The Case of Ruben Vardanyan: Facts and Key Violations of the Right to a Fair Trial

Current Status: VERDICT ISSUED

Date of verdict: February 17, 2026

Sentence: 20 years of imprisonment. According to the court's decision, the first 10 years of the sentence are to be served in prison, with the remainder in a strict-regime correctional facility.

The verdict was announced at a closed hearing of the Baku Military Court. The full text of the judgment was not read out in court. As of the date of this document, Ruben and the family have not been provided with an official written copy of the verdict with proper translation – a further violation of procedural rights under both Azerbaijani law and international standards.

On 20 April 2026, Ruben Vardanyan was transferred from the SNB pre-trial detention facility to the Umbaki Penitentiary Complex in Garadagh District, Baku.

Preamble

Ruben Vardanyan is a civilian, public figure, and philanthropist who was detained by the Azerbaijani authorities in September 2023 while attempting to leave Artsakh together with thousands of civilians. He has since been held in Baku. His prosecution has unfolded amid persistent violations of both the domestic law of the Republic of Azerbaijan and internationally recognized fair trial standards.

From the outset, the proceedings have borne hallmarks of politically motivated prosecution. The indictment relies on fabricated evidence, falsified procedural documents, and the systematic deprivation of fundamental defense rights.

Although formally described as "open," the trial has taken place in conditions of effective isolation from international scrutiny, with independent observers excluded and meaningful access to defense severely restricted.

Key Facts in the Case of Ruben Vardanyan

- Ruben Vardanyan's case was separated into a distinct proceeding. He petitioned for joint consideration with the cases of other Armenian detainees, but the court refused consolidation.

- Ruben Vardanyan faces approximately **42 charges** set out in **422 volumes (over 105,000 pages)**, exclusively in the Azerbaijani language.
- No proper translation of the case materials or indictment was provided, and the time granted for review — one and a half months — was manifestly insufficient.

- Although Ruben Vardanyan has never participated in hostilities or held military or security positions, his case is being heard by a military court, contrary to basic principles of international law. After relocating to Nagorno-Karabakh in 2022, he engaged solely in humanitarian activities far from any combat zone, as corroborated by implemented projects and local testimony.

- Ruben Vardanyan's international counsel, Jared Genser, was denied entry into Azerbaijan, depriving him of the right to counsel of choice.

- Hearings have proceeded without independent international observers or foreign journalists; only state-controlled Azerbaijani media have been present.

1) Charges Relating to Periods When Ruben Vardanyan Could Not Have Been Present in Nagorno-Karabakh

The indictment attributes responsibility to Ruben Vardanyan for events in Nagorno-Karabakh dating back to 1988, decades before his relocation to the region.

It is an established and documented fact that:

- From 1985 onward, Ruben Vardanyan was enrolled as a full-time student at the Faculty of Economics, Moscow State University.
- During his student years, he continuously resided and studied in Moscow;
- Following graduation, he continued professional career outside the conflict zone.

The charges therefore encompass acts Ruben Vardanyan could not physically have committed, indicating their arbitrary and unreliable nature.

This contravenes the principle of legal certainty (*lex certa*) and the temporal application of the law (*tempus regit actum*). The charges impute indirect responsibility to Ruben Vardanyan for events that occurred 30 years before his

involvement — a concept explicitly rejected in both domestic and international criminal law, which require a direct causal link (*nexus causalis*) between an individual's actions and the alleged criminal consequences.

2) Witness Testimony Without Personal Knowledge or Evidentiary Basis

The majority of the "victims" and their representatives questioned by the court, who claim that Ruben Vardanyan committed alleged crimes in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, have never personally known him: they themselves state that they have never met him and that their knowledge of him comes solely from the media and social networks. In this context, the testimony is derivative (second-hand or based on publications) and, by definition, cannot establish the key elements of the prosecution's case — namely, the accused's individual role and the causal link between his actions and the alleged harm. The testimony describes the events of the conflict and the harm suffered but contains no facts of direct perception (such as contact with the accused, his orders, participation, communications, or documented coordination) that would specifically connect these episodes to Vardanyan. Moreover, the court repeatedly refused to summon defense witnesses who could have clarified the circumstances and corroborated the facts cited by the defense, thereby undermining both the verifiability and the balance of adversarial proceedings in the assessment of the prosecution's witness testimony.

3) Inconsistency with International Agreements

The formal basis for Ruben Vardanyan's detention was cited as "illegal border crossing" on September 27, 2023.

However:

- In accordance with the trilateral agreement of November 9, 2020, signed by the Presidents of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the Russian Federation, the Lachin Corridor was under the control of Russian peacekeeping forces. The trilateral statement established a unique legal status for this territory, which was under the supervision of the Russian peacekeeping contingent. This status excluded the application of ordinary border regime rules. Crucially, Azerbaijan recognized this legal situation, thereby agreeing that movement through the Lachin Corridor in accordance with the terms of the trilateral statement could not be classified as an illegal border crossing.
- Azerbaijan guaranteed the safety of the movement of civilians, vehicles, and goods in both directions.

- In 2023, both the International Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights affirmed the necessity of ensuring free movement through the Lachin Corridor.

The indictment thus rests on a presumption that is itself the subject of international legal dispute, constituting both a logical and legal defect.

Participation in a "Criminal Organization:" The characterization of Artsakh's state institutions as a "criminal formation" violates the norms of international law (both treaty-based and customary) and also contradicts the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice in the Kosovo case, which clearly established that "general international law contains no applicable prohibition on the declaration of independence."

The indictment effectively introduces a form of retrospective criminalization, declaring unlawful, after the fact, a political entity that, for decades, participated in negotiations under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group. In this context, the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group (France, Russia, and the United States), established pursuant to a United Nations Security Council decision to facilitate conflict resolution, regularly met with the official representatives of Artsakh — including its President, State Minister, Speaker of the National Assembly, and other senior officials — to discuss ongoing issues and potential pathways for resolving the conflict.

In its practice, the United Nations Security Council has invalidated certain declarations of independence when it found them to be contrary to international law (e.g., Southern Rhodesia, Northern Cyprus, Republika Srpska). However, in the case of Artsakh, the Security Council has never declared the Republic of Artsakh's declaration of independence invalid and has implicitly recognized its legal personality as distinct from that of the Republic of Armenia and/or Azerbaijan.

Chronology of Key Events

Statements by Ruben Vardanyan and International Reactions

- January 16, 2025: Through family members, Ruben Vardanyan submitted a statement, in which he declared that he had given no testimony since his arrest;
- that all protocols bearing his signature were forged;
- and that his lawyer and translator had been coerced into signing procedural documents.

- **On October 10, 2023**, the alumni community of the SKOLKOVO School of Management issued an open appeal in support of their mentor, Ruben Vardanyan. The former students called for the release of the public figure from detention so that he could return to his family and resume his work on educational and humanitarian projects.
- **On December 12, 2023,** more than 150 humanitarian figures, politicians, and business leaders from around the world signed an open letter calling for the release of former Artsakh leaders from detention. They expressed concern over the conditions of the detainees and alarm for their well-being.
- **From April 5–24, 2024,** Ruben Vardanyan went on a hunger strike, calling for the immediate release of Armenian detainees held unlawfully.
- **In December 2024,** Azerbaijani prosecutors filed 42 additional charges under 19 Criminal Code articles, including murder, war crimes, terrorism, seizure of power, and torture.
- **On 17 January 2025,** the trial of Ruben Vardanyan commenced. The case is being heard by the Baku Military Court, despite the fact that Vardanyan is a civilian with no affiliation to the armed forces, law enforcement, or intelligence services. The proceedings are conducted by a three-judge panel chaired by Zeynal Agaev, separate from the cases of other Artsakh officials.
- **On January 17, 2025,** Amnesty International called on the Azerbaijani authorities to ensure that Ruben Vardanyan is afforded the right to a fair trial.
- **On February 18, 2025,** Ruben Vardanyan began a second hunger strike in protest of what he described as a judicial farce.
- **On March 12, 2025,** the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning inhumane treatment of the Armenian detainees and calling for their immediate release.
- **On 3 September 2025,** the International Committee of the Red Cross announced the suspension of its operations in Azerbaijan. It had been the only international organization with access to Armenian detainees in Baku.
- **On October 21, 2025,** Vardanyan renounced his legal counsel, stating that, in the context of systemic violations of justice, the defense had no real ability to challenge the charges and that the role of the lawyer was reduced to creating the appearance of a lawful process.
- **On December 18, 2025,** the prosecutor requested a life sentence for Ruben Vardanyan.

Key Procedural Violations

Violation of the Right to Be Informed of Charges and of One's Rights

1. At the time of his detention, Ruben Vardanyan was not informed of the reasons for his arrest or of his rights.
2. Notifications of his rights were either unsigned, not delivered, or issued with procedural deficiencies.
3. Orders charging him under new articles were not served within the legally prescribed timeframe and were not translated.

Denial of the Right to an Effective Defense

1. Almost all motions submitted by Ruben Vardanyan and his defense team were systematically ignored.
2. Access was denied to notarial services, documents, case materials, specialized literature, and online resources necessary for preparing a defense.
3. Several dozen motions were formally "considered" but were, in fact, not reflected in the official records.

Falsification and Manipulation of Documents

1. The case file contains protocols lacking the signatures of the accused and his defense counsel.
2. Distortions of the content of court hearing transcripts have been recorded.
3. The indictment does not bear the signatures of authorized representatives of the prosecution.
4. The translator provided by the Azerbaijani court made serious errors, including incorrect references, citing Belarusian law instead of Azerbaijani law.

Unlawful Jurisdiction

1. The case of a civilian is being heard by a military court, in violation of international standards of judicial independence.

Closed Nature of the Proceedings

1. International observers and independent journalists are not admitted to the courtroom.
2. State media misrepresent the statements of Ruben Vardanyan and his defense counsel.

3. Invocations of “state secrecy” are used as a pretext to shield the proceedings from international oversight.

Additional Factors of Isolation

1. On September 3, 2025, at the request of the Azerbaijani authorities, the mission of the International Committee of the Red Cross — the last international mechanism with access to detainees — was suspended.
2. On October 22, 2025, Ruben Vardanyan renounced his legal counsel, citing the absence of conditions for a meaningful defense and refusing to participate in what he described as a “theatre of the absurd.”

Conclusion

The totality of established facts demonstrates that the prosecution of Ruben Vardanyan fails to comply with either Azerbaijani national law or internationally recognized standards of a fair trial. His case is politically motivated and unfolds against the backdrop of a sharp ethno-political conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, where criminal prosecution serves as both a continuation of the confrontation and a tool for public displays of power.

The scale and retrospective nature of the charges, the trial of a civilian before a military court, and the systemic obstacles to exercising the right to a defense all contribute to a proceeding in which fundamental guarantees of a fair trial are absent.

Now that the judicial panel has delivered its verdict, international engagement is more critical than ever. A judgment issued under such circumstances lacks legitimacy and serves to confirm the political character of the prosecution.