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AZERBAIJAN: STOP PERSECUTION OF CRITICS AT HOME AND IN EXILE

In 2013 constitutional and other legislative changes initiated the effective dismantling of civic space in Azerbaijan. Since 2013 Azerbaijani authorities have consistently disabled independent civil society by, amongst other things, imprisoning hundreds of human rights defenders, activists, journalists and political opponents on politically motivated charges, and forcing others into exile.

This repression is no longer confined to Azerbaijan's borders. Amnesty International has documented an escalating campaign of repression targeting those who live abroad and are critical of the government, including journalists, human rights defenders, activists and family members of government critics. Transnational repression tools deployed against these exiled individuals, in past years and until today, include prosecution in absentia, surveillance, online harassment and smear campaigns. and in some cases, physical attacks and killing.

These measures constitute a widespread and grave assault on human rights including the rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, fair trial, and freedom of movement. The Azerbaijani authorities must promptly, thoroughly, impartially, independently, transparently and effectively investigate the allegations of grave human rights violations and bring to justice in fair trial those suspected to be responsible. The international community must act decisively to ensure that those targeted for speaking out are effectively protected.

BACKGROUND: REPRESSION OF PEACEFUL DISSENT IN AZERBAIJAN

2013-2025

Since 2013, the sustained and relentless crackdown on peaceful dissent has led to the closure of virtually all independent civil society organisations, whilst numerous human rights defenders, activists, journalists, academics, human rights lawyers, opposition leaders and other dissenting voices have been arbitrarily arrested, detained or imprisoned under politically motivated charges. Those who have escaped arrest and other reprisals have been forced into exile or have gone silent for fear of severe retaliation.

Rights groups estimate that more than 300 people are behind bars following unfair trials on politically motivated charges.¹ They are held in conditions which do not meet international human rights standards and are often denied access to their lawyers and family members, refused required medical care, and subjected to torture and other ill-treatment.²

The severity of the government's assault on civic space and human rights defenders is reflected by the fact that Azerbaijan has one of the worst records amongst Council of Europe member states on the implementation of European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) judgements. Azerbaijani authorities have not resumed dialogue and cooperation on the execution of the Mammadli³ and Ramazanova groups of cases, which represent gross violations of human rights including the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly.⁴

¹ Caucasian Knot, "The number of political prisoners in Azerbaijan has approached 400", 8 October 2025, <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/68931>

² Amnesty International, *Azerbaijan: Further Information: Jailed Journalists in Dire Health*, Urgent Action UA-002/2025-1, EUR 55/0646/2026, January 26, 2026, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/0646/2026/en/>

³ Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, *Mammadli v. Azerbaijan* (Application No. 47145/14), leading case, enhanced supervision, HUDOC-EXEC document 004-50875, accessed June 29, 2026, <https://hudoc.exec.coe.int/?i=004-50875>

⁴ Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, *Ramazanova and Others v. Azerbaijan* (Application No. 44363/02 and related cases), HUDOC-EXEC document 004-1607, Department for the Execution of Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, accessed June 29, 2026 <https://hudoc.exec.coe.int/?i=004-1607>

REPRESSION IN THE LEAD-UP TO AND POST NOVEMBER 2024 COP29

The latest wave of reprisals against peaceful dissent in Azerbaijan started ahead of the Baku-hosted November 2024 COP29,⁵ and has continued to this day. In a pattern only too familiar from other instances when Azerbaijan hosted high-profile international events,⁶ the authorities responded to efforts to shine an international spotlight on its human rights record by suppressing critical Azerbaijani voices. The response is a relentless crackdown against civil society at large, including independent media and human rights defenders at home and abroad. Most forms of dissent and legitimate human rights work in-country have been repressed.⁷

Media workers

Since November 2023 the Azerbaijani authorities have arrested and prosecuted nearly 30 independent journalists and media workers on bogus criminal charges.⁸ Seven journalists from *Abzas Media* were arrested between November 2023 and December 2024, accused of “currency smuggling” and “money laundering”, among other charges, and in June 2025 they were convicted and sentenced to prison terms ranging from seven and-a-half to nine years.⁹

Between December 2024 and August 2025, 12 journalists and media workers associated with *Meydan TV* were arbitrarily detained and put into pre-trial detention. According to their lawyers, the journalists were placed in overcrowded cells, subjected to sexual harassment and psychological threats and denied adequate healthcare.¹⁰ Their trial continues, and on 10 June 2026 the entire three-judge panel was replaced without explanation. Their defence lawyers have stated that the replacement of the judges may require the trial to be restarted – further prolonging their arbitrary detention.¹¹

In December 2023, **Ilgar Aliyev**, an information security and IT governance expert, was arrested during the investigation against *Abzas Media*. In May 2026, he died in Correctional Facility No 13. In his final voice recording, Ilgar Aliyev stated that police officers planted narcotics and psychotropic substances in his pocket, forced him to confess under threats, and threatened to target his family if he refused. Court documents describe allegations of physical violence, psychological pressure, denial of access to lawyers of his own choice, and falsification of procedural documents.¹²

Academics

Academics have also been targeted for dissent. On 23 June 2025, researcher and peace activist **Bahrüz Samadov**, who had been advocating for peace and dialogue with neighbouring Armenia, was prosecuted and sentenced to 15 years in prison on trumped-up charges of “high treason”. On 20 May 2025, **Igbal Abilov**, an ethnic Talysh scholar, was convicted and sentenced to 18 years in prison on charges of “high treason” and “inciting ethnic hatred”.¹³ **Gubad Ibadoglu** was in 2023 a senior visiting scholar at the London School of Economic and led the Economic Research Center, an NGO that conducted research on public finance management, good governance, and budget transparency. He was arrested during a visit to Azerbaijan in July 2023. On 22 April 2024, after 274 days in detention, Gubad Ibadoglu was released from the detention centre and moved to house arrest. According to his family, he is still unable to obtain the medical care he requires.¹⁴

⁵ Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: The Human Rights Situation in Azerbaijan ahead of COP29, EUR 55/8314/2024, July 11, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR55/8314/2024/en/>.

⁶ E.g., see Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: The Spring That Never Blossomed: Freedoms Suppressed in Azerbaijan, EUR 55/011/2011, November 16, 2011, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/011/2011/en/>; Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: “Revolving Doors”: The Ongoing Persecution of Government Critics in Azerbaijan, EUR 55/4268/2016, June 16, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/4268/2016/en/>.

⁷ Amnesty International, COP29: States Must Press Azerbaijani Authorities to End Assault on Civil Society, October 8, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/cop29-azerbaijan-end-assault-on-civil-society/>.

⁸ Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: From Newsroom to Cell: Persecution of Independent Journalists, EUR 55/0128/2025, July 22, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/0128/2025/en/>.

⁹ Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: Seven Journalists Sentenced in Latest Shocking Crackdown on Free Speech, June 20, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/06/azerbaijan-seven-journalists-sentenced-in-latest-shocking-crackdown-on-free-speech/>.

¹⁰ Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: Further Information: Jailed Journalists in Dire Health, EUR 55/0646/2026, January 26, 2026, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/0646/2026/en/>.

¹¹ Meydan TV, Vəkillər: “Meydan TV işi” üzrə məhkəmə yenidən başlanı bilər, June 10, 2026, <https://www.meydan.tv/az/article/v%99kill%99meydan-tv-i%99fi-%99bczr%99m%99hk%99m%99yenid%99n-ba%99flana-bil%99r/?tztc=1>; OCCRP, Azerbaijani Court Replaces Entire Judicial Panel in Meydan TV Trial, Raising Fears of Retrial, June 17, 2026, <https://www.occrp.org/en/news/azerbaijani-court-replaces-entire-judicial-panel-in-meydan-tv-trial-raising-fears-of-retrial>.

¹² Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: Further Information: Journalist Denied Healthcare in Prison: Nargiz Absalamova, EUR 55/1150/2026, June 16, 2026, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/1150/2026/en/>.

¹³ Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: Further Update: Academics Sentenced on Spurious Charges of Treason: Bahrüz Samadov and Igbal Abilov, EUR 55/0295/2025, September 15, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/0295/2025/en/>.

¹⁴ Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: Further Information: Drop Charges and Release Gubad Ibadoglu, EUR 55/8048/2024, May 15, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/8048/2024/en/>.

Political opposition figures and human rights defenders

Political opposition figures and activists have been similarly targeted for prosecution and imprisonment. **Tofiq Yagublu**, a veteran opposition figure and a member of the Musavat Party, was in March 2025 sentenced to nine years in prison on trumped-up charges of “fraud resulting in substantial harm” and “document forgery”. His co-defendant, **Elnur Mamedov**, who provided incriminating testimony, was at the same time sentenced to eight years in prison.¹⁵

Ali Karimli, chairman of the opposition Azerbaijani Popular Front Party (APFP), was in December 2025 remanded in pre-trial detention, accused of “actions aimed at the violent seizure of power” and “violent change of the constitutional order”. Authorities have connected him to a criminal investigation against Ramiz Mehdiyev, the former head of the presidential administration, who was charged in October 2025 with attempted “seizure of power,” “high treason” and the “legalization of property obtained by criminal means.”¹⁶

Human rights defender and Vaclav Havel Award winner **Anar Mammadli** has been in detention on fabricated charges since 29 April 2024¹⁷ and is still on trial. **Rufat Safarov**, a prominent human rights defender detained on 3 December 2024 on trumped-up fraud and hooliganism charges,¹⁸ was sentenced to eight years imprisonment on 12 June 2026.

REPRESSION BEYOND BORDERS

Having effectively silenced most independent voices in the country through the tactics described above, the Azerbaijani authorities have extended their repression beyond national borders. Exiled dissenting voices, including journalists and human rights defenders, face intimidation, surveillance, physical attacks, smear campaigns in state-aligned media, online harassment, and prosecution in absentia. The latter exposes individuals to the risk of arrest during international travel, potential extradition attempts, and legal uncertainty. Combined with the practice of abduction and secret rendition, these methods collectively constitute a system of transnational repression designed to deter peaceful dissent against the Azerbaijani authorities wherever it is expressed.

Working conditions in exile

In consequence, it is increasingly risky to conduct independent journalistic work even from exile. The exiled acting editor-in-chief of *Abzas Media*, **Gunel Safarova**, whose colleagues remain imprisoned in Azerbaijan, nonetheless told Amnesty International that continuing their work from abroad “was not a choice but the only viable option.”¹⁹

Despite operating from Europe, the team does not consider itself fully secure. Professional decisions, including around travel, take into account surveillance, harassment, and other potential transnational repression repercussions – all of which affects their ability to conduct journalistic work and investigations effectively and without fear of harassment.

Gunel Safarova and dozens of other journalists and human rights defenders in exile refuse to be silenced. They continue to report on issues of public interest, expose corruption and human rights violations, demand justice and carry forward the work of their imprisoned colleagues.

Physical attacks on exiled critics

The history of the Azerbaijani authorities’ critics being physically targeted abroad in suspicious circumstances goes some years back.

In 2017, exiled investigative journalist **Afgan Mukhtarli** was abducted from Tbilisi, Georgia, forcibly returned to Azerbaijan and imprisoned.²⁰ He had fled to Georgia after having written about high-level government corruption and having drawn attention to imprisoned journalists and activists. He went missing in the evening of 29 May 2017 and eventually was

¹⁵ Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: Opposition Activist Tofiq Yagublu Sentenced Following Sham Trial, March 10, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/03/azerbaijan-opposition-activist-tofig-yagublu-sentenced-following-sham-trial/>

¹⁶ Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: Arrest of Opposition Leader Is Further Evidence of Consolidation of Authoritarian Practices, December 1, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/12/azerbaijan-arrest-of-opposition-leader-is-further-evidence-of-consolidation-of-authoritarian-practices/>

¹⁷ Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: Further Information: Imprisoned Defender Denied Health Care: Anar Mammadli, EUR 55/8737/2024, November 7, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/8737/2024/en/>

¹⁸ Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: Authorities Must Immediately Release Human Rights Defender Rufat Safarov, December 4, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/azerbaijan-authorities-must-immediately-release-human-rights-defender-rufat-safarov/>

¹⁹ Gunel Safarova, interview with Amnesty International, February 12, 2026.

²⁰ Amnesty International UK, Sentenced Journalist Latest Victim of Azerbaijan’s ‘Repressive Apparatus of Fear’, January 12, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/knowledge-hub/all-resources/sentenced-journalist-latest-victim-azerbaijans-repressive-apparatus-fear/>; European Court of Human Rights, Mukhtarli v. Azerbaijan and Georgia (Application No. 39503/17), Judgment of September 5, 2024, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/geo/?i=001-235491>

found to be in the custody of Azerbaijan's State Border Service.²¹ His abductors reportedly spoke Georgian. Afgan Mukhtarli later received asylum in Germany. On 9 September 2025, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Georgian authorities had failed to conduct an effective investigation into his alleged abduction and ill-treatment, while Azerbaijani authorities had breached his right to private life.²²

In France, blogger **Mahammad Mirzali**, who has criticised corruption and embezzlement of state funds, has survived multiple assassination attempts which French authorities have linked to the Azerbaijani state.²³ In May 2026 nine Azerbaijani nationals were put on trial in France for plotting to murder Mirzali, and were sentenced in June 2026. During the proceedings, the presiding judge stated that the attack was motivated by Mirzali's exercise of his right to freedom of expression through his work as a blogger and journalist. According to the judge, the perpetrators sought to send a broader message to Azerbaijani dissidents living in Europe, and the judge described the attack as an attempt to silence a prominent critic of the Azerbaijani authorities through extreme violence.²⁴

Another rights defender, **Vidadi Isgandarli**, who was known for his criticism of Azerbaijani government and had fled Azerbaijan to France, was killed in a stabbing attack in September 2024, in circumstances reminiscent of the attacks against Mirzali – exposing a failure to protect exiled activists.²⁵

In August 2023, **Fazil Gasimov**, Azerbaijani economist and doctoral researcher enrolled at Istanbul University, was **abducted in Istanbul** by Turkish police officers and handed over to officers of the Baku Department for Combating Organised Crime (BDCOC). He was charged with illegal activities around counterfeit and foreign currency,²⁶ as part of the same criminal case against **Gubad Ibadoghlu** (see above) an economist and academic who in July 2023 was arrested upon return to Azerbaijan and prosecuted on fabricated charges (currently under house arrest).²⁷

On November 7, 2025, **Talysh activist Kamal Isayev** was **detained in Istanbul and taken to Azerbaijan** by members of Azerbaijan's State Security Service (SSS), according to his wife Aida Isayeva. The charges against him were not reported.²⁸

The Talysh people are an ethnic minority in Azerbaijan, whose members tried, and failed, to achieve political autonomy in the early 1990s. Azerbaijani authorities have actively persecuted advocates of Talysh cultural revival and other activists (e.g., **Igbal Abilov** was arrested in 2024 and in 2025 sentenced to a long prison sentence for treason, following an unfair trial).²⁹

Overt physical violence by Azerbaijani officers against Azerbaijani exiles partaking in protest, has also been reported. For example, in a public incident on 19 February 2026, bodyguards travelling with President Ilham Aliyev attacked peaceful protesters outside the Waldorf Astoria hotel in Washington, DC, where Ilham Aliyev was staying during an official visit to attend the inaugural meeting of US President Trump's Board of Peace.³⁰ The protesters were calling for the release of political prisoners in Azerbaijan, and video footage widely circulated on social media shows security personnel punching and kicking demonstrators. Among those injured was **Rahim Yagublu**, son of political activist **Tofiq Yagublu**, who was sentenced to nine years' imprisonment in 2025 following a sham trial.³¹ At least four protesters were injured. The incident

²¹ Amnesty International, Georgia/Azerbaijan: Exiled Azerbaijani Journalist at Risk of Torture after Cross-Border Abduction, May 31, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.nl/actueel/georgiaazerbaijan-exiled-azerbaijani-journalist-at-risk-of-torture-after-cross-border-abduction>

²² European Court of Human Rights, Mukhtarli v. Azerbaijan and Georgia (Application No. 39503/17), Judgment of September 5, 2024, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/geo/?i=001-235491>

²³ OC Media, Azerbaijani Blogger Stabbed in France after Sister Blackmailed with 'Intimate Video', March 17, 2021, <https://oc-media.org/azerbaijani-blogger-stabbed-in-france-after-sister-blackmailed-with-with-intimate-video/>

²⁴ OC Media, France Tries 9 Azerbaijanis for Plotting to Murder Exiled Blogger, May 26, 2026, <https://oc-media.org/france-tries-9-azerbaijanis-for-plotting-to-murder-exiled-blogger/>

²⁵ Amnesty International, France/Azerbaijan: Killing of President Aliyev's Critic Exposes Failures to Protect Exiled Activists, October 2, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/france-azerbaijan-killing-of-president-aliyevs-critic-exposes-failures-to-protect-exiled-activists/>

²⁶ Free Voices Collective, Fazil Gasimov, accessed June 25, 2026, <https://freevoicescollective.org/fazil-gasimov/>

²⁷ Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: Further Information: Drop Charges and Release Gubad Ibadoghlu, EUR 55/8048/2024, May 15, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/8048/2024/en/>

²⁸ OC Media, Talysh Activist Reportedly Detained in Turkey and Taken to Azerbaijan by State Security Service, November 14, 2025, <https://oc-media.org/talysh-activist-reportedly-detained-in-turkey-and-taken-to-azerbaijan-by-state-security-service/>

²⁹ Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: Academics Arrested on Fabricated Charges: Igbal Abilov and Bahruz Samadov, EUR 55/8554/2024, September 23, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/8554/2024/en/>

³⁰ The Washington Post, D.C. Protesters Say They Were Attacked by Guards of Azerbaijani President, February 19, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2026/02/19/dc-protesters-azerbaijan-ilham-aliyev-attack-trump/>

³¹ Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: Authorities Must Immediately Release Tofiq Yagublu and Urgently Provide Medical Care as His Health Deteriorates, April 11, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/04/azerbaijan-authorities-must-immediately-release-tofig-yagublu-and-urgently-provide-medical-care-as-his-health-deteriorates/>

occurred in full view of US law enforcement, and US Congress members condemned the attack and called for a full investigation.³²

Exiled journalist and co-founder of the Switzerland-based Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety, Emin Huseynov, reported to Amnesty International three instances in which he believed he was followed in Geneva by individuals associated with Azerbaijani authorities, and conducting secret surveillance. On 18 February 2026, these were two men, apparently of Azerbaijani origin, who he believed were armed. Emin Huseynov started livestreaming the situation on his mobile phone, and they walked away.³³ The video shows him chasing and trying to talk in Azeri to a man who walks away and appears to be hiding his face from the camera.

Emin Huseynov also claims that on 20 February 2026, two unidentified individuals were waiting near his vehicle. Huseynov believes they left the scene (in a van with French license plates) due to the presence of some pedestrians and a passing police vehicle. On 21 February 2026, Emin Huseynov claims he was surveilled by two individuals driving a black BMW with German number plates. He observed suspicious-looking individuals near his home and workplace on several subsequent occasions. Emin Huseynov reported these three incidents to the police.³⁴ He believes these incidents were the consequence of him publicly challenging President İlham Aliyev and his wife and Vice President, Mehriban Aliyeva, about democracy in Azerbaijan, on the fringes of the 13-15 February 2026 Munich Security Conference.³⁵ Mehriban Aliyeva responded verbally with a personal attack on Huseynov.³⁶

Additionally, Emin Huseynov's exiled brother, **blogger Mehman Huseynov**, who has published investigative reports about alleged corruption within the Aliyev family, has reported to Amnesty International that he has received death threats and lives under police protection in Europe. Mehman Huseynov also stated publicly in an interview with Meydan TV that hidden cameras installed in his bedroom in Baku had for five years been recording his private life. Mehman Huseynov alleges that he himself has been blackmailed, and members of his family inside Azerbaijan interrogated to pressure him to refrain from his activities.³⁷

According to media reports, on the night of 4 April 2026, **Azerbaijani investigative journalist Afgan Sadigov** was detained in Tbilisi, Georgia, and deported to Azerbaijan. His deportation took place within hours of a late-night court hearing in which he had reportedly stood accused of insulting a police officer online, an administrative offence for which the court granted permission to deport him. Conspicuously, this occurred one day before President İlham Aliyev's scheduled official visit to Tbilisi. The deportation circumvented binding ECtHR interim measures in place since early 2025, which barred his extradition from Georgia to Azerbaijan.

On 1 April, Azerbaijani authorities had abruptly halted criminal proceedings against Afgan Sadigov, thus removing the formal basis for the extradition. Following this, the Georgian authorities reclassified his forcible return to Azerbaijan as an administrative deportation.³⁸ On 8 June, Afgan Sadigov's wife, Sevinj Sadigova, reported that four or five masked men in plain clothes forcibly took him from Jalilabad region, around 200 kilometres south of the capital Baku. No information about his whereabouts was provided to Sadigova. According to RFE/RL, the Binagadi District Court ordered his pre-trial detention until 30 July.³⁹

³² Office of Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, Norton Calls on Rubio to Expel and Bar Reentry of Azerbaijani Officials Involved in Violent Attacks on Peaceful Protestors in D.C., press release, February 23, 2026, <https://norton.house.gov/media/press-releases/norton-calls-rubio-expel-and-bar-reentry-azerbaijani-officials-involved>

³³ Obyektiv TV, "Cowardly Killers Like İlham Aliyev Himself Wanted to Set a Trap for Me", YouTube video, February 18, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Me3gKRlI0c0>

³⁴ Emin Huseynov, email correspondence with Amnesty International, March 20, 2026.

³⁵ Obyektiv TV, Birinci Vitse-Prezident Mehriban Əliyeva Münhendə Emin Hüseynovun Sualına Hədə ilə Cavab Verdi, YouTube video, February 15, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZROtzGjhi4>

³⁶ OC Media, Aliyeva Insults Independent Azerbaijani Journalist after Being Heckled in Germany, February 16, 2026, <https://oc-media.org/aliyeva-insults-independent-azerbaijani-journalist-after-being-heckled-in-germany/>

³⁷ Meydan TV, Mehman Hüseynov: "Məni Yolumdan Çəkəndirmək Üçün İntim Səhnələrimi Çəkiblər", YouTube video, December 29, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKXEGeYYekI>

³⁸ Civil Georgia, Georgian Court Rules to Deport Journalist Afgan Sadigov to Azerbaijan after Late-Night Arrest, May 4, 2026, <https://civil.ge/archives/729102>

³⁹ Azadlıq Radiosu, Xanımı: "Əfqan Sadıqova Ailəsinə Zəng Vurmaq Qadağan Edilib", June 11, 2026, <https://www.azadliq.org/a/efqan-sadiqov/33567119.html>

ONLINE ATTACKS AND SMEAR CAMPAIGNS

Azerbaijani human rights defenders and journalists in exile are subject to frequent online attacks and coordinated smear campaigns in state-aligned media. By illustration, Azerbaijani members of parliament have publicly called for exiled critics to be “neutralised by any means.”⁴⁰

In the days following the above-mentioned Washington, DC, protest, pro-government outlets labelled the peaceful demonstrators “Russian agents”, claiming Russia was behind the protest rally.⁴¹

On 10 October 2025, an Azerbaijani MP at a parliamentary session condemned “SANCAQ media and those behind it”. He was apparently referring to blogger Mehman Huseynov for allegedly targeting law enforcement with insults and decontextualised posts. The MP accused “SANCAQ media and those behind it of seeking to manipulate public emotions, incite an uprising, “forcibly change the constitutional order” and “shed blood”, and warned that such actions “will definitely be punished either today or tomorrow”.⁴²

Online journalistic or other digital content produced by exiled critics may also suffer direct or indirect targeting. In February 2026, exiled journalist Sevinj Osmanqizi reported that dozens of her YouTube videos had been simultaneously deleted within hours, before most were eventually restored. *Osmanqizi TV* provides news coverage, analysis and interviews on Azerbaijani and regional political affairs.

MISUSE OF CRIMINAL LAW AND TRIALS IN ABSENTIA

The pattern of repression has escalated into criminal prosecutions and convictions in absentia, based on politically motivated and often fabricated charges – further entrenching a system of transnational repression designed to deter dissent in exile wherever it is expressed. The government of Azerbaijan has also for years extensively misused Interpol's red notices to target political dissidents and repress human rights defenders abroad.⁴³

The European Court of Human Rights has consistently held that restrictions on rights to liberty and freedom of expression pursued for an ulterior political purpose violate Article 18 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The concentration of prosecutions targeting critics in exile, the reliance on national security and public order provisions against peaceful expression provide reasonable grounds to interpret that criminal law is being applied to silence dissent and activism in exile. In this context, in absentia prosecution, as form of transnational repression, sets out a punitive measure. Individuals might be exposed to the risk of arrest during international travel, potential extradition attempts, and legal uncertainty.

Since March 2025, the Office of the Prosecutor General of Azerbaijan has initiated coordinated criminal proceedings in absentia against nearly 30 exiled journalists, bloggers, academics, former officials and civil society activists. The charges brought against them are typically baseless and reliant predominantly or entirely on broadly worded provisions of the Criminal Code, including Articles 220.2 (“call for mass disorder”), 281.2 (“public calls against the state”), 278 (“incitement to coup d'état”), terrorism-related provisions, and financial offences such as money laundering. The NGO Free Voices Collective told Amnesty International that “the alleged [criminal] conduct consists of online commentary, journalistic reporting, political criticism, whistle-blowing activities, or public statements critical of the authorities.”⁴⁴

In numerous cases, remand in custody orders were routinely issued in absentia shortly after in absentia proceedings were opened, trials commenced and concluded without the defendants' presence, some resulting in lengthy custodial sentences, of up to 16 years. The many commonalities in charges, timing, and procedural outcomes across nearly

⁴⁰ Meydan TV, Zahid Oruc: "Prezidenti Təhqir Edənlər Legitim Hədəflər Kimi Hər Cür Zərərsizləşdirilməlidir", March 5, 2024, <https://www.meydan.tv/az/article/zahid-oruc-prezidenti-tehqir-edenler-legitim-hedefler-kimi-her-cur-zerersizlesdirilmelidir/>

⁴¹ Toplum TV, Hökumətyönlü Media Vaşinqton Etirazında "Rusiya İzi" Olduğunu İddia Edir, February 25, 2026, <https://toplummedia.tv/siyaset/phoumlkumetyoumlnluuml-media-vasinqton-etirazinda-quotrusiya-iziquot-oldugunu-iddia-edirp>

⁴² Milli Məclis (National Assembly) of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Azərbaycan Respublikası Milli Məclisi İclaslarının Protokolları və Stenoqramları, Yeddinci Çağırış, Beşinci Sessiya, Payız, vol. 43, October 10, 2025, 27–28, <https://meclis.gov.az/documents/43-c%C3%BC%20cild.pdf>

⁴³ JamNews, Azerbaijani Political Emigrant Detained in Poland on Charges of Tax Evasion Released on Bail, January 9, 2020, <https://jam-news.net/interpol-detains-azerbaijani-political-emigre-intends-to-deport-him/>; Fair Trials, Azer Samadov: Victim of INTERPOL Abuse, March 20, 2018, <https://www.fairtrials.org/articles/case-studies/azer-samadov/>; RFE/RL, Baku's Interpol Alert Silences Opposition Journalist Abroad, October 19, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-ukraine-interpol-alert-huseynli-baku-abuse/28804385.html>; the abuse of Interpol's red notice system by governments as part of their authoritarian practices for political purposes has been well documented and exposed by international media, for instance the BBC. See Amnesty International, Global: Misuse of Interpol Red Notices to Target Dissidents a Grave Institutional Failure, January 26, 2026, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/01/global-misuse-of-interpol-red-notices-to-target-dissidents-a-grave-institutional-failure/>.

⁴⁴ Nijat Mammadbayli, managing director, Free Voices Collective, written interview, February 5, 2026.

all cases point to a pattern of abuse of the criminal justice system by the Azerbaijani government in its pursuit to silence all dissent.

"I learned about both the initiation of the criminal case and the final verdict exclusively through the media. I was never officially notified, never summoned, never represented, and never given an opportunity to participate in or challenge the proceedings. The 'evidence' cited against me consisted of six YouTube broadcasts — the oldest over seven years old — containing no calls for violence, no calls for unlawful action, and no incitement whatsoever."

*"This verdict is not an isolated form of intimidation. It is part of a broader pattern. The purpose is not just to punish one individual. It is to send a chilling message: if you are a journalist, if you ask difficult questions, if you analyse power, you will pay a high price."*⁴⁵ — Sevinj Osmanqizi, journalist and anchor of *Osmanqizi TV*, sentenced in absentia to eight years' imprisonment on 14 January 2026 under criminal code article 220.2 and 281.2 for 'calls for mass disorder' and "public calls against the state".

IN ABSENTIA PROSECUTIONS MARCH 2025-PRESENT

The list of cases of in absentia prosecution is constantly growing, creating risks for all those targeted while travelling abroad and precluding their voluntary return to Azerbaijan. On 15 March 2025, criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated against **lawyer and the head of the Social Rights Center, Subhan Hasanli**, on charges including money laundering, abuse of office and falsification of public records. A Baku court ordered his remand in custody in absentia.⁴⁶

On 16 March 2025, in apparently coordinated timing, proceedings were initiated against **bloggers critical of the Azerbaijani government, Tural Sadigli, Gurban Mammadov, Elshad Mammadov, Mahammad Mirzali, Gabil Mammadov and Imamaddin Alimanov**. Charges included fraud, incitement to riot, subversion, terrorism-related offences, financing of terrorism, disclosure of classified information and related offences under the Criminal Code. Remand in custody orders were issued in absentia against all defendants on the same day.⁴⁷

Subsequently, several of them have been sentenced in absentia. On 28 July 2025, Imamaddin Alimanov was sentenced in absentia to seven years' imprisonment. On 30 July 2025, Gabil Mammadov was sentenced in absentia to 16 years' imprisonment. On 15 September 2025, Mahammad Mirzali was sentenced in absentia to six years and six months' imprisonment. Although they were able to submit appeals, on 9 September 2025, the appeals of Gabil Mammadov and Imamaddin Alimanov were dismissed without due process.⁴⁸

On 3 April 2025, proceedings in absentia were initiated simultaneously against **bloggers Suleyman Suleymanli and Orkhan Aghayev** on charges of incitement to riot and subversion. Both are known for their criticism of government policy. Remand in custody orders were issued in absentia the same day. On 26 December 2025, bloggers Suleymanli and Aghayev were sentenced to nine years' imprisonment in absentia.⁴⁹

On 11 April 2025, proceedings in absentia were initiated against **feminist activist Aytaj Aghazade**, head of the AYNA gender-support centre, on charges including money laundering, abuse of office and falsification of public records, and against **blogger Rafael Piriye** on charges of incitement to riots and subversion. Remand orders were issued in both cases on the same day. On 26 December 2025, the Baku Court of Grave Crimes convicted Rafael Piriye to nine years' imprisonment in absentia.⁵⁰

On 17 October 2025 trial proceedings in absentia against **bloggers Tural Sadigli, Gurban Mammadov and Elshad Mammadov** commenced, and they were convicted to nine years' imprisonment on 26 December 2025.⁵¹

On 12 April 2025, proceedings were initiated against **Elshad Abdullayev, a whistle-blower and government critic**, as well as former Rector of Azerbaijan International University (a private university closed down by the authorities in 2010), on

⁴⁵ Sevinj Osmanqizi, interview with Amnesty International, February 14, 2026.

⁴⁶ Abzas Media, Lawyer Subhan Hasanli Faces Criminal Charges, Search Warrant Issued, April 14, 2025, <https://abzas.info/en/2025/4/lawyer-subhan-hasanli-faces-cr956d22af-5>

⁴⁷ Meydan TV, Criminal Cases Launched against Exiled Bloggers by Azerbaijan's Prosecutor General's Office, March 17, 2025, <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/criminal-cases-launched-against-exiled-bloggers-by-azerbaijans-prosecutor-generals-office/>

⁴⁸ APA, Baku Court of Appeal Upholds Blogger Imameddin Alimanov's 7-Year Prison Sentence, September 9, 2025, <https://en.apa.az/incident/baku-court-of-appeal-upholds-blogger-imameddin-alimanovs-7-year-prison-sentence-477201>; Demokrat.az, Məhkəmə Qabil Məmmədovla Bağlı Qərar Verdi, September 9, 2025, <https://demokrat.az/az/news/249712/mehkeme-qabil-memmedovla-bagli-qerar-verdi>

⁴⁹ Uzbekistan News Gazette, Court Issues Sentencing for Prominent Bloggers in Absentia, December 26, 2025, <https://uzbekistannewsgazette.com/court-issues-sentencing-for-prominent-bloggers-in-absentia/>

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

charges including tax evasion and abuse of office, followed by a remand order in absentia. On 23 December 2025, the Baku Court of Grave Crimes sentenced him to 15 fifteen years imprisonment in absentia. The Baku Court of Appeal upheld the decision on 19 February 2026.⁵²

On 17 April 2025, proceedings were initiated against **blogger Ordukhan Temirkhan (Babirov)** on charges of incitement to riots and subversion and against former diplomat and **whistleblower (about PACE lobbying corruption) Arif Mammadov** on charges of misappropriation and abuse of office. Remand in custody orders were issued in absentia in both cases. On 26 December 2025, Ordukhan Temirkhan was sentenced to nine years' imprisonment in absentia.⁵³

On 14 November 2025, criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated against **historian Altay Goyushov, political analyst Arastun Orujlu, journalists Sevinj Osmanqizi and Beydulla Manafov, bloggers Abid Gafarov and Vagif Allahverdiyev** - the biggest-ever number in a single day. The charges primarily concerned incitement to riot, subversion and related offences. Beydulla Manafov was additionally charged with incitement to ethnic and religious hatred.⁵⁴

On 15 November 2025, proceedings were initiated against **bloggers Murad Guliyev and Manaf Jalilzade** (incitement to subversion), and exiled businessman Ilgar Hajiyev (fraud and money laundering). In a decision dated February 27, 2025, seen by Amnesty International, the Swiss Federal Office of Justice rejected the extradition request submitted by the Azerbaijani authorities for Manaf Jalilzade. The Court concluded that extradition would expose him to a real risk of human rights violations.⁵⁵

On 18 November 2025, proceedings were initiated against **Ganimat Zahidov (Zahid), editor-in-chief of Azadliq newspaper**, on charges of incitement to subversion. Convictions and sentencing decisions followed issued in rapid succession. On 23 December 2025, Ganimat Zahidov was sentenced in absentia to seven years' imprisonment.

On 14 January 2026, **journalist Sevinj Osmanqizi, bloggers Abid Gafarov and Beydulla Manafov** were each sentenced in absentia to eight years' imprisonment.⁵⁶

On 18 February 2026, **Altay Goyushov** was convicted by the Baku Court of Grave Crimes and sentenced in absentia to six years' imprisonment for allegedly inciting open protests against the state. On 19 February 2026, the same court sentenced **Arastun Orujlu** in-absentia to eight years' imprisonment for alleged calls for mass riots.⁵⁷

Amnesty International calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to immediately end transnational repression against critics at home and abroad. States where exiled journalists, human rights defenders and critics reside or travel must ensure their protection, refrain from cooperating in politically motivated prosecutions or extradition requests, uphold their obligations under the principle of non-refoulement and prevent abuse of international legal mechanisms.

⁵² Euro Asia News, "Convict Elshad Abdullayev Sentenced to 15 Years, Listed by Interpol; Criminal Case Opened in Ukraine", December 23, 2025, <https://euasia.news/2025/12/23/76222/>

⁵³ Uzbekistan News Gazette, Court Issues Sentencing for Prominent Bloggers in Absentia, December 26, 2025, <https://uzbekistannewsgazette.com/court-issues-sentencing-for-prominent-bloggers-in-absentia/>

⁵⁴ Meydan TV, Daha 4 İctimai Şəxs Baş Prokurorluğa Çağırılıb, November 14, 2025, <https://www.meydan.tv/az/article/daha-4-ictimai-s%C9%99xs-bas-prokurorluga-cagirilib/>

⁵⁵ Swiss Federal Office of Justice, decision rejecting the extradition request for Manaf Jalilzade, February 27, 2025, seen by Amnesty International, unpublished.

⁵⁶ Committee to Protect Journalists, Azerbaijan Sentences Exiled Journalists to Lengthy Prison Terms in Absentia, January 16, 2026, <https://cpj.org/2026/01/azerbaijan-sentences-exiled-journalists-to-lengthy-prison-terms-in-absentia/>

⁵⁷ OC Media, Two Exiled Azerbaijani Critics Convicted in Absentia, February 19, 2026, <https://oc-media.org/two-exiled-azerbaijani-critics-convicted-in-absentia/>

RECOMMENDATIONS

A. To the Government of Azerbaijan

- End repression of peaceful dissent and immediately release those arbitrarily detained or imprisoned;
- Cease all forms of reprisals and harassment of critical Azerbaijani voices at home and abroad, including unlawful surveillance, smear campaigns, threats and physical attacks, and in absentia prosecution;
- Refrain from misuse of international cooperation mechanisms, including Interpol Red Notices, for politically motivated purposes;
- Ensure accountability for all reported human rights violations, including physical violence, torture and other ill-treatment, fabrication of false charge and unfounded prosecution, threats, harassment and unlawful surveillance. Ensure that every reported violation is promptly, thoroughly, impartially, independently, transparently and effectively investigated, and all those suspected to be responsible, including officials ordering or enabling such conduct, are brought to justice in fair trial proceedings;
- Immediately end the practice of trials in absentia, as a practice contravening the principles of fair trial, including the right to participate effectively in one's defence, and incompatible with Azerbaijan's obligations under international human rights law;
- End all other punitive proceedings and other punitive measures against individuals and organizations targeted solely for their dissenting views and criticism of the government, including civil society organizations, media outlets and political opposition organizations;
- Repeal or amend legislation that unduly restricts the work of independent media and civil society organisations, and bring national legislation in full compliance with international human rights law;
- End smear campaigns against government critics online and offline;
- Fully implement and comply with decisions of the European Court of Human Rights;
- Resume meaningful engagement with the Council of Europe on execution of judgments;
- End intimidation, harassment and targeting of family members of exiled government critics.

B. To Azerbaijan's International Partners and the Wider International Community

- Use every available opportunity, in bilateral and multilateral fora, to raise concerns about Azerbaijan's human rights record;
- Ensure effective protection of Azerbaijani exiled journalists, activists and human rights defenders within your jurisdiction;
- Provide timely access to protection measures, including police protection where necessary;
- Promptly, thoroughly, impartially, independently, transparently and effectively investigate threats, alleged attacks and unlawful surveillance targeting Azerbaijani exiles, and bring those suspected to be responsible to justice in fair trial proceedings;
- Refrain from cooperating with politically motivated Red Notices and extradition or mutual legal assistance requests from Azerbaijan;
- Strictly comply with the principle of non-refoulement, ensuring that no person is returned to Azerbaijan where they face a real risk of torture, unfair trial and other human rights violations;
- Advocate for and support stronger safeguards within Interpol and other international and intergovernmental mechanisms to prevent abuse;
- Support independent civil society and media, including by providing financial, technical and political support to independent Azerbaijani civil society organisations and media outlets, including those operating in exile; and by facilitating safe environments for exiled journalists and defenders to continue their work without interference;
- Support initiatives addressing extraterritorial repression globally, including documentation, monitoring and coordinated responses.