

## **TV Chief Killing Rocks Armenia**

**Author:** [Mark Grigorian](#)

The assassination of the head of state television at the start of the presidential election campaign has shocked Armenia

The as yet unexplained murder of public television boss Tigran Naghdalian has shocked the country and inflamed tensions between the government and opposition ahead of presidential elections next month.

Naghdalian was shot in the head as he left his parents' house in Yerevan on December 28. He died in hospital a little over two hours later.

As head of state television, Naghdalian was a key supporter of President Robert Kocharian - standing for re-election on February 19 - who, along with his supporters, has suggested that the opposition had a hand in the murder.

Many saw this as an attack on leading presidential contender Artashes Geghamian. He, in turn, accused the authorities of trying to make political capital out of the murder and sowing the seeds of fear among the population.

Naghdalian, 36, was one of Armenia's best-known journalists and public figures. He worked in both television and news agencies, before taking up the job of head of the state television channel H1 in June 1998.

The post enabled him to become one of the most influential people in Armenia. H1 is state-owned and run by a council of directors appointed by the president. The channel has the largest number of viewers in Armenia and is also transmitted abroad by satellite to the seven-million-strong Armenian diaspora.

On December 28, most of the country was shutting down for the New Year and Christmas, which Armenians celebrate on January 6. The newspapers were beginning a ten-day break.

This meant that television was the only source of information for most of the population for a number of days. H1 was so shocked by the killing of its boss that it transmitted only music and statements by famous Armenians on the death of Naghdalian.

Less than six weeks now remain till the first round of presidential elections, in which Kocharian will depend heavily on H1 for support.

Kocharian was quick to label the murder of Naghdalian as a terrorist act. "By striking at what is most precious - human life - the terrorists wanted to hurt those people who are trying to create a peaceful, stable and prosperous fatherland through their everyday work," he said.

Within the context of the presidential elections, many interpreted these words as Kocharian blaming the opposition for the killing. Other supporters of the government spoke more openly.

"Those who promise that in two steps they will make life in the country ten times better are to blame," well-known cartoon film-maker Robert Saakyants declared on H1. Gagik Mkrtchian, editor of the pro-government paper Hayots Ashkhar, said, "The radicals have no other choice but to commit a crime like this."

Although they named no names, it was clear they were talking about Geghamian, the former mayor of Yerevan, who, opinion polls suggest, is making a strong challenge to Kocharian in the election.

In response, Geghamian accused the authorities of exploiting the murder for their own purposes. He said that the government had created an atmosphere of hysteria around the death of Naghdalian and was trying to discredit him because he stood a good chance of winning the presidential ballot.

Certainly, the mood in the country is very heated. Presidential spokesman Vahe Gabrielian said live on H1 that none of the opposition parties had expressed condolences over the death of Naghdalian, while one of the channel's reporters, Alina Ordian, said opposition journalists bore moral responsibility for his murder.

Opposition politicians responded by saying that they were not given the chance to speak on state television and their statements condemning the murder were ignored.

Journalists who do not support the government are fearful of a backlash against them. "I have been talking to many colleagues," said well-known commentator David Petrosian. "They all say that will be more careful from now on, as the statements on H1 show that the authorities are ready to crush dissent."

David Petrosian says that a political motive for the murder could be linked to the central role that government television under Naghdalian played in Armenia and the way it helped form the president's policies.

"H1 did not just deprive Robert Kocharian's opponents of the opportunity to express their point of view on air, it pursued a strict policy of ostracizing them," Petrosian said.

While the only theory being discussed is a political one, there is a possible economic motive as well, since state television in Armenia is a very profitable business: it received five million US dollars of government money in 2002 as well as advertising revenue and support from sponsors.

Besides his job at H1, Naghdalian owned the private television company Kaim, which worked with H1 in producing programmes and advertisements. He was also the owner of a café in the centre of Yerevan.

Pursuing another theory, opposition leader Artashes Geghamian said Naghdalian was killed so that he could not give testimony in the ongoing trial over the killings in the Armenian parliament in 1999.

When the gunmen, led by Nairi Hunanian, took over the parliament chamber on October 27 that year, Naghdalian was in the control room of his television station and watched the drama unfold. Everything was recorded on videocassettes, which were then handed over to the investigators.

However, opposition politicians maintain that material, which compromised President Kocharian was edited out of the cassettes.

As with the October 27 case, the truth of why Tigran Naghdalian was killed may take a long time to emerge or may never be known. Its short-term impact, however, has been dramatic.

"Whatever was the motive for this crime, it is yet another brazen challenge to our society and to Armenian journalism in particular," said a statement by the Armenian Press Club. "Monstrous acts like these plunge us into terror, create an atmosphere of fear and undermine the basis of freedom of speech and democracy as a whole."

Mark Grigorian is IWPR's Armenia Coordinator

**Location:** [Armenia](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tv-chief-killing-rocks-armenia>