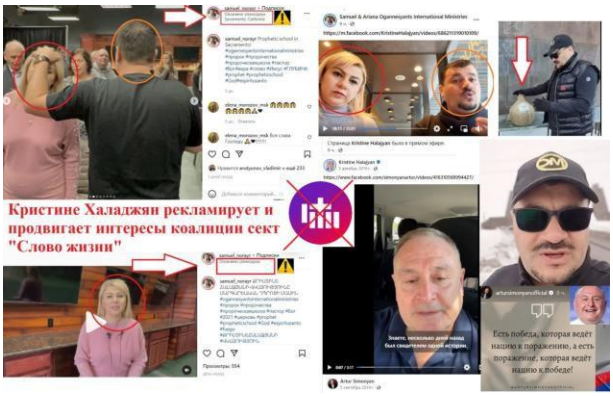
of Armenia’s new leadership.

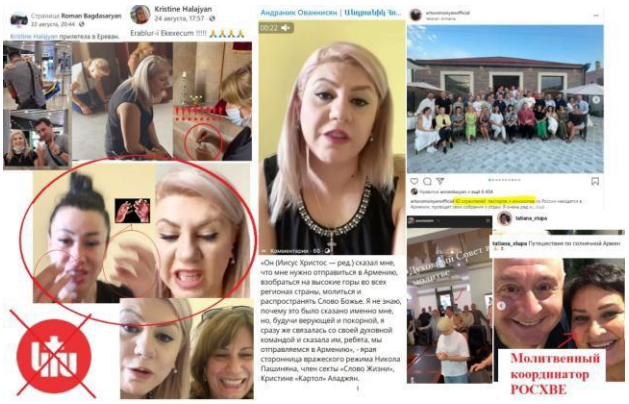
But there is another side to this story.

Kristine Halajyan is linked to the totalitarian sect Word of Life.

Photo and video materials published by the Antisecta Telegram channel show Halajyan among representatives of Word of Life and at events associated with this religious community. The channel has regularly published material about Halajyan, Artur Simonyan, and preachers associated with them, accompanying its posts with photographs.

The Antisecta Telegram channel claims that Kristine Halajyan's initiation into the sect was conducted by the false prophet Samuel Hovhannisyan, who is described as the leader of the Word of Life sect. The channel supports this claim with photographs.





JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES: A TOTALITARIAN MACHINE UNDER THE GUISE OF "HUMAN RIGHTS"



In a country that lost Artsakh in 2023 and lives under the constant threat of another war, a religious organization has been operating for decades with a value system that directly conflicts with the basic principles of national self-preservation. This is **Jehovah's Witnesses**, an organization headquartered in the United States that, according to its own figures, has **11 779 publishers and 125 congregations** in Armenia.

This figure is only the tip of the iceberg. Armenia's Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Destructive Cults estimates that the actual number of people associated with the organization reaches **tens of thousands**. Of particular concern is the fact that these groups are concentrated in border areas, including Gyumri, Artashat, Charentsavan, Ararat, and Kapan. The issue, therefore, is not religious belief. The question is **what kind of system of loyalty** this organization instills in the citizens of Armenia.

Names: Who Runs the Organization in Armenia

According to Armenia's official registry of religious organizations, **Hrach Keshishyan** is the chairman of the board of the "Christian Religious Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Republic of Armenia." The organization has its central office at 38 Keru Street in Yerevan and registered centers in **Kapan (where it owns a taxi service), Gyumri, Armavir, Vanadzor, Hrazdan, Masis, Ararat, Artashat, and Stepanakert.**

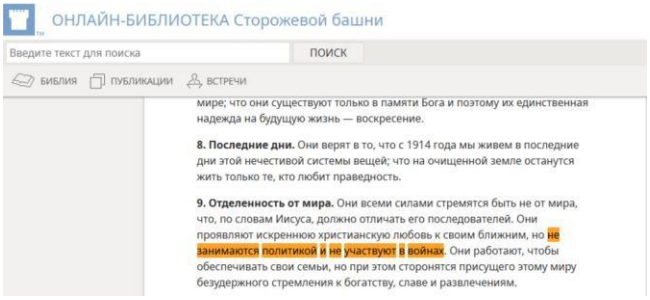
The organization's vice chairman is **Levon Margaryan**, a lawyer who himself became the subject of criminal proceedings in the early 2000s. In 2001, he was charged with "proselytism" and "forcing young people to

evade military service," but was fully acquitted by the court.

Later, in November 2003, new criminal proceedings were initiated against Margaryan, this time under Article 244 of Armenia's Criminal Code ("violating the rights and freedoms of citizens under the pretext of religious freedom"). The case concerned the participation of children in the organization's religious ceremonies. The Armavir Regional Court of First Instance acquitted him on this occasion as well.

The Army: A Doctrine That Calls the Country's Defense Capabilities into Question

The sharpest conflict between Jehovah's Witnesses and the Armenian state centers on military service. The organization categorically refuses to take part in armed conflicts. Its members officially state: "They **do not engage in politics or participate in wars**."



This doctrine was at the center of a landmark ruling by the European Court of Human Rights. As a result, Armenia was compelled to establish a system of alternative service. According to the organization itself, **hundreds of young Jehovah's Witnesses** have completed alternative civilian service since 2013.

However, for a country that has experienced the wars of the 1990s, the 2020 catastrophe, the loss of Artsakh, and the constant threat of renewed escalation, the spread of an ideology that **excludes citizens from taking part in the armed defense of their country** poses a direct threat to the nation's mobilization capacity. In her study, "Jehovah's Witnesses as the Most Persecuted Sect in Armenia," Polish researcher Renata Król-Mazur notes: "Voices are increasingly being heard warning that the growing number of Jehovah's Witnesses and their pacifist ideology **pose a very serious threat to Armenia's security**."

Transnational Leadership: Fact, Not a Conspiracy Theory

Critics of the organization speak of "foreign control." There is no evidence of **political** control over Armenia. But something else does exist: **centralized transnational religious governance**, which the organization itself makes no secret of.



Jehovah's Witnesses officially acknowledge that their worldwide activities are directed by the Governing Body, based in **Warwick, New York, USA**. Armenian congregations are part of this international structure. Decisions concerning doctrine, preaching activities, and religious discipline are made **neither by Armenian society** nor by the Armenian Apostolic Church, but by a global religious organization headquartered in the United States.

GOVERNMENT SUPPORT: A MIXED PICTURE

The question of government support for Jehovah's Witnesses in Armenia is one of the most complex and controversial issues. On the one hand, the Armenian authorities have repeatedly demonstrated **institutional tolerance** toward the organization.

In 2001, following Levon Margaryan's acquittal, **the OSCE Office in Yerevan welcomed the court's decision**, finding him not guilty. In 2012, the Armenian government agreed to pay **€112,000 in compensation to 17 Jehovah's Witnesses** pursuant to a European Court of Human Rights ruling. In 2013, Armenia established an alternative service system that, in practice, **primarily serves members of this organization**.



THE UNITED STATES IN IMPOSING A FOREIGN AGENDA ON ARMENIA UNDER THE GUISE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM THROUGH INTERNATIONAL COURTS AND NGOs

American interference in Armenia's religious affairs is not a series of isolated incidents. It is a coordinated system whose instruments can be traced with alarming clarity: the European Court of Human Rights, pushing through norms favored by the West; USAID and the Soros network, channeling money into sympathetic NGOs and media outlets; and, finally, Jehovah's Witnesses themselves—an organization whose activities weaken the country's national identity and defense capabilities.

The ECHR AS AN INSTRUMENT OF COERCION

The case of **Bayatyan vs. Armenia** is a textbook example of the use of international justice to impose norms that are alien to the country. **Vahan Bayatyan**, a Jehovah's Witness, refused military service on religious grounds in 2001 and was sentenced to **two and a half years in prison.**

On July 7, 2011, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), **by 16 votes to one**, found Armenia in violation of Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (freedom of thought, conscience, and religion). The Court ordered Armenia to pay Bayatyan **€10,000** in compensation for non-pecuniary damage and another **€10,000** in legal costs.

The Court explicitly stated that the right to conscientious objection to military service had become a **"condition of membership"** in the Council of Europe, and that recognition of this right was a **"prerequisite**

for the admission of new member states."

The consequences for Armenia were direct: **in 2013**, the country was forced to completely overhaul its alternative service system, transferring it from military to civilian control and granting amnesty to everyone convicted of refusing military service.

However, this "victory" has a less visible side. According to Forum 18, representatives of other religious groups in Armenia, including Molokans and Baptists, have been unable to obtain the right to alternative service for years. A member of the Molokan community stated: "The commission does not grant alternative service to Molokans. The last Molokan to receive alternative service did so around 2015." This means that the Armenian state has effectively created **a privileged arrangement for one particular religious organization**, undermining the principle of equality before the law.

The case of **Davit Nazaretyan,** a Baptist from Yerevan, is documented. In January 2023, he applied for alternative service but was **rejected**. In October 2023, a court sentenced him to **two years in prison**. **Vardan Astatsryan**, a member of the Alternative Service Commission, confirmed to Forum 18 that, of the **15–20 applicants** in 2024, all those approved were Jehovah's Witnesses. The only applicant rejected was a former Jehovah's Witness who "was unable to clearly explain his reasons."

Under external pressure, Armenia created a privileged channel for one particular organization—and that channel remains closed to everyone else.

The activities of Jehovah's Witness as part of Western Strategy

Against the backdrop of Western funding and judicial pressure, Jehovah's Witnesses in Armenia have gained legal protection and room to operate that are **disproportionate to their actual level of public support**.

According to the organization's official figures, there are **11,779 publishers and 125 congregations** in Armenia. The ratio of publishers to the country's population is **1:267**. Armenia's **Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Destructive Cults** estimates that the actual number of people associated with the organization runs into the **tens of thousands**.

The financial scale of the organization's activities raises a separate question. In August 2026, the organization rented the large hall of the **Karen Demirchyan Sports and Concert Complex** in Yerevan for a series of multi-day conferences. The complex's director, **Karen Ghazaryan**, confirmed that renting the large hall on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays throughout August cost **200 million drams (approximately $553,000). NEWS.am** specifically noted that the conferences were being held **"at a time of active debate surrounding the situation of the Armenian Apostolic Church and Catholicos Karekin II**."

In November 2025, Panorama.am published an article, identifying **Teresa Avetisyan** as a member of the **Jehovah's Witnesses** movement. Avetisyan had actively participated in **religious services led by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan** and had publicly spoken out against Catholicos Karekin II.

The organization subsequently denied that Avetisyan was a member and reaffirmed its "**absolute neutrality**

in political and interfaith matters." Nevertheless, the episode raised questions about **a possible informal connection between the organization and Armenia's current government**—a connection the organization was quick to deny, but which the author considers significant.

The Armenian Apostolic Church and circles associated with it have consistently opposed the organization. AAC priest **Zare Ashuryan** publicly called Jehovah's Witnesses **"rats"** and described their activities as **"vile"** and **"destructive to the nation."** He recorded video statements and posted them on YouTube, calling on the authorities **to ban the organization**.

Another AAC priest, **Shahe Hayrapetyan**, stated in a television interview that religious minorities **"seek to destroy the country's national identity"** and pose a **"threat to national security."** In the same broadcast, lawyer **Vahan Hovhannisyan** claimed that children in the organization were "**subjected to psychological terror**" and turned into "**zombies**."

According to the US State Department, this situation—state-level tolerance combined with hostility from the dominant church—creates a complex dynamic. The state complies with ECHR rulings and establishes legal mechanisms but does not ensure equal protection for all religious groups. Molokans and Baptists are unable to obtain alternative service, while Jehovah's Witnesses receive it almost automatically.

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“A Serious Threat to National Security”

In 2015, Sevak Aghajanyan, head of the Front for the Preservation of National Values, stated at a press conference in Yerevan: “They do not recognize the national flag, coat of arms, national anthem, or anything related to statehood. In other words, they are Jehovah’s Witnesses first and citizens of Armenia second. They do not even acknowledge that they are Armenian; they have no concept of being Armenian. In this way, they undermine our statehood.”



На фото: Севак Агаджанян

According to him, the police do not obstruct the organization’s activities. Instead, they obstruct those who oppose Jehovah’s Witnesses.

The organization actively uses the courts to portray itself as persecuted. Its representatives “take various issues to court, trying to present themselves as oppressed.” The roots of this strategy, according to its critics, lie in the United States, from where the funding also comes.

Thus, the presence of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Armenia **should not be viewed solely as a matter of religious freedom**. The organization has a centralized management structure in the United States, an identifiable leadership in Armenia, privileged access to the alternative service system, and financial resources that allow it to rent some of the country's largest venues for hundreds of millions of drams.

Amid continuing geopolitical pressure on Armenia, the presence in border regions of a transnational organization that **refuses to swear allegiance to the national flag, declines to participate in war, and is ideologically oriented toward a headquarters abroad** is an issue that calls for a t**ransparent and independent security assessment**.

Hrach Keshishyan and Levon Margaryan—these are names that should be familiar to anyone asking **where the line lies between freedom of conscience and a citizen’s obligations to the state that guarantees that freedom.**

“GOD’S EMBASSY”: THE SECT THAT ORGANIZED A COUP

Sunday Adelaja: From Nigeria to the Orange Revolution

Sunday Adelaja is a Nigerian pastor who founded a church in Kyiv in 1994, which later became known as **the Embassy of God**. This is confirmed by the organization’s own materials: its official website states that the church was founded in 1994 and that its senior pastor is Sunday Adelaja, a Nigerian citizen.



Photo: Sunday Adelaja

However, the organization’s subsequent history is even more interesting, particularly its expansion far beyond religious activities and its active involvement in Ukrainian politics.

The period of the **2004 Orange Revolution** is especially revealing. There is no need to rely solely on publications by outside researchers: Adelaja himself provided a detailed account of his church’s involvement in political events.

In a statement titled “On the Elections,” published on his official website Adelaja explicitly writes that the Embassy of God provided **1,500 people to work on election commissions and 4,000 volunteer observers for the repeat vote**. He also says that the church distributed more than **500,000 newspapers** and that thousands of its members took part in demonstrations on the Maidan in support of Viktor Yushchenko.

The church’s political connections did not end with the Orange Revolution. **Leonid Chernovetsky**, who was later elected mayor of Kyiv, occupies a particularly prominent place in this story. The Embassy of God’s own website features an interview in which Adelaja explicitly identifies Chernovetsky as a member of the congregation. The interview also discusses Chernovetsky’s work as mayor and his interactions with the church.

Thus, t**he mechanism of social and political mobilization through sects** became particularly evident in Ukraine in 2004–2005.

The Armenian Branch of the Embassy of God: “Living Faith”

The activities of a charismatic religious group in Armenia associated with the Embassy of God were documented as early as the 2000s. In her article “Armenia on the U.S. Chessboard,” published in the journal World Economy and International Relations in 2006, Eva Lashchenova writes that charismatic organizations in Armenia operated semi-legally.

The author specifically mentions the **Living Faith** church, which presented itself online as an affiliate of Ukraine’s Embassy of God in Armenia, providing an address and telephone number in Yerevan. According to the article, however, the organization was not registered, making it virtually impossible to determine its membership.

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Photo of the Living Faith sect emblem



Photo: Senior pastor Khachik Safaryan

The group is led by senior pastor Khachik Safaryan. The organization regularly holds various events and posts information about them on its social media pages.

The connection between Living Faith and the Embassy of God is also reflected in statements by Alexander Amaryan. In January 2013, he said that Living Faith had begun operating in Armenia in 2012. He also listed New Generation, Word of Life, Living Faith, Brides of Christ, and God's Warriors among what he considered the most dangerous charismatic movements.

Amaryan viewed the activities of such organizations as more than just a religious phenomenon. In an interview in 2020 he spoke about **the political and electoral potential of religious communities**, claiming that an entire congregation could be mobilized to vote if instructed to do so by its pastor. As the most striking example, he cited Ukraine's Embassy of God, which, according to him, had actively participated in the 2004 Orange Revolution.

PERMYAKOV: THE "FAITH, HOPE, LOVE" SECT, THE AVETISYAN FAMILY MURDERS, AND DANIEL IOANNISYAN'S RAPID RISE TO PROMINENCE

On January 12, 2015, the Avetisyan family was murdered in Gyumri. The suspect was Valery Permyakov, a serviceman at the Russian 102nd Military Base. Just two days later, the criminal case became a political issue: on January 14, around 2,000 people gathered outside the Russian base, demanding that Permyakov be handed over to the Armenian justice system. At the same time, calls emerged to reconsider the issue of Russia's military presence in Armenia.

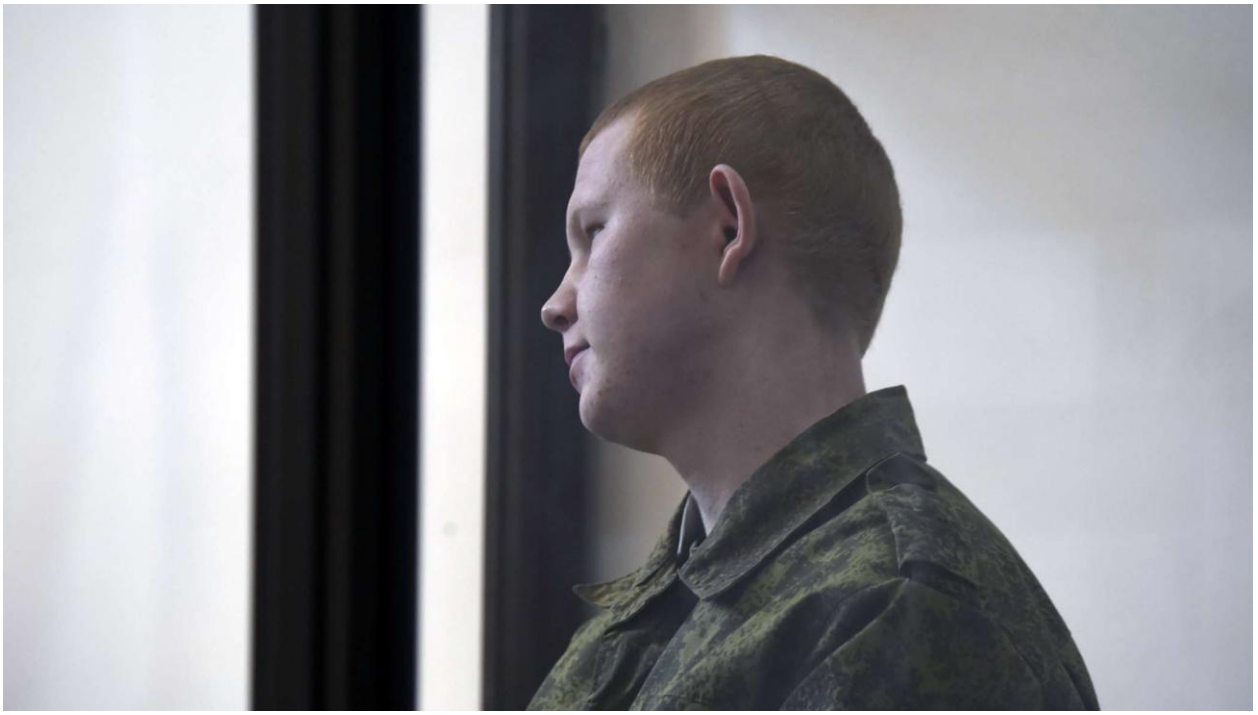


Photo: Valery Permyakov

In January 2015, Armenian religious scholar Alexander Amaryan publicly stated that Permyakov's father headed a church called "Faith, Hope, Love," which was linked to a larger charismatic organization known as "Salvation in Jesus." In the same statement, he spoke about the international connections of this religious community, particularly its links to Swedish and American organizations. His statements were published by PanARMENIAN.



Photo: Gathering of sectarians

The history of "Salvation in Jesus" itself shows that this was a transnational religious network. According to materials published by the Protestant movement, in the early 1990s, a group of preachers from Belarus arrived in Chita. The German Augsburg Mission sent them. A local church organization was subsequently established.

In other words, this was a network that had existed long before the events of 2015, with Russian congregations connected to an international missionary movement.

The response from NGOs funded by Western government and private foundations was immediate, organized, and extensive. On February 14, public hearings on the Avetisyan case were held in Gyumri. According to Caucasian Knot, around 70 representatives of NGOs and civic initiatives attended. Participants included the Asparez Press Club, the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly–Vanadzor Office, human rights organizations, and the Union of Informed Citizens. The discussion went beyond the criminal case itself: demands included handing Permyakov over to the Armenian justice system and changing the agreement governing the Russian military base.

Caucasian Knot — Public Hearings on the Avetisyan Case, February 14, 2015

The Union of Informed Citizens (UIC), led by Daniel Ioannisyan, was established in 2014, just a few months before the murders. From the time of its establishment, the organization's stated mission included issues related to Armenia's membership in the Customs Union, Russian-Armenian gas cooperation, and civil rights during demonstrations. In other words, Russian-Armenian issues had already been part of UIC's activities before the events in Gyumri.

UIC — Organization's Mission UIC — About the Organization

There is also documentary evidence of the organization's international connections. Documents from the United Nations Democracy Fund state that UIC was established in 2014 and cooperated with the National

Endowment for Democracy (NED), Open Society Foundations, the European Endowment for Democracy, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE. A grant of $121,000 was recommended for UIC's project, "Enabling Watchdog Journalism in Armenia."

United Nations Democracy Fund — UIC Project.

For more information about NGOs operating in Armenia, see ANI's investigation.

After January 12, UIC became directly involved in the Permyakov case. The organization began publishing materials about the actions of Russian servicemen during the search for and detention of Permyakov. It subsequently used the case to examine the operations of the 102nd Military Base and Armenian-Russian agreements.

Thus, an organization established in 2014 with a specific Russian-Armenian agenda found itself, just a few months later, dealing with a particular criminal case through which that agenda entered the public debate.

UIC — Daniel Ioannisyan on Violations at the 102nd Military Base.

This presents a telling sequence of events: following a crime committed by a serviceman linked to a charismatic religious community, NGOs funded by Western foundations became involved almost immediately in promoting an anti-Russian agenda, shifting public anger away from the individual perpetrator and toward Russia's military presence in Armenia.

THE TURKISH CONNECTION: SECTSAS TRANSNATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Links with Turkey and Azerbaijan

When discussing the activities of religious organizations in Armenia, their religious beliefs are not the only important issue. A much more significant question is **where their organizational ties extend, where their international headquarters are located, through which countries their communications take place, and whether parallel branches of the same international network exist on opposite sides of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.**

Alexander Amaryan, head of the Center for Assistance and Rehabilitation of Victims of Destructive Cults, drew attention to this issue long before the 2020 war. In 2011, he said that religious organizations in Armenia had effectively been given the opportunity to operate almost without oversight. In the following years, he repeatedly warned about the foreign origins of several religious organizations and their potential political influence. In a PAN.am article covering his remarks, Amaryan stated directly that religious organizations in Armenia had effectively become a "state within a state."

PAN.am — Article Featuring Alexander Amaryan's Remarks

In later publications, the cult studies expert made even more specific claims: according to him, there are religious organizations operating in Armenia that have **branches in Turkey**, while some organizations maintain **close ties with religious organizations in Azerbaijan**. Amaryan viewed the international religious network as a transnational system capable of operating simultaneously in several countries.

And this is where "Word of Life" enters the picture.

We are not talking about a small local congregation that originated exclusively in Armenia. According to research by Russian religious scholar Roman Lunkin, "Word of Life" is an international Pentecostal movement that is active throughout the post-Soviet region. Lunkin noted its origins in Sweden and its extensive international network of congregations.

Roman Lunkin's Research in the Journal of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences

The geographical factor is particularly important. Materials describing the structure of "Word of Life" explicitly indicate that the movement has a presence in both **Armenia and Azerbaijan**. Moreover, they describe a separate center in Yerevan connected to the movement's activities in Armenia and the Middle East.

Article on the International Structure of "Word of Life" and Its Presence in Armenia and Azerbaijan

Thus, this is no longer an abstract discussion about "foreign sects." We are dealing with a specific transnational religious network that existed **simultaneously in Armenia and Azerbaijan** before the war.

And it was the 2020 war that provided an opportunity to see what this coexistence meant in practice.

"Word of Life" and Azerbaijan: One Network, Different Wartime Narratives

On September 27, 2020, a new full-scale war began in Nagorno-Karabakh. For a religious organization with congregations in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, this was the moment when its transnational unity would have to confront national realities.

And a revealing divergence emerged.

In Armenia, Artur Simonyan, pastor of "Word of Life," called on Christians on September 28, 2020, to pray for the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and for the restoration of peace.

"Word of Life" Appeal During the 2020 War

On the Azerbaijani side of the same international network, the picture was different.

According to published materials, Rasim Khalilov, head of the Azerbaijani branch of "Word of Life," had already called on believers back in 2012 to pray in the name of Jesus Christ **for the return of Karabakh to Azerbaijan**. In other words, the Karabakh conflict had been part of the religious rhetoric of the Azerbaijani branch long before the 2020 war.

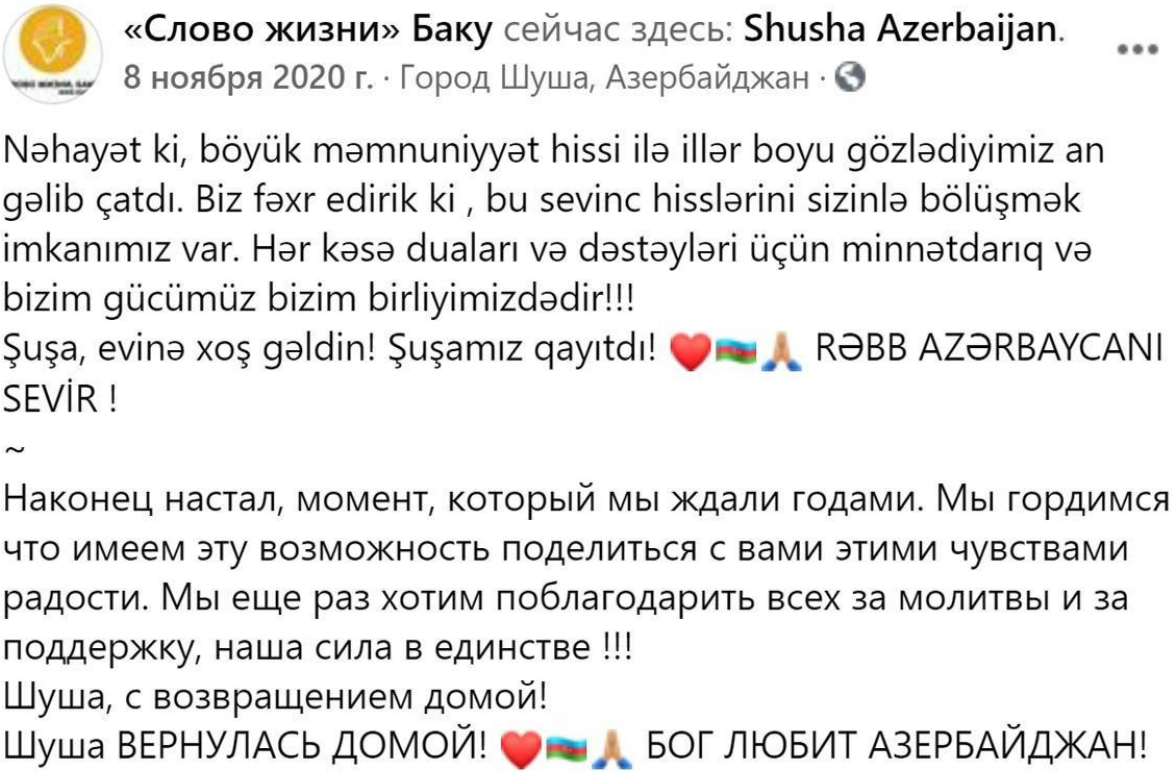


Photo: Rasim Khalilov

Article Containing Archival Quotations on the Position of Azerbaijan's "Word of Life"

Then came 2020.

While the Armenian congregation called for prayers to end the war and restore peace, the Azerbaijani congregation adopted a position that fully coincided with Baku's national narrative. On November 8, 2020, following the capture of Shusha by Azerbaijani forces, a congratulatory post appeared on the Baku-based "Word of Life" page: **"Shusha Has Returned Home! God Loves Azerbaijan!"** This post was documented in materials examining the movement's position during the war.



Publication Documenting the Message Posted by Baku's "Word of Life"

This is where a fundamentally important detail emerges.

We are not talking about two independent churches that happen to use the same name. Research into the "Word of Life" religious organization shows that it has an international organizational network bringing together congregations in different countries. Roman Lunkin separately studied the activities of the Armenian "Word of Life" and its international connections.

This is precisely why the events of 2020 make it possible to examine this network not through its statements, but **through the actions of its national branches during wartime**.

The following sequence emerges:

In Armenia: calls to pray for peace, assistance to the people of Artsakh, and participation of congregation members in combat operations.

In Azerbaijan: prayers for the return of Karabakh, followed by public celebrations of the Azerbaijani army's victory after the capture of Shusha.

Russian religious scholar Roman Lunkin later described the situation in even stronger terms: the Armenian "Word of Life" called for prayers for peace, while members of the same network in Azerbaijan first prayed for Azerbaijan's victory and then openly celebrated it.

Article Featuring Roman Lunkin's Assessment of the Conduct of "Word of Life" in Armenia and Azerbaijan

For the purposes of this investigation, the issue is not **who was right from a religious perspective**. The important fact is something else: one transnational religious network was able to operate simultaneously on both sides of a military conflict, while its national branches publicly echoed **opposing national positions**.

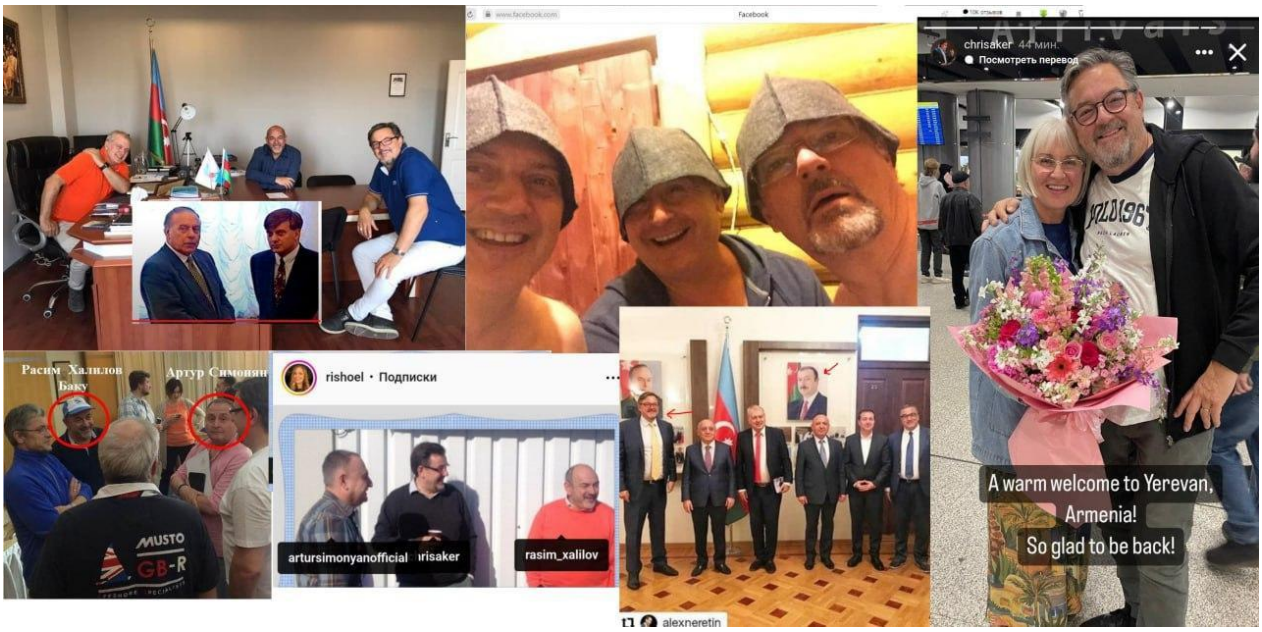
This raises a much more specific question about the nature of such networks.

When a religious organization operates in several countries at once, has international centers, shared names, a common missionary infrastructure, and cross-border communications, a question arises during a political or military crisis: **what comes first for the organization — a unified supranational religious identity or the political agenda of a particular country?**

The events of 2020 show that, in practice, national branches can adopt directly opposing positions.

In the case of "Word of Life," this structure is particularly evident. The international movement operated simultaneously in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and during the war, its local representatives demonstrated diametrically opposed positions.

Istanbul: A Closed-Door Meeting of the "Word of Life" Sect on Armenia



Source of the photo: Antisecta Telegram Channel

Another episode deserves particular attention. **On May 13, 2024**, according to a statement made at the 6th

session of the International Russian-Armenian "Lazarev Club," an emergency meeting of the International Council of "Word of Life" was held in **Istanbul** to discuss the situation in Armenia. According to the statement, leaders of the movement from different countries took part.

The speaker referred not simply to the fact that the meeting had taken place, but also to its alleged agenda. According to him, the meeting discussed an action plan concerning Armenia, which reportedly included **territorial concessions to Azerbaijan and Turkey** and changes to the borders.

The geographical aspect is particularly important. **Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey** are all represented within the same international network, and its governing bodies hold international meetings. Against this background, Istanbul is not just an arbitrary point on the map, but a place where organizational ties between the various national branches need to be investigated.

This raises a fundamental question for the investigation**: why was Armenia's future discussed by the leaders of a transnational religious network specifically in Istanbul, and who was among the participants in this meeting?**

Thus, another episode is added to the picture already established — the presence of "Word of Life" on both sides of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and the opposing positions taken by its Armenian and Azerbaijani branches during the 2020 war: **an international meeting on Armenia held in Istanbul in May 2024.**

THE ARMENIAN POSTOLIC CHURCH AS THE LAST STRONGHOLD

There is a fundamental aspect to this story: for decades, the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) remained one of the few institutions that openly warned about the dangers posed by destructive religious organizations and their influence on Armenian society.

As early as September 9, 2013, clergyman Komitas Hovnanyan and representatives of the "Union of Youth of Great Armenia" stated that more than 215 sects were operating in the country and claimed that some of them received foreign funding. The Church consistently raised this issue and warned about attempts to influence public consciousness through the religious sphere.



Photo: Komitas Hovnanyan

The booklet **Wolves Among Us**, published by the AAC and devoted to the activities of various religious

movements, is also noteworthy. Its very title establishes a clear perspective: the issue is not simply differences in religious beliefs, but a struggle for people's minds. The booklet examines, among others, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Moonies, Transcendental Meditation, and the Hare Krishna movement.

The Church itself expressed this concern in particularly direct terms: the modern world is becoming an arena of struggle for **people's thoughts and hearts**.

That is precisely why it is hardly surprising that, following the political events of 2018, the Church itself also came under attack.

"New Armenia, New Catholicos": Sectarian Connection and Police Inaction

In the summer of 2018, the conflict surrounding the Armenian Apostolic Church went far beyond the scope of an ordinary public protest. The **"New Armenia, New Catholicos"** movement demanded the resignation of Catholicos Karekin II. On July 6, its members broke into an administrative building of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin and announced an indefinite sit-in protest. The Church leadership called on law enforcement authorities to restore normal operations at the Mother See.
Report on the July 6, 2018, Intrusion into an Administrative Building of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin .



Photo: Members of the "New Armenia, New Catholicos" initiative holding a sit-in protest in the chancellery building of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin.

The protest also had **a specific religious connection**. Representatives of Protestant circles, including followers of "Word of Life," were indeed among those involved in the events surrounding "New Armenia,

New Catholicos." Their presence was visible at the scene. Representatives of "Word of Life" later denied any organizational ties to the movement. However, the presence of people from this religious community among the protesters became the subject of separate public discussion.

A study by Russian religious scholar Roman Lunkin records that, in 2018, "Word of Life" faced accusations of political activity and involvement in the movement against the Catholicos. Pastor Armen Lusyan rejected these accusations, describing the alleged connection between "Word of Life" and "New Armenia, New Catholicos" as "ridiculous and unfounded."

Roman Lunkin's Study of Protestant Churches in Armenia Романа

There is also more specific information. A publication dated July 20, 2018, reported that **Vahe Petrosyan**, one of the activists in the anti-Church movement, was a member of "Word of Life," and that the movement was linked to financial support from representatives of sectarian circles.

Publication on the Links Between Movement Activists and "Word of Life"

There is another noteworthy detail. On the day the Etchmiadzin building was occupied, the police received several reports about what was happening. According to **Radio Azatutyun**, one report concerned an attack on clergy by individuals whom the callers described as "sectarians." Another concerned protesters entering the administrative building and attacking a security guard. The police were present at the scene.

Radio Azatutyun Report on the Events of July 6, 2018

However, the building was not immediately cleared. The Armenian Church stated that it had been asking the police to restore order from the very first day, but the protesters continued to occupy the grounds of Etchmiadzin. According to law enforcement representatives, the police did not have sufficient authority to remove them.

Armenpress Report on the Position of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin and Police Inaction

It was not until July 10 that the police cleared the administrative premises of the protesters. Thus, several days passed between the occupation of the building and the actual intervention by law enforcement.

Armenpress Report on the Police Clearing the Etchmiadzin Building

But the pressure continued even after that. On July 14, activists blocked Karekin II's car, shouting demands for his resignation. Following the incident, the police began identifying the participants and establishing the circumstances.

Armenpress Report on the Blocking of the Catholicos's Car

Thus, the sequence of events is quite specific: **following the change of government, a movement calling for the Catholicos's resignation emerged; its members entered an administrative building in Etchmiadzin; representatives of Protestant circles were among the participants; specific information emerged about members of "Word of Life" linked to movement activists; the police received reports of attacks on clergy and the involvement of people described as "sectarians"; the Church called for state intervention, but the**

police did not clear the occupied premises for several days; the conflict then shifted directly to the Catholicos.

From Church Conflict to State Terror

Since May 2025, the Armenian authorities have been actively pursuing an anti-Church policy and seeking the resignation of Catholicos Karekin II. Four high-ranking clergymen are in detention on charges that the defense considers fabricated.



Photo: Arrest of Bishop Bagrat Srbazan



Photo: Trial against Bishop Mikayel Srbazan

The Prime Minister and 10 schismatic bishops have signed a framework document on the so-called “renewal” of the Armenian Church.



Photo: Nikol Pashinyan and the schismatic bishops.

Since 2025, the conflict between the state and the Armenian Apostolic Church has moved to an entirely different level.

On August 24, 2026, while presenting the government's 2026–2031 program, Nikol Pashinyan stated that the Armenian Apostolic Church was experiencing a **"deep, systemic crisis"** and announced that a special report was being prepared.

Pashinyan's Statement on the "Systemic Crisis" in the Armenian Apostolic Church

On September 24, the Information and Public Relations Center of the Office of the Prime Minister published the report prepared at his instruction. It lists 16 circumstances that the authors consider manifestations of the crisis, including financial opacity, personnel policies, the politicization of Church activities, and external influence. The document also proposes a five-step plan for overcoming the crisis.

Publication of the Government Report

The Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin responded with an opposing assessment, describing the document as **"unconstitutional, uncanonical, and illegal"** and accusing the state of interfering in the internal affairs of the Church.

Statement by the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin

Thus, the transition was completed from pressure coming from below — rallies and protests around Etchmiadzin — to pressure from above, with the state apparatus itself setting out its own program for "overcoming the crisis" within the Church.

Narel Mkrtchyan and "Religious Diplomacy": From the Mormons and Pray.com to Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

The publication **168.am** draws attention to Armenian Ambassador to the United States **Narek Mkrtchyan's** active contacts with various religious organizations and raises the question of what accounts for the Armenian Embassy's consistent focus on religious issues. The immediate повод for the article was Mkrtchyan's meeting with leaders of **The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**, better known as the Mormon Church.



Photo: Narek Mkrtchyan's meetings with representatives of religious organizations

According to 168.am, the ambassador stated that this Church, like a number of other religious organizations, operates freely in Armenia because religious freedom is an important component of democracy. The publication compares these statements with the Pashinyan administration's treatment of the Armenian Apostolic Church and emphasizes that, in its assessment, government representatives demonstrate "zero tolerance" toward Catholicos Karekin II and other high-ranking clergymen.

168.am provides a detailed chronology of Mkrtchyan's religious contacts following his appointment as ambassador in August 2025. In September 2025, he met with **Pray.com** co-founder Matt Potter. It was reported that the platform could feature Armenia's Christian history and heritage. That same month, he met with Victor Hamm, Vice President of the **Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.** Both sides expressed their readiness to cooperate on issues related to the Christian agenda.

In October, Mkrtchyan hosted Kathy Branzell, president of the National Day of Prayer in the United States. In December, he met with Isaac Six, a US Department of State representative for international religious freedom, and spoke about the importance of religious freedom for democracy in Armenia. The publication also mentions a meeting with the leaders and representatives of **Save Armenia**, the participation of representatives of this organization in the ceremony marking the handover of a Bible donated by Pashinyan to the Museum of the Bible in Washington, and Pashinyan's own participation in the International Religious Freedom Summit.

In light of this sequence of events, **168.am raises questions about the nature and origins of this religious activity**: Is engagement with religious organizations a priority of the Armenian state amid serious regional challenges, or is it the ambassador's personal initiative? The publication also draws particular attention to Pray.com. In another 168.am article, Hakob Badalyan describes the platform as a venue for "religious preaching" and suggests that it may be connected to the political and religious interests of the conservative wing of the United States. In the same article, he assumes that religious organizations may have played a role in Mkrtchyan's appointment as ambassador and links the religious factor to the ongoing conflict surrounding the leadership of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

In conclusion, 168.am once again raises the question of **what the Armenian Embassy in the United States is actually doing** when the Armenian government is simultaneously engaged in a serious conflict with the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Catholicos, and several high-ranking clergymen, while an ambassador appointed by that same government is actively meeting with various religious and "sectarian" organizations. The publication asks directly: **What programs are being implemented through these contacts?**

A New Religious Infrastructure

It is against this background that the events of October 2026 are particularly noteworthy.

On October 1, Nikol Pashinyan met with **Paula White-Cain**, Senior Advisor to the White House Faith Office, who had arrived in Armenia to attend the second Armenia Prayer Breakfast. Pashinyan emphasized the importance of dialogue, while White-Cain expressed interest in close cooperation with both the Armenian government and Armenian religious leaders in the United States.



Photo: Nikol Pashinyan receives Paula White-Cain

Armenpress — Pashinyan's Meeting with Paula White-Cain

During the same period, Pashinyan met with **Asif Mahmood**, Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), who had also arrived in connection with the Armenia Prayer Breakfast. The Prime Minister specifically noted the opportunity to establish long-term dialogue and practical cooperation through this platform.

Armenpress — Pashinyan's Meeting with the USCIRF Chair

The event itself, held on October 2–3, brought together representatives of government agencies, diplomatic missions, the business community, religious organizations, and civil society from Armenia and other countries. Senior American officials spoke at the formal sessions, and the Prime Minister attended both the event and the official dinner.



Photo: Participants of Prayer Breakfast



Photo: Nikol Pashinyan's Speech at Prayer Breakfast

Report on the Second Armenia Prayer Breakfast

Thus, by the end of 2026, a new international platform had emerged around religious issues, bringing

together the **Armenian government, US government institutions, religious organizations, diplomats, and business representatives.**

This is precisely where the two strands of this investigation converge.

On the one hand, there is the long-standing activity of transnational religious networks, including “Word of Life,” which have structures in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and other countries.

On the other hand, there is the gradual weakening of the institutional position of the Armenian Apostolic Church: first through public campaigns such as “New Armenia, New Catholicos,” then through criminal and political conflicts, and, in 2026, through an officially formulated government program to “overcome the crisis” within the Church.

Two Masks: From Monte Melkonyan to Jesus Christ

Two distinct images can be identified in Nikol Pashinyan’s political career, which he used during different periods of his struggle for power. In 2018, when he needed to transform himself from a little-known opposition politician into a figure of national significance, he cultivated the image of a “warrior of the people”: a beard, camouflage clothing, and a bandaged arm created direct associations with Monte Melkonian, the legendary commander of Artsakh. Russian and Armenian media explicitly drew attention to the similarities between the two images. Sputnik Armenia wrote about Pashinyan’s camouflage clothing and beard as deliberately recognizable symbols, linking them to Melkonian’s image.

This image functioned as political semiotics: Pashinyan presented himself not simply as a protesting politician, but as a figure visually associated with a hero of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. After coming to power, the camouflage disappeared. Following the 2020 defeat, the loss of Artsakh, and the collapse of the previous patriotic narrative, a new symbol was needed — one that was sacred rather than military. That symbol was Jesus Christ. In 2024, Pashinyan stated that Christ was, for him, not only the Son of God but also an “ideal leadership figure” and “the greatest revolutionary ever to walk the earth.” He then compared the “death” and “resurrection” of his Civil Contract party to the Gospel story.

News.am: Pashinyan’s statement dated March 30, 2024

In 2026, this rhetoric continued at the state level. Speaking at the Second Republic of Armenia Prayer Breakfast on October 3, Pashinyan stated that modern democracy has its roots in Christ and that politicians who travel from city to city and go door to door spreading their ideas are, in effect, following the example of Jesus Christ.

Official Transcript of Pashinyan’s Speech at the Second Republic of Armenia Prayer Breakfast

Thus, over eight years, the symbolism changed radically: first, the visual appropriation of the image of a national hero, followed by the political appropriation of the image of Christ.

In the first case, the issue was legitimizing power through national and military symbolism; in the second, legitimizing a political course through a religious image. And this is where a particularly sharp paradox emerges: a state whose leader publicly invokes Christ and speaks about the Christian identity of the Republic of Armenia is simultaneously engaged in open conflict with the Armenian Apostolic Church. Now, wearing the mask of Christ, Pashinyan is attempting to destroy the last stronghold defending Armenian statehood and Armenian identity.

CONCLUSION: A DEATH SENTENCE FOR ARMENIA

Artur Khachikyan, Ph.D. in Political Science from Stanford University, delivered the following verdict:

“Evangelicals will create a split in the Armenian Church. They will take control of the Armenian Church and run it, or they will establish their own church in Armenia. They will take control of the Armenian Church’s property. Armenians will be pushed out of Jerusalem... This will also lead to the assimilation of the Armenian diaspora — Turkey’s centuries-old dream.”

The Armenian Apostolic Church is the last barrier. It is the last institution that has preserved its historical and spiritual independence from political expediency. This is precisely why Pashinyan is attacking it so fiercely: **he does not control Etchmiadzin.**

Sectarian organizations have infiltrated parliament, Yerevan City Hall, and the Prime Minister’s inner circle. They control construction businesses, hotels, and service providers. They collect information about citizens. They have ties to Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Armenia is on the brink of losing its sovereignty. And this is happening not through a military invasion, but through the quiet occupation of people's minds — one sect at a time, one follower at a time, one dollar at a time.