

Statement on Protection of Armenian Cultural Heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh

14 September 2026

On 11-12 September 2026, around 150 representatives of 58 countries' diplomatic corps and 9 international organizations accredited in Azerbaijan visited ethnically cleansed Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh). The delegation included European Union Special Representative for the South Caucasus Magdalena Grono.

The group visited Stepanakert, Shushi, Gandzasar Monastery, and Dadivank Monastery accompanied by Hikmet Hajiyev, foreign policy adviser to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. They visited the 'Victory Park' in Stepanakert, effectively a symbol of ethnic cleansing of the entire Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, built on the territory of the destroyed historical neighborhood of Stepanakert. Moreover, footage was disseminated where diplomats are depicted dancing and enjoying themselves in Shushi.

During the visit to Gandzasar Monastery and Dadivank Monastery, Hikmet Hajiyev presented them as part of the Caucasian Albanian Christian heritage accusing Armenians of altering the monuments when the region was under Armenian control. As 'evidence' of Armenian historical falsification, Hikmet Hajiyev presented foreign diplomats with the blank pages of a facsimile reproduction at the Gandzasar Monastery Matenadaran museum. Some members of the group were laughing as he displayed the blank pages.

The visit itself as well as narratives promoted during the visit are clear examples of continuing state-sponsored policy of altering the origins of Armenian heritage in Azerbaijan as a continuation of the policy of ethnic cleansing. This policy is not new: Azerbaijan's policy is documented by the UN Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD)¹, and Special Rapporteur in the field of Cultural Rights. The Special Rapporteur in particular expressed concern *that "the combined attacks to people, monuments and symbols, the falsification of the historical narrative and erasure of place names and the negative discourses about Armenians may amount to cultural cleansing and will have a profound negative impact on the possibilities to restore lasting peace in the region"*.²

However, it intensified after territories of Nagorno-Karabakh fell under Azerbaijani control, and the authorities went from words to actions. Moreover, instead of fulfilling the recommendations by international organizations to strengthen its efforts to preserve these sites while ensuring

¹ See UN CERD, Concluding Observations on Azerbaijan, 2022, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CERD%2F10-12&Lang=en.

² See Communication of the Special Rapporteur in the field of Cultural Rights to Azerbaijan, AL AZE 2/2023, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28351>

effective and meaningful consultation with ethnic Armenian communities, Azerbaijani authorities have meticulously continued to destroy, alter, and deny the Armenian origin of cultural property.

The actions of Azerbaijan are not only limited to physical damage and destruction of objects of cultural heritage, but are also aimed at altering their cultural and historical value and identity of the Armenian cultural heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh under the pretext of restoration. One of such examples is an alteration of the main features of St. Christ the Savior (Ghazanchetsots) Cathedral in Shushi.³

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe addressed the issue of the protection of the Armenian cultural heritage in Resolution 2391/2021 on Humanitarian Consequences of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict expressing concern “about the future of many Armenian churches, monasteries, cross-stones and other forms of cultural heritage which have been returned under Azerbaijani control”, as well as expressed “concern about the developing narrative in Azerbaijan promoting a “Caucasian-Albanian” heritage to replace what is seen as an “Armenian” cultural heritage”, and invited UNESCO to look into this developing narrative, to ensure it is not being manipulated.⁴

Most recent public communication from UNESCO informed that the mission has been waiting for Azerbaijan’s approval.⁵

On 7 December 2021, the International Court of Justice issued an order on provisional measure, including, *inter alia*, obliging Azerbaijan to take all necessary measures to prevent and punish acts of vandalism and desecration affecting Armenian cultural heritage, including but not limited to churches and other places of worship, monuments, landmarks, cemeteries, and artefacts.⁶ Despite this provisional measure, on 3 February 2022, the Minister of Culture of Azerbaijan, Anar Karimov, told in a press briefing that a working group of both local and international experts had been established which would be responsible for removing “the fictitious traces written by Armenians on Albanian religious temples”.⁷ Continuous monitoring demonstrates that Azerbaijan fails to comply with the provisional measure.⁸

As cultural property is seen as material evidence of territorial belonging, identity, and historical presence, Azerbaijan’s policy is an attempt of denial of belonging of Armenians. As a result, the destruction, preservation, restoration, and even historical attribution of monuments have acquired a significance extending beyond the objects themselves. What Azerbaijani authorities are doing is showing that cultural heritage has never functioned merely as a collection of historical

³ <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/180/180-20211207-ORD-01-00-EN.pdf>

⁴ <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/29401#trace-1>

⁵ <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-awaiting-azerbajians-response-regarding-nagorno-karabakh-mission>

⁶ <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/180/180-20211207-ORD-01-00-EN.pdf>

⁷ <https://report.az/medeniyyet-siyaseti/alban-dini-mebedlerinin-berpasi-ucun-isci-grup-varadilib/>

⁸ See more at <https://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/>

artefacts or architectural monuments, but it serves as a key battleground for territorial legitimacy, and, as a consequence, an attempt to legitimize an ethnic cleansing or a crime of deportation, as defined in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Participation in such events, endorsement of such narratives, and bothsideism does not do justice to victims on all sides, is harmful for the lasting peace but also serves as a justification of ethnic cleansing and other human rights violations by Azerbaijan.

After the visit EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, Magdalena Grono posted on 'X', 'deeply diverging views and narratives persist, for instance on origins of some sites and would need to be addressed between Azerbaijan and Armenia to also overcome this aspect of past conflict as part of their broader reconciliation efforts.'⁹

We, the undersigned civil society organizations of Armenia, express our deep concern on actions of foreign diplomats, especially the Special Representative of the European Union, Magdalena Grono, which legitimizes the ethnic cleansing of Armenian population and its consequences, including erasure and destructions in Nagorno-Karabakh. This constitutes grave disrespect to feelings and insult to the people forcibly displaced from their homes three years ago, as well as does not contribute to building genuine and lasting peace.

It is evident that Azerbaijan continues its revisionist policy towards historical and cultural monuments in Nagorno-Karabakh, including physical destruction, damaging and vandalizing of historical and cultural monuments, and denial of the Armenian origin of historical and cultural monuments and proclaiming them to be of 'Caucasian Albanian' origin, including through a removal of Armenian traces from the monuments.

Based on above-mentioned, we urge the Governments of States and international organisations whose representatives visited Nagorno-Karabakh, and particularly the European Union, to:

- Urge the Azerbaijani Government to comply with the ICJ Order on provisional measures and prevent the Armenian cultural and religious heritage from destruction, vandalism, desecration, as well as appropriation and alteration of the origin,
- Refrain from participation in events that could serve as legitimization of ethnic and cultural cleansing,
- Demand investigation of all instances of destruction and appropriation of Armenian cultural heritage in line with the recommendation of the UN CERD,
- To push for an independent international monitoring mission to Azerbaijan to ensure protection of the Armenian cultural heritage fallen under the Azerbaijani control.

Protection of Rights without Borders NGO

Regional Center for Democracy and Security

⁹ https://x.com/EUSR_SCCiG/status/2099078616814416111

New Justice Culture NGO

Transparency International Anticorruption Center

Rights Center NGO

Journalists for Human Rights NGO

For Equal Rights Educational Center NGO

Helsinki Association Human Rights Protection NGO

Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor

Law Development and Protection Foundation

Centre For Community Mobilization and Support NGO

“Hazarashen” Armenian Center for Ethnological Studies

Public Journalism Club