

Policy Brief: Suppression of Environmental Activists in Armenia

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The plight of environmental activists in Armenia is a pressing issue requiring urgent attention from both domestic and international stakeholders. Ensuring their protection is not only a matter of justice but also crucial for the sustainable and equitable development of the country.

Over the course of the last several years, **mining and other companies in Armenia have brought at least 29 cases against environmental activists, journalists, and other critics.** Known as SLAPP suites or strategic litigation against public participation, these cases are aimed at intimidating and silencing those who publicly criticize their actions. The vast majority of these cases have been initiated in connection with the Amulsar gold mine project in Southeastern Armenia, which is operated by the Lydian Armenia, and is the largest foreign investments in the country. [Lydian Armenia](#) is a 100% subsidiary of Lydian Canada Ventures owned by the US firm, Orion Mine Finance and Canadian firm, Osisko Gold Royalties, who both invest in mining and mineral sectors. According to a deal struck between the company and the Armenian Government, Lydian [agreed to hand over](#) 12.5 percent of its shares to the government.

[Zangezur Copper-Molybdenum Combine \(ZCMC\)](#) is the other company known for filing SLAPP suites against activists that have been critical of its negative environmental impact of the mining process. In 2021, 75 percent of company shares [were taken over](#) by Roman Trotsenko, a Russian oligarch, who later ceded a minority stake to the Armenian government in an obscure deal. The government of Armenia currently holds 21.8 percent of company's shares.

Up until now, Araminta is aware of **19 SLAPP suits filed by Lydian Armenia and an additional 10 filed by ZCMC, mainly for defamation and insult.** These lawsuits impose significant financial and psychological burden on activists, effectively disabling their work and deterring others from speaking out against rights abuses or environmental harm that the mining activities lead to. In parallel to facing legal cases, some of the activists have experienced hate speech and harassment in the social media. Some of these stories have been well [documented](#).

Yet issues raised by these critics are of huge importance, represent public interest, and are grounded on solid research. For example, a 2019 independent [report](#) found that the approval of the Amulsar project was in violation of the Armenian legislation, EBRD's Environmental and Social Policy, and creating environmental and biodiversity risks for the area. Moreover, the project [was found](#) to threaten the water of the lake Sevan by sulfidic mine tailings, given that the mine sits above underground tunnels supplying water to the lake. There have also been reliable [reports](#) about the negative impact on the environment and communities living near the Zangezur mine.

The cases brought against the critics of the aforementioned mining companies severely limit freedom of speech and undermine civic space, going against Armenia's democratic aspirations and commitments under the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement. The issue has already

received a wide attention from a range of international organizations, including the [UN](#), [Council of Europe](#), the [Business and Human Rights Resource Center](#), [Friends of the Earth Europe](#), [Bankwatch](#), [OSF Armenia](#) and many others, however there has been no appropriate response from the government in Armenia.

The suppression of environmental activists in Armenia and the use of SLAPPs and other legal measures to silence dissent poses significant risks to democratic principles and environmental protection. We recommend the government of Armenia as a matter of priority to:

- **Pass and enforce anti-SLAPP legislation to protect activists and journalists from frivolous lawsuits designed to stifle free speech and public participation. The Government of Armenia should study the April 5, 2024 Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)2 on countering the use of SLAPPs published by the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers for preparing the necessary legislation.**
- **Engage activists in decision-making processes to foster a more inclusive and democratic approach to environmental governance.**
- **Establish independent environmental oversight bodies to monitor and regulate mining activities, ensuring they adhere to environmental standards and do not harm local communities.**