

Statement on the Remarks of OSCE Secretary General Feridun H. Sinirlioğlu Concerning the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church

July 23, 2026

The Armenian Center for Political Rights, the Helsinki Committee of Armenia, and Christian Solidarity International express our deep concern and condemnation regarding recorded remarks of the Secretary General of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Feridun H. Sinirlioğlu of Turkey, in which he appeared willing to lend the support of his office to the Armenian government's campaign to remove Catholicos Karekin II, the Catholicos of All Armenians and head of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church (AAHC). For the most senior official of an organisation whose founding commitments include the protection of human rights to entertain such a request—even in passing—is deeply troubling and demands an immediate and public clarification.

We are conscious of the provenance of these remarks. They were obtained by Russian pranksters, who telephoned the Secretary General while impersonating Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The call was made public on July 8. These pranksters have a track record of targeting politicians and officials to secure statements on sensitive public matters. We do not condone deception of this kind. Nevertheless, while we recognise that the exchange was engineered, the Secretary General's own words reveal a posture that cannot be reconciled with the responsibilities of his office.

During the conversation, the Secretary General accused the Catholicos of politicising the AAHC. He then agreed to “look into” how the OSCE might support the person impersonating the Armenian Prime Minister in the matter of removing the Catholicos. When asked by the Secretary General whether he can “change the Catholicos,” the impersonator said he was “looking to all possible ways.” The impersonator asked for the Secretary General's support in the event of any public criticism, to which the Secretary General responded with “OK, I'll do my best, I'll try.” At no point did the Secretary General object that the forced removal of a religious leader by the state would violate the very freedoms the OSCE is committed to uphold.

Principle VII of the Helsinki Final Act 1975 sets out the OSCE's foundational commitment to “human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.” That commitment has been reaffirmed repeatedly and is binding on all 57 participating states, including Armenia. The autonomy of religious organisations, and their freedom to govern their own internal and canonical affairs, lie at the heart of that guarantee. Since the Secretary General is charged with upholding this commitment, he should not be offering even qualified encouragement to a government bent on deposing the head of a church.

These remarks cannot be viewed in isolation. Since May 2025, the Armenian government has pursued a systematic and sustained campaign against the AAHC as part of a broader attack on democracy and rule of law. Prime Minister Pashinyan has publicly called for the removal of Catholicos Karekin II, published a “roadmap” setting out steps to depose him, and levelled unsubstantiated accusations against the Catholicos and senior clergy. Travel bans have been brought against the Catholicos and several bishops, and high-ranking clergymen have been

detained on criminal charges that appear politically motivated. Taken together, these actions constitute a state-orchestrated effort to subordinate the Church to the government's will, putting at risk the separation of church and state enshrined in Armenia's Constitution.

The AAHC is no ordinary party to a political dispute. Since Armenia's adoption of Christianity in 301 AD, the Church has played a critical role in preserving the Armenian language, culture and national identity, a role recognised under Article 18 of the Armenian Constitution as an "exclusive mission." Far from politicising the Church—as the Secretary General claims—the Catholicos has sought to discharge this constitutional responsibility by defending the rights of the Armenian people, not least those ethnically cleansed from Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. Any state-led effort to depose the Catholicos thus violates not only Armenia's commitment to religious freedom, but also the country's settled constitutional order.

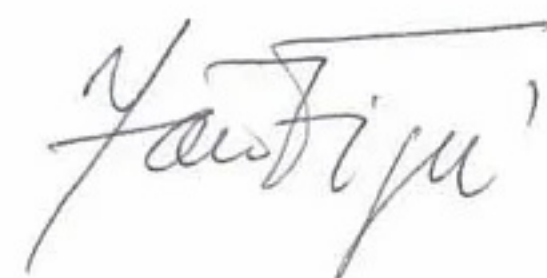
We therefore call on Secretary General Sinirlioğlu to:

- publicly clarify and retract any suggestion that the OSCE would support the removal of the Catholicos or otherwise interfere in the internal governance of the AAHC;
- reaffirm the OSCE's commitment to protecting freedom of religion or belief in Armenia, consistent with its human dimension commitments; and
- engage with the Catholicos to ensure that the rights of the AAHC, its clergy and its faithful are fully respected.

We stand ready to meet with the OSCE to share further information and our concerns, and we will continue to monitor the conduct of its leadership closely. The head of the OSCE should be a bulwark against the violation of religious freedom, not a willing accessory to it. On the evidence of these remarks, Secretary General Sinirlioğlu has failed that test, and he must now make plain where he stands.



John Eibner
President
Christian Solidarity International



Ján Figel'
President
Forum for Religious Freedom in Europe



Rafael Ishkhanyan
President
Armenian Center for Political Rights



Siranush Sahakyan
President
Helsinki Committee of Armenia