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Azerbaijan Sentences Former Nagorno-Karabakh Official to 20 Years in Prison

February 17, 2026



Ruben Vardanyan. **@minval_az / Telegram**

A judge in Azerbaijan has sentenced Ruben Vardanyan, the former state minister of the now-dissolved Armenian separatist administration of Nagorno-Karabakh, to 20 years in prison, Azerbaijani state media reported Tuesday.

The 57-year-old billionaire was convicted on 19 charges under Azerbaijan's criminal code, including crimes against peace and humanity, war crimes and terrorism.

Prosecutors had sought a life sentence.

Vardanyan denied the charges against him.

In October 2025, he dismissed his lawyer and described the trial as a "farce."

In his final statement to the court this month, he devoted most of his remarks to Armenian-Azerbaijani reconciliation, saying peace would come only "when there are two equal neighbors."

His family called the verdict "horrifying but expected," saying the proceedings were held behind closed doors and under conditions "incompatible with the standards of a fair trial."

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Vardanyan was arrested in September 2023 as he attempted to leave Nagorno-Karabakh while Baku seized the region in a lightning offensive.

He went on hunger strike twice while in pre-trial detention in protest against his prosecution.

A former owner of one of Moscow's first investment banks Troika Dialog and a founder of the Skolkovo business school, Vardanyan renounced his Russian citizenship in 2022 to become state minister of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Earlier this month, Azerbaijani judges handed down sentences to 15 other former military and political leaders of the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Several received life terms, including former president Arayik Harutyunyan, former foreign minister David Babayan, former parliament speaker David Ishkhanyan and former defense army commander Levon Mnatsakanyan.

Around 100,000 ethnic Armenians fled Nagorno-Karabakh following Azerbaijan's September 2023 takeover in fear of reprisals and repression. A contingent of nearly 2,000 Russian peacekeepers that had been stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh did not intervene.

The self-declared republic, which had existed since 1991, formally dissolved on Jan. 1, 2024.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has since signed a declaration recognizing Azerbaijan's territorial integrity within 86,600 square kilometers, including Nagorno-Karabakh.

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