

Nagorno-Karabakh refugees face a legal limbo in France

Lilit Shahverdyan · OC Media · 2026-08-17

For the 120,000 Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians who were forcibly displaced by Azerbaijan's military offensive in 2023, creating a new sense of home abroad has been difficult, not least because of official documents many countries fail to recognise.

Narine Arushanyan's family of four has spent more than two years trying to rebuild their lives in a commune near the northern city of Rouen, France. Since arriving in France in November that year, the country having the third-largest Armenian population outside of Armenia itself, they have struggled to qualify for legal protection, finding themselves caught between two systems.

Despite having applied for asylum shortly after her arrival in France, the court decision took two years, and in April 2026, the courts rejected her application on a crucial legal ground: that Armenia had already granted the family protection. Indeed, just days before Narine's arrival in France, Armenia had granted collective temporary protection to Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians. Even though Narine left without receiving her refugee certificate, in the eyes of French authorities, that policy alone reduced the need for asylum elsewhere.

The decision cut off the family's financial support and left them facing an uncertain future. Only Narine's 17-year-old son is still awaiting a ruling on his case, allowing the family to remain in France while they appeal.

'All we want now is a work permit', Narine tells OC Media. 'That's how we're used to living. We're not used to depending on the state'.

Without legal status, only off-the-books employment is an option. Narine has taken on informal work, commuting to Paris three times a week for a babysitting job — a journey that takes three hours each way.

'We had nothing in Armenia'

Narine's situation is not unique. For many displaced Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, the main challenge is convincing asylum authorities that Armenia's protection is not a durable solution. Although they are ethnically Armenian, they argue that Armenia is not their country of origin, but a country they were forced to flee.

'It became a trap', Narine says. 'We had nothing in Armenia — no home, no stability. Starting from zero wasn't possible'.

At the time, Armenia was struggling to accommodate tens of thousands of people in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Another influx of 120,000 Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians made finding housing impossible for many.

Narine also describes feeling stigmatised as a refugee in Armenia, including an incident that took place shortly after arriving in Yerevan in September 2023.

'I was in a taxi with my family, and we asked the driver if he knew of any free apartments to rent. He called a friend who had an empty apartment and put him on speakerphone. We heard his friend

say, “I’m not renting it to Karabakhis” ‘.

This discrimination is something that has not appeared to have lessened since her arrival in France. In recent months, many Armenian high-ranking officials have shown an increasingly aggressive attitude towards Nagorno-Karabakh, referring to them as ‘runaways’. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan once erupted at a refugee during his pre-election campaign, saying, ‘Why are you alive? Why didn’t you die, you scum?’.

While most Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians re-settled in Armenia, some 24,000 sought refuge abroad, according to the former Nagorno-Karabakh authorities. For Narine, whose generation had already lived through the First Nagorno-Karabakh War in the 1990s, the 2016 Nagorno-Karabakh clashes, and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, Azerbaijan’s 2023 offensive became the final rupture.

As Armenia and Azerbaijan continue difficult peace negotiations, Narine says she chose to move far from the region’s recurring cycles of conflict and hatred to ‘give her children a life more peaceful than hers’.

How Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians slip between the cracks

As Mihail Kats, a researcher and advisor on former Soviet countries within the French asylum court, tells OC Media, asylum requests from people fleeing Nagorno-Karabakh are not treated as a distinct category.

‘Because the territory has never been internationally recognised as a state, most individuals from Nagorno-Karabakh are considered to be linked to Armenia due to their Armenian-issued documents’, he explains.

Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians hold Armenian passports issued as travel documents, but these do not automatically grant voting rights or land ownership. They must apply separately to obtain Armenian citizenship.

However, foreign asylum authorities make little distinction between displaced Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians and Armenian citizens.

‘Asylum applications of people from Nagorno-Karabakh have slipped through the cracks because the system is dealing with a massive influx of refugees from Ukraine and the Middle East’, Kats says.

He adds that Armenia is designated by France as a ‘safe country of origin’, meaning applicants must demonstrate specific risks if returned there in order to qualify for protection.

In 2025, the French asylum court issued 986 decisions related to Armenia. Only 49, or around 5%, were approved. As the data is uncategorised, it is unclear how many of the cases were related to Nagorno-Karabakh refugees.

According to the head of Armenia’s Migration and Citizenship Service, Nelly Davtyan, it is not reasonable to expect the Armenian government to ‘examine separately the cases of people displaced in the same conditions. Our capacity for individual claims is 200–250 per year’.

‘In conditions of mass displacement, everyone becomes a beneficiary of the same status with one decision’, she says, adding that the only way to reject this protection is to apply for Armenian citizenship.

This policy has had unintended consequences across Europe. Germany has also rejected asylum claims from former Nagorno-Karabakh residents on similar grounds, arguing they can rely on protection from Armenia.

In a rare exception, a German administrative court in Kassel recognised a Nagorno-Karabakh Armenian family as stateless in November 2024. But the ruling has not set broader precedent.

'Even if authorities acknowledge that someone is not truly an Armenian citizen but has a refugee status in Armenia, the outcome will likely be the same', Davtyan notes.

For Hovhannes Gevorgyan, representative of Nagorno-Karabakh in France since 2003, the rights of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians are 'universal human rights'.

'They should not depend on whether one state or another chooses to protect them', he says.

'Whether they are Armenians, Ukrainians, Kurds, or Palestinians, people must have the same rights', he emphasises. 'If authorities decide not to defend them, does it mean that these people no longer have rights? That they can be driven from their ancestral homes overnight, and this is acceptable?'.

Narine says she feels trapped between systems, with no path back to Nagorno-Karabakh, few opportunities to rebuild her life in Armenia, and no access to protection in Europe.

After more than two years in exile, she still thinks about the moment they left.

'It was never the decision of ordinary people', she says. 'We stayed [in Nagorno-Karabakh] for as long as we could, the rest didn't depend on us', Narine adds.

Like many others, the family took only documents and a few items carrying memories of a life abruptly interrupted, leaving the keys near the door.

Narine still hopes to return to her profession one day, perhaps teaching at an Armenian school in France.

What she wants most, she says, is not assistance, but a more predictable future.

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