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Silencing critical voices in Azerbaijan

Report[1]
Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights
Rapporteur: Mr Christophe LACROIX, Belgium, Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group

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1. Reference to committee: Doc. 15521, Reference 4659 of 24 June 2022.

A. Draft resolution[2]

1. The P arliamentary Assembly deeply deplores the systemic pattern of silencing dissent and independent voices that has become firmly entrenched in Azerbaijan. The latest Press Freedom Index, published annually by Reporters Without Borders, ranks Azerbaijan 171st out of 180 countries. Azerbaijan's score reflects years of continued suppression of independent media, in what can only be described as a blatant and systemic disregard for freedom of expression, as guaranteed by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5, "the Convention").

2. The Assembly is equally concerned by a broader climate of silencing critical voices in Azerbaijan, facilitated by restrictive legislative measures, notably the Law on the Media, the Law on Political Parties and the Law on Non-Governmental Organisations (Public Associations and Funds). Their cumulative effect has been to suppress independent journalism, genuine political opposition, civic space and freedom of expression in Azerbaijan. As of 2026, not a single independent media outlet operates within Azerbaijan, a Council of Europe member State. The Council of Europe Platform for the safety of journalists records 36 journalists currently detained in Azerbaijan.

3. The Assembly deeply regrets that, instead of addressing the serious concerns it expressed in Resolution 2527 (2024) "Challenge, on substantive grounds, of the still unratified credentials of the parliamentary delegation of Azerbaijan", including with regard to respect for human rights, Azerbaijan chose not to participate in the work of the Assembly by deciding not to submit its delegation's credentials for the years 2025 and 2026. Despite the absence of the Azerbaijani delegation, the Assembly finds it imperative to address the increasingly concerning situation in Azerbaijan, which raises serious doubts as to its willingness to abide by its membership obligations to the Council of Europe.

4. The Assembly remains concerned by the high number of leading judgments of the European Court of Human Rights still pending implementation in respect of Azerbaijan, many of which have been pending for years. Groups of judgments pending implementation include those relating to: the unlawful blocking of online media; the arbitrary disbarment of lawyers; the arbitrary application of criminal law to limit freedom of expression; the unlawful and/or unjustified refusal to register civil society organisations, or their dissolution; violations of the safety and security of journalists; and the misuse of criminal law to punish and silence human rights defenders, civil society activists and journalists. The Assembly recalls that, in order to implement these judgments, Azerbaijan is obliged not only to ensure justice for the applicants concerned, but also to undertake prompt and effective reforms to ensure that similar violations do not recur.

5. The Assembly recalls that Azerbaijan has an unconditional obligation to implement the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights under Article 46, paragraph 1, of the Convention. It rejects any attempts to use Azerbaijan's non-participation in the Assembly as justification for failing to comply with the judgments of the Court, or for failing to participate fully in the Convention system. This includes the obligation to submit, in due time, a list of candidates for the post of judge at the Court to the Assembly, in accordance with Article 22 of the Convention and the procedure established by the Assembly.

6. The Assembly notes that none of the recommendations made by the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) in its opinions regarding the Law on the Media, the Law on Political Parties, and the Law on Non-Governmental Organisations (Public Associations and Funds) have been implemented. Instead, further restrictions have been introduced, including a simplified process for dissolving foreign media branches, stricter naming rules for press outlets, and an effective blockade preventing non-governmental organisations from receiving any form of international funding, thereby exacerbating the chilling effect on the media and broader civic space in Azerbaijan.

7. Recalling its Resolution 2322 (2020) "Reported cases of political prisoners in Azerbaijan", the Assembly is deeply concerned about the significant rise in the number of reported political prisoners. According to the Union for the Freedom of Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan, a non-governmental organisation, as of May 2026, there were 328 political prisoners in Azerbaijan.

8. In this context, the Assembly particularly deplores the ongoing detention and prosecution of Anar Mammadli, a prominent Azerbaijani human rights defender and election monitor, laureate of the 2014 Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, and recalls that the European Court of Human Rights had found his previous detention to be politically motivated, in violation of Articles 5 and 18 of the Convention. The Assembly finds it alarming that the current indictment against Anar Mammadli explicitly cites his previous criminal proceedings, which the European Court of Human Rights found to constitute an attempt to silence and punish him as a civil

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 27 May 2026.

society activist for his work in electoral monitoring, as part of his criminal record. It recalls that the implementation of the Court's judgment in his case is not yet closed and that, in this context, the Azerbaijani authorities therefore have an obligation to ensure that the previous conviction does not have any bearing on the new criminal proceedings against him.

9. Mr Mammadli's latest detention, on charges of conducting illegal business activities, money laundering, tax evasion, and several other offences, occurred shortly after his NGO, the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre, reported irregularities in the February 2024 presidential election and after he engaged with the United Nations Human Rights Council. Accordingly, the Assembly considers that Mr Mammadli's current detention appears to have been imposed for purely political reasons, which indicates that he falls within the definition of political prisoner set out in its Resolution 1900 (2012) "The definition of political prisoner".

10. The Assembly further condemns, in the strongest possible terms, the sentencing of the journalists and staff of Abzas Media, an independent media outlet, to lengthy prison terms, and notes with particular concern that among those convicted is Ulvi Hassanli, its editor-in-chief, who had previously testified before the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights of the Assembly about the situation of journalists in Azerbaijan. The Assembly firmly denounces the misuse of criminal law to punish individuals co-operating with international organisations.

11. Equally alarming for the Assembly is the similar pattern of repression affecting journalists and staff of other independent media outlets previously operating in Azerbaijan, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Toplum TV, Meydan TV, Kanal 11 and Kanal 13, who have either been convicted or prosecuted on what appear to be fabricated charges. Similar measures have been applied against other journalists bloggers, pro-democracy activists, opposition figures, anti-corruption experts and human rights defenders, including Gubad Ibadoghlu, Akif Gurbanov, Alasgar Mammadli, Ruslan Izzatli, Elnara Qasimova, Nargiz Absalamova, Ali Zeynal, Farid Mehralizade, Bakhtiar Hajiyev, Rufat Safarov and Ali Karimli, all of whom are either in detention or under house arrest on allegedly politically motivated charges, or have already received disproportionate sentences.

12. The Assembly also condemns the harsh prison sentences imposed upon Iqbal Abilov and Bahruz Samadov, independent researchers convicted on fabricated charges of high treason based on their routine interactions with Armenian universities and nationals. Referring to its Resolution 2352 (2020) "Threats to academic freedom and autonomy of higher education institutions in Europe", the Assembly reiterates that academic freedom is an essential component of democratic societies.

13. The Assembly is appalled by recent reports of sexual violence against nine female journalists imprisoned in Azerbaijan, including threats of rape and sexual harassment by prison guards.

14. The Assembly therefore urges Azerbaijan to:

14.1. respect its international obligations under the Statute of the Council of Europe (ETS No. 1), particularly Article 3, and under the European Convention on Human Rights and other international human rights treaties;

14.2. cease the threats, intimidation and prosecution of individuals who have been targeted due to their journalistic activities, reporting on corruption, pro-democratic stance, defence of human rights or independent academic research, and ensure the immediate release of those who are in detention;

14.3. re-examine the cases of all persons appearing on the regularly updated lists of political prisoners maintained by the Union for the Freedom for Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan, release those found to be political prisoners in accordance with the definition set out in Resolution 1900 (2012) while dropping all politically motivated charges or quashing their convictions;

14.4. pending their release, ensure that the conditions of detention of all such prisoners are compliant with international human rights law (including access to adequate medical care and contact with their lawyers, families and others);

14.5. ensure that prisoners are not subjected to torture or other forms of ill-treatment, and that any such allegations are investigated promptly, transparently and effectively and that perpetrators are prosecuted;

14.6. ensure that any physical attacks or violence, or threats of violence, including hate crimes, against journalists, human rights defenders and civil society activists, are properly investigated, and that the perpetrators are prosecuted;

14.7. adopt, without delay, effective general measures to address the structural and systemic problems identified by the European Court of Human Rights and the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe with regard to freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, the right to liberty and the right to a fair trial;

14.8. review its legal framework with a view to ensuring the full enjoyment of human rights in Azerbaijan, the respect for the rule of law, and the independence of the judiciary, including by implementing the recommendations of the Venice Commission and in accordance with Resolution 2184 (2017) "The functioning of democratic institutions in Azerbaijan";

14.9. guarantee the publication of all CPT report and implement the recommendations contained in those reports;

14.10. rescind measures declaring certain members of the Assembly as *personae non gratae* in Azerbaijan.

15. Recalling the unconditional obligation of States to implement judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, the Assembly urges Azerbaijan to:

15.1. re-initiate its engagement in the Committee of Ministers' process to supervise the implementation of judgments of the Court, including by fully and actively participating in quarterly "CM/DH" meetings dedicated to the implementation of judgments, and fulfilling its obligation to submit timely and comprehensive action plans and action reports;

15.2. ensure the protection of human rights defenders, civil society organisations and journalists by promptly implementing all judgments of the European Court of Human Rights that are pending implementation.

16. The Assembly calls on the Milli Mejlis to resume dialogue with the Assembly with a view to addressing the concerns expressed in this resolution. It also calls on the authorities of Azerbaijan to refrain from using their decision not to submit the credentials of its parliamentary delegation to the Assembly as a pretext not to fully abide by their obligations and commitments as a member State and as a State Party to Council of Europe treaties. This includes full participation in the European Convention on Human Rights system, particularly by submitting a list of candidates for the post of judge at the Court and re-engaging in the supervision process for the execution of the Court's judgments. The same applies to their full participation in other Council of Europe treaties and their co-operation with the relevant monitoring bodies and projects. The Assembly believes that it is also in the best interest of Azerbaijan to co-operate effectively with all Council of Europe bodies and to benefit fully from this co-operation.

17. The Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States and, where applicable, observer States and the European Union, to:

17.1. engage with the Azerbaijani authorities, both bilaterally and within multilateral fora, to secure the release of political prisoners;

17.2. facilitate the granting of visas and give careful consideration to requests for asylum from former political prisoners and Azerbaijani opposition politicians, civil society activists, journalists and human rights defenders who need to leave Azerbaijan in order to avoid persecution and/or arrest, and ensure their safety if they are at risk of violence or transnational repression;

17.3. refuse extradition requests for Azerbaijani nationals for charges which could be considered politically motivated;

17.4. refrain from deporting those Azerbaijani nationals who would face a genuine risk of political persecution.

18. The Assembly calls on the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to make use of the powers conferred upon him under Article 52 of the European Convention on Human Rights, in order to obtain from the Azerbaijani authorities explanations as to how their internal law ensures the effective implementation of the Convention.

19. Recalling that, upon becoming a member of the Council of Europe, Azerbaijan committed to co-operate fully in the implementation of the Assembly's monitoring procedure and that such a procedure continues irrespective of the Milli Mejlis' decision not to submit credentials to the Assembly, the Assembly invites the co-rapporteurs of the Monitoring Committee to take into account this resolution and to intensify their work.

20. Finally, the Assembly resolves to remain seized of the matter of protecting human rights defenders and independent journalists in Azerbaijan.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Christophe Lacroix, rapporteur[3]

1. Introduction

1. On 2 May 2022, I tabled a motion for a resolution titled "Threats to life and safety of journalists and human rights defenders in Azerbaijan".[4] Since then, the situation of journalists and human rights defenders in Azerbaijan has deteriorated even further. In response to these concerning developments, two additional motions were tabled and referred by the Assembly to the Committee on legal affairs and human rights to be taken into account herein: "Growth in number of political prisoners in Azerbaijan"[5] and "The need to investigate politically motivated persecution in Azerbaijan"[6]. Considering the different scope of these motions, I proposed a new title for my report that would better reflect their shared theme.

2. I am grateful to Ms Hannah Bardell (United Kingdom, NR), former rapporteur, for her dedication and work on this file, including her many public statements in reaction to developments in Azerbaijan.[7]

3. I regret that neither I nor Ms Bardell have been able to carry out a fact-finding visit to Azerbaijan. Out of three dates proposed by Ms Bardell for a fact-finding visit, none was accepted by the Azerbaijani delegation for various organisational and substantive reasons. Following the Assembly's refusal to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation (Resolution 2527 (2024)), the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan announced that members of the Parliamentary Assembly who had voted in favour of that resolution, would be considered *personae non gratae* in the country.[8] Considering that I was among them, I would not be allowed to enter Azerbaijan.

4. Regrettably, the Milli Mejlis unilaterally decided not to participate in the work of the Assembly in 2025 and 2026. I believe that despite the absence of the Azerbaijani delegation in its midst, the Assembly owes it to the people of Azerbaijan to provide an objective and fair evaluation of the situation in this Council of Europe member State. I deplore the President of Azerbaijan's announcement that Azerbaijan would no longer implement judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, using its non-participation in the Assembly as a pretext.[9]

2. Situation of journalists, human rights defenders and reported political prisoners

5. Violence and threats of violence against journalists and human rights defenders rarely occur in a vacuum. It is therefore not enough for a State to merely respond to such acts through after-the-event investigations; it is also necessary for the State to take action to prevent and combat such acts in the first place. This involves ensuring adequate protective measures are in place for individuals considered to be at risk, but also more generally creating an environment that supports free speech and where it is clear that strong action would be taken in response to any such attacks on journalists and human rights defenders.

6. In a healthy, vibrant democracy, it is crucial to establish a culture and society that facilitates and champions freedom of expression, pluralism and the crucial role played by human rights defenders and civil society. It has long been alleged that cases of threats and acts of violence to the life and safety of journalists and human rights defenders could be facilitated by, and form part of, a wider climate of intolerance towards free speech and pluralism in Azerbaijan. Indeed, from 2014, the actions undertaken by Azerbaijani authorities have shown a clear pattern of dismantling pluralism and restricting civic space. Developments occurring since 2023 appear to have eradicated any remnants of media freedom in the country.

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3. This explanatory memorandum is drawn up under the responsibility of the rapporteur.
4. Doc. 15521.
5. Doc. 15646.
6. Doc. 15852.
7. https://pace.coe.int/en/news/9287/pace-rapporteurs-call-on-the-azerbaijani-authorities-to-immediately-release-ulvi-hasanli; https://pace.coe.int/en/news/9392/pace-rapporteur-calls-on-azerbaijan-to-immediately-release-jailed-journalists-and-democracy-activists; https://pace.coe.int/en/news/9444/azerbaijan-pace-rapporteur-welcomes-release-from-prison-of-gubad-ibadoghlu.
8. www.mfa.gov.az/en/news/no14325 See also: Azerbaijan: PACE President reacts to ban on certain PACE members entering the country.
9. https://oc-media.org/aliyev-announces-that-azerbaijan-will-no-longer-consider-echr-decisions-valid/.

2.1. Background and independent reviews

7. According to the 2026 World Press Freedom Index, prepared annually by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Azerbaijan ranks 171st out of 180 States, the lowest ranking of any Council of Europe member States, superior only to several regimes such as the Russian Federation, Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea and Eritrea.[10]

8. According to data published by the Justice for Journalists Foundation, there were 211 attacks on or threats against journalists in Azerbaijan in 2025.[11] As of 2026, the Council of Europe's Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists reported 2 journalists killed (with impunity), and 36 journalists in detention (compared to 4 in 2021).[12]

9. It is worth briefly recalling the existence of previous cases of killings and violence against journalists and human rights defenders in Azerbaijan. These include the murder of prominent investigative journalist Elmar Huseynov in 2005,[13] the murder of writer and journalist Rafiq Tagi in 2011,[14] and the murder of journalist Rasim Aliyev in 2015 (following the publication of a Facebook post criticising a footballer for unsportsmanlike behaviour).[15]

10. According to the most recent list prepared by the "Union for the Freedom for Political Prisoners in Azerbaijan" (a group of activists and former "prisoners of conscience", including a prominent human rights defender and the Director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, Leyla Yunus), as of 13 May 2026 there were 328 political prisoners in Azerbaijan, including 31 journalists, 8 human rights defenders and 44 members of opposition and civil society organisations.[16] These numbers increased significantly since December 2023, when 254 "political prisoners" were reported, reflecting the growing scale of repression. The authors note that the list is compiled based on the Assembly's definition of a "political prisoner", contained in its Resolution 1900 (2012).

11. Below, I will briefly present some of the more concerning cases involving attacks against or arrests of journalists, human rights defenders, pro-democracy activists and anti-corruption campaigners.

2.2. Murder of journalist and LGBTI rights activist Avaz Hafizli, 22 February 2022

12. Avaz Shikhmammadov (a.k.a. Avaz Hafizli) was killed at home in Baku on 22 February 2022 by his cousin. Avaz Hafizli was a well-known young LGBTI activist, who was known for his courageous work in highlighting cases of injustice or violence against the LGBTI community in Azerbaijan – often in the face of significant homophobia and transphobia.[17] He also worked as a reporter for the independent video news website, Kanal 13, where he covered a range of issues, including LGBTI rights. He took part in rallies against the Law on the Media in Azerbaijan and staged protests demanding the government to end discrimination against LGBTI persons. He once chained himself to the fence outside the chief prosecutor's office to protest a lack of action against threats to the gay community.[18]

13. Avaz Hafizli's cousin, Amrulla Gulaliyev, confessed to killing his cousin over a dispute relating to Avaz Hafizli's sexuality, having gone to his house to confront him about his sexuality and activism on the topic.[19] Amrulla Gulaliyev has been convicted of his murder and sentenced to nine years and six months in prison. Whilst the law enforcement authorities have taken swift action in investigating this case and in prosecuting the perpetrator, there are criticisms that the sentence is unduly lenient given the brutal nature of the murder and that it is a hate crime (it is very much on the lower end of sentencing for a murder, contrary to the severity of the crime). There are also concerns that little has been done to investigate more fully into the context of the killing, in particular to explore the extent to which it was linked to his activism, journalism, or identity, and what could be done to prevent such tragic deaths in the future, such as better laws against hate speech. This case

10. https://rsf.org/en/index.
11. https://jfj.fund/attacks-on-media-workers-in-azerbaijan-in-2025/.
12. https://fom.coe.int/en/pays/detail/11709482.
13. www.occrp.org/en/investigation/fbi-case-file-shows-how-azerbaijan-botched-investigation-into-journalists-death.
14. https://rsf.org/en/journalist-critical-islam-dies-four-days-after-being-stabbed-attacker.
15. https://rsf.org/en/journalist-killed-culture-intolerance-and-impunity.
16. www.ipd-az.org/political-prisoners-for-13-may-2026/.
17. Obituary | Avaz Hafizli (oc-media.org).
18. Azerbaijan Mourns Tragic Killing of Gay Rights Activist and Reporter (voanews.com).
19. Man Who Brutally Killed LGBTQ+ Activist Sentenced to 9.5 Years (advocate.com); Murderer of queer Azerbaijani journalist sentenced to 9 years (oc-media.org).

also raises significant questions about the extent of preventive and protective actions being taken to ensure that human rights defenders, and in particular those in the LGBTI community, are adequately protected in Azerbaijan, and to ensure that swift action is taken for any hate speech or threats to their life and safety.

14. The level of threats and insults from society in Azerbaijan against those highlighting issues of homophobia and transphobia is significant (including often from family members), and yet little seems to have been done to take action against those encouraging threatening behaviour or hate speech, let alone to protect Avaz Hafizli.[20] Indeed, there are concerns that wider societal stigma in relation to the LGBTI community seems also prevalent in the police attitudes to this case.

2.3. Kidnapping, violence and a wider pattern of persecution against human rights activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, 21 April 2022

15. Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, a well-known blogger and human rights activist, and outspoken critic of the authorities, was abducted from the street on 21 April 2022 by four masked men. He was forced into a car, beaten, tortured and subjected to inhuman treatment. The assailants filmed themselves urinating on him as part of an effort at humiliation.[21] He claimed that the men demanded that he admit to having been instructed to write critical posts about the Interior Minister Vilayat Eyvazov. When he denied any such instructions, he was stripped and they demanded he delete his posts about the Minister as well as those about Fuad Muradov, a pro-government activist. He reported that they threatened to rape and kill him if he continued to criticise the Minister. He was then abandoned in a remote area, where they left him bound with duct tape and blindfolded. Bakhtiyar Hajiyev accused the Interior Ministry of orchestrating his kidnapping in order to warn him against criticising the Minister. The Government said that it was investigating these events.

16. This incident is part of a wider pattern of persecution against Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, which has many elements. He was arrested again on 9 December 2022 on charges of hooliganism (relating to a dispute with a neighbour about a kitten), however the charges were widely considered to be retaliation for his political activities, with some alleging that these are linked to US sanctions on an Azerbaijani official.[22] Mr Hajiyev was later charged with economic crimes relating to the alleged misuse of allocated subsidies. On 13 February 2023, the Assembly's co-rapporteurs for the monitoring of Azerbaijan, expressed profound concern over the continuing detention of Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, noting that it was "widely believed to be connected to his activism" and expressing "utmost concern" for the state of his health. The co-rapporteurs said "Unfortunately, Mr Hajiyev`s case illustrates a 'troubling pattern of arbitrary arrest and detention of government critics, civil society activists and human rights defenders through retaliatory prosecution and misuse of criminal law in defiance of the rule of law'".[23] This detention received general international condemnation, with the charges being widely understood as politically motivated.[24]

17. On 13 January 2025, the Baku Court for Serious Crimes convicted Mr Hajiyev and sentenced him to 10 years' imprisonment, confiscated his apartment in Baku and the funds in his bank accounts, and banned him from educational activities for one year after his release.[25] The Assembly's then co-rapporteur for the monitoring of Azerbaijan, Lise Christoffersen (Norway, SOC), and the General Rapporteur for political prisoners, Thórhildur Sunna Ævarsdóttir (Iceland, SOC) denounced the verdict as unjust and disproportionate.[26]

2.4. Threats to kill journalist Ayten Mammadova and her daughter, 8 May 2022

18. Journalist Ayten Mammadova, known for covering lawsuits of public interest including criminal cases, was attacked on the evening of 8-9 May 2022 in the lift in her building in Baku. A man entered the lift, held a knife to her throat, threatened to kill her and her young daughter and demanded that she stop writing about a trial.[27] Ayten Mammadova contacted the police after the attack. Medical examinations confirmed traces of a knife blade on her throat. The Ministry of Internal Affairs confirmed that a criminal case had been initiated.

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20. Journalist chains himself to Prosecutors' gate in Azerbaijan (oc-media.org).
21. Activist claims to have been kidnapped over criticism of Azerbaijani minister (oc-media.org).
22. Bakhtiyar Hajiyev Arrested for a Month and 20 Days, Prominent activist detained following U.S. sanctions on Azerbaijani official | Eurasianet.
23. PACE monitors call on Azerbaijan authorities to immediately release Bakhtiyar Hajiyev (coe.int).
24. Calling for the Release of Bakhtiyar Hajiyev – United States Department of State; Washington calls for the release of imprisoned Azerbaijani activist Hajiyev (oc-media.org).
25. www.reuters.com/world/azerbaijan-facing-criticism-over-human-rights-jails-activist-10-years-2025-01-13/.
26. https://pace.coe.int/en/news/9734/pace-rapporteurs-express-deep-concern-at-the-sentencing-of-bakhtiyar-hajiyev-in-azerbaijan.

19. It was unclear what trial the attacker was referring to, but Ayten Mammadova had been recently focussing on the trial of the disappearance and murder in 2019/2020 of Narmin Guliyeva, a 10-year-old resident of the Dondar Gushchu village of the Tovuz region in Azerbaijan.

2.5. Attempted assassination of Mahammad Mirzali and links to transnational repression

20. Well-known blogger and social-media opposition activist, Mahammad Mirzali, has been repeatedly attacked in France including being shot, stabbed and severely beaten.[28] In Azerbaijan, he was arrested at a protest in 2013 and tortured. He left Azerbaijan in 2016 after coming under increasing pressure from the Azerbaijani authorities and has been living in France as a refugee since. He regularly receives threats to his life and safety and has been violently attacked. President Aliyev has denied any involvement in these attacks.[29]

21. On 6 October 2020, Mahammad Mirzali was attacked in France as he got into his car. His assailant shot him through the car window with a handgun, wounding him in the shoulder. The victim managed to drive away and get medical help. The perpetrator of this attack has not been identified.

22. On 14 March 2021, Mahammad Mirzali was stabbed 16 times and seriously wounded in an attack, in which he lost three litres of blood and required lengthy surgery.[30] The attackers reportedly attempted to cut out his tongue. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Azerbaijan said that Azerbaijani authorities had nothing to do with the attack in France. Four attackers (three from Azerbaijan, one from Georgia) were arrested and charged with attempted murder in an organised group. Their trial was scheduled to start before the Cour d'Assises de Rennes in May 2026.[31]

23. Another suspected conspiracy to murder Mahammad Mirzali occurred in 2022. On 12 June 2022, French police arrested two suspected hit men at a motorway toll near Angers. One was an Azerbaijani armed with a pistol, another was a Moldovan of Turkish origin. Both were driving Polish-registered cars and had Mahammad Mirzali's address entered as the destination in their GPS devices, one having a picture of Mirzali in his telephone.[32] On 3 June 2025, Khayyam Hagverdiyev (an Azerbaijani citizen residing in Poland) was sentenced to 10 years in prison for his involvement in this assassination attempt against Mr Mirzali. The Rennes Criminal Court found that Mr Mirzali was solely targeted because of his "activity as a freelance journalist" who published content that criticised "abuses of autocratic power and leaders of the national oil and gas sector." According to RSF, this judgment marked the first time when the direct involvement of the Azerbaijani government in violence against journalists was formally established.[33]

24. In addition to the horrific violence that he has been subjected to, Mahammad Mirzali's case also exemplifies the level of threats that journalists and activists can receive. Mr Mirzali told RSF he gets "an average of 2 000 threatening messages a day, especially on YouTube". He said the typical one consists of a profile photo with a Kalashnikov accompanied by some clearly threatening words such as "I'm here".[34]

25. In addition to these violent attacks and threats of violence, there were many other incidents involving the blogger and his family. In January 2018, authorities in Azerbaijan arrested Mahammad Mirzali's father Fazil Mirzaliyev and his brother-in-law Elman Agayev, allegedly in an effort to get Mahammad Mirzali to remove material posted on a Facebook page "Made in Azerbaijan".[35] Defamation claims have been brought against Mahammad Mirzali in France, largely unsuccessfully, including a defamation suit brought by a former Azerbaijani deputy economy minister. In 2021, an anonymous person threatened to publish intimate photos of the blogger's sister and her husband if he did not stop his blogging.[36] Apparently such photographs were then circulated.

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27. Azerbaijani Journalist Ayten Mammadova Was Attacked, Received Death Threats in Baku, *English Jamnews*, 9 May 2022.
28. 'Soon Enough I'll Be Killed': Threats Against Azerbaijani Dissident Intensify After Armenian Media Interview (rferl.org).
29. Azerbaijan's President offers placating words in response to RSF's criticism | RSF.
30. Exiled Azerbaijani blogger Mahammad Mirzali stabbed at least 16 times in knife attack in France – Committee to Protect Journalists (cpj.org).
31. Azerbaijani blogger living in France stabbed, threatened | RSF.
32. Hit men sent to France to kill Azerbaijani blogger who is Aliyev foe | RSF.
33. https://rsf.org/en/attempted-assassination-blogger-mahammad-mirzali-french-courts-recognise-azerbaijan-s-involvement.
34. https://rsf.org/en/hit-men-sent-france-kill-azerbaijani-blogger-who-aliyev-foe.
35. Out of reach? How Azerbaijan punishes the families of political emigres – MEYDAN.TV (d9mc3ts4czbpr.cloudfront.net); Blogger's Relatives Taken to Police Office – IRFS.

2.6. Murder of Vidadi Isgandarli in France

26. Vidadi Isgandarli, a prominent Azerbaijani human rights defender and former prosecutor known for his fierce criticism of President Ilham Aliyev, was assassinated in Mulhouse, France, in 2024, marking a brutal escalation in the targeting of exiled dissidents. Mr Isgandarli had a long history of political persecution in Azerbaijan, notably receiving a three-year prison sentence in 2011 on fabricated vote-tampering charges following his participation in anti-government rallies, which led Amnesty International to designate him a prisoner of conscience. After seeking international protection in France in 2015, he continued his vocal opposition through online platforms until 29 September 2024, when unknown assailants broke into his apartment in Mulhouse and stabbed him more than 20 times. He died from his injuries in a hospital two days later, prompting international calls for French authorities to investigate the killing as an act of transnational repression by Azerbaijan. As of 2026, the investigation is ongoing.[37]

2.7. Persecution of Abzas Media staff and other independent journalists

27. On 20 and 21 November 2023, members of the editorial staff of Abzas Media, an independent media outlet, were arrested on charges of smuggling, including Ulvi Hasanli – its founder. Police claimed to have found €40,000 during office searches – an accusation immediately denounced by staff as fabricated and unsupported by any credible evidence. Several other leading staff and journalists, including editor-in-chief Sevinc Vagifgizi, investigative journalist Hafiz Babali, reporters Nargiz Absalamova and Elnara Gasimova, as well as translator and co-ordinator Mahammad Kekalov, were arrested soon after. Their arrest was linked to the making of a documentary and a large-scale investigation into high-level corruption in Azerbaijan. Ulvi Hasanli took part in a joint public hearing before the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, the Monitoring Committee and the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media in April 2023, during which he detailed the risks faced by independent journalists in Azerbaijan. In a joint statement, Hannah Bardell (United Kingdom, NR), Mogens Jensen (Denmark, SOC), the Assembly's General Rapporteur on media freedom and safety of journalists, and Sunna Aevarsdottir (Iceland, SOC), the Assembly's General Rapporteur on political prisoners, considered his arrest to be a reprisal for his co-operation with the Parliamentary Assembly and for his recent investigative journalism into corruption by members of the government.[38] Addressing the court in Baku, Mr Hasanli stated: "We have lost our freedom for the sake of free speech and independent media. Ilham Aliyev may imprison us, but he cannot imprison our thoughts or our words."[39]

28. On 20 June 2025, the Baku Serious Crimes Court sentenced six members of the Abzas Media team and one Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist to lengthy prison terms. Ulvi Hasanli, who was shortlisted for the 2025 Vaclav Havel Human Rights Prize, as well as Sevinc Vagifgizi, Hafiz Babali, and Farid Mehralizade (an economist and contributor) were sentenced to nine years in prison, Nargiz Absalamova and Elnara Gasimova were sentenced to eight years and Mahammad Kekalov received a seven-and-a-half-year sentence.[40] There are concerning reports of ill-treatment and inhuman conditions of their detention. Mr Hasanli embarked on a hunger strike in protest.[41] On 3 April 2026, the Azerbaijan's Supreme Court rejected their appeals.[42]

29. In March 2024, dozens of plainclothes police officers raided Toplum TV's office in Baku. They confiscated equipment, seized the phones of journalists, and detained at least ten members of staff and affiliated activists – some for interrogation, others on charges of "smuggling". Toplum TV was known for its investigative reports on government corruption.[43] During the operation, the authorities sealed the editorial office, deleted Toplum TV's YouTube content, and disabled its social media accounts. The founder, Alasgar Mammadli, was among those arrested.

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36. В Азербайджане оппозиционера шантажировали интимным видео его сестры (jam-news.net); Mirzali Mahammad on Twitter: "Mr. Ambassador, although today is international Women's Day, the ladies in my family cannot celebrate it. Because of my political activity, we are being blackmailed with the video tape of my sister's private life. My sister Nigar's life is in danger in Azerbaijan." / Twitter; Mahammad Mirzali – Azerbaijan Internet Watch (az-netwatch.org).
37. www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/10/02/azerbaijani-opponent-murdered-at-home-in-eastern-france_6727983_4.html.
38. https://pace.coe.int/en/news/9287/pace-rapporteurs-call-on-the-azerbaijani-authorities-to-immediately-release-ulvi-hasanli.
39. https://abzas.org/en/2025/6/up-to-9-years-in-prison-for-ab904d6071-2/.
40. Ibid.
41. https://ipi.media/azerbaijan-ipi-joins-partner-organizations-concerned-by-mistreatment-of-abzas-media-journalists/.
42. https://pace.coe.int/en/news/10252/pace-rapporteur-strongly-condemns-harsh-final-sentences-against-journalists-in-azerbaijan.
43. www.occrp.org/en/news/azerbaijani-police-raid-toplum-tv-and-democracy-group-detaining-7.

30. On 6 March 2026, RSF reported that nine female journalists imprisoned in Azerbaijan, including three correspondents for Meydan TV, had recently been threatened with sexual violence, including rape, subjected to unwanted physical contact by male prison guards and to other forms of ill-treatment.[44] I find these credible reports shocking. I note that the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) recently visited Azerbaijan, but since Azerbaijan does not consent to the publication of its reports, their conclusions and recommendations remain confidential. Azerbaijan should promptly investigate these serious allegations and make its findings public.

2.8. Persecution of pro-democracy activists and human rights defenders

31. Akif Gurbanov is a well-known civil society leader, serving as chairperson of the Institute of Democratic Initiatives (IDI), and a co-founder of Toplum TV and spokesperson for the Third Republic Platform political initiative. On 6 March 2024, he was arrested during a police raid targeting the offices of Toplum TV, IDI, and the Third Republic Platform. Authorities charged Mr Gurbanov with offences such as conspiring to smuggle foreign currency, tax evasion, illegal entrepreneurship, and large-scale money laundering.[45] Mr Gurbanov and his supporters maintain that these charges are politically motivated, asserting they stem from his pro-democracy activities and open criticism of the Azerbaijani government. His arrest occurred without a court order, and his lawyer was reportedly denied access during the search of his home. Akif Gurbanov has faced repeated extensions of his pre-trial detention. In 2024, he was shortlisted for the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize. Reports indicate that he has faced threats of torture and pressure to cease criticism of President Aliyev while in detention.[46] In the past, Mr Gurbanov won a case before the European Court of Human Rights, which found Azerbaijan to be in violation of the right to freedom of association (Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights) over its refusal to register the IDI.[47]

32. Ruslan Izzatli is a political activist, former leader of the D18 Movement, and founding member of the Third Republic Platform. Mr Izzatli has a history of government harassment – including being drafted into military service despite being declared unfit, which he attributed to his public criticism of officials. After his military service and renewed activism, he was called in for questioning due to social media posts about challenges facing soldiers and veterans.[48] On 6 March 2024, Mr Izzatli was detained during the aforementioned raids with other activists but released the same day. However, he was re-detained two days later while waiting outside a police station.[49] He was subsequently charged with “smuggling by an organised group,” the same charge faced by several other activists and journalists.

33. Dr. Gubad Ibadhoglu is a prominent economist, academic, and anti-corruption activist. In July 2023, he was violently arrested by the Azerbaijani authorities and charged with counterfeiting currency – a charge widely condemned by observers as fabricated. Dr. Ibadhoglu was held in pre-trial detention under harsh and deteriorating health conditions without adequate medical care.[50] In April 2024, he was released to house arrest in Baku, where he remains under strict restrictions and surveillance. His release coincided with the publication of an early draft of the Azerbaijan Sanctions Review Act of 2024 – proposed by US lawmakers – which explicitly called for his release and threatened sanctions against Azerbaijani officials.[51] Although his pre-trial proceedings were suspended in July 2024, the charges were not dropped, and his travel remains restricted, preventing him from seeking treatment abroad. International organisations and civil society groups have called for his unconditional release, highlighting his detention as emblematic of Azerbaijan’s treatment of dissidents and critics.[52]

34. Hafiz Hasanov, the head of the Public Association “Rights and Development” and a prominent civil society representative, was detained in March 2025 as part of a sweeping investigation into foreign-funded civil society groups, an operation that also saw the arrest of other NGO leaders on charges of abuse of power, money laundering, and official forgery. While Mr Hasanov was released from initial custody the same day, he was subsequently placed under strict police supervision and a travel ban as the criminal investigation

44. https://rsf.org/en/azerbaijan-nine-jailed-women-journalists-report-sexual-abuse-detainees-handed-roses-international.
45. www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/azerbaijani-court-puts-tv-staff-pre-trial-detention-2024-03-08/.
46. www.demandrightsatcop.org/akif-gurbanov.
47. *Abdullayev and Others v. Azerbaijan*, [Committee], nos. 69466/14 and 12 others, 20 May 2021.
48. https://free-anar.site/political-prisoners/ruslan-izzatli/.
49. www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-arrests-tv-station/32855196.html.
50. https://oc-media.org/detained-azerbaijani-economist-ibadoghlu-denied-treatment-despite-life-threatening-condition/.
51. https://titus.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=3613.
52. www.hrw.org/news/2024/07/23/azerbaijan-free-academic-facing-bogus-charges.

continued. By the end of 2025 and into early 2026, his case remained pending with hearings ongoing, reflecting a broader state strategy of using protracted judicial proceedings and "police supervision" to hinder the activities of human rights defenders without immediate formal sentencing.[53]

35. On 29 April 2024, Anar Mammadli, human rights defender, election and climate action observer, and laureate of the 2014 Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, was arrested and detained on remand. His arrest was linked to the observation by his Centre for Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies (an NGO) of the presidential elections and the announcement of a coalition with other human rights defenders on climate justice ahead of COP29. In the past, Mr Mammadli won a case before the European Court of Human Rights, which found his previous detention to be politically motivated, in violation of Articles 5 and 18 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Court explicitly noted that the actual purpose of the impugned measures was to silence and punish the applicant as a civil society activist for his activities in the area of electoral monitoring.[54] The implementation of this judgment will be discussed further in this explanatory report, but I wish to note that despite Azerbaijan's official statement that his previous criminal record had been expunged,[55] he is currently reportedly being tried as a repeat offender,.[56] Given his background and circumstances of his current prosecution, I propose that Mr Mammadli be explicitly recognised by the Assembly as a political prisoner, in line with the criteria set forth in the Resolution 1900 (2012).

36. Rufat Safarov, a former investigator, human rights defender and founder of the organisation Defence Line, which is dedicated to monitoring and promoting human rights and the rule of law in Azerbaijan, was arrested on suspicion of fraud and hooliganism on 3 December 2024.[57] His arrest took place several hours after he had visited the US Embassy in Baku to obtain a visa for travel to the United States, where he was meant to receive the US Secretary of State's 2024 Human Rights Defender Award. He remains in pre-trial detention.

2.9. Crackdown on peace activists and independent researchers

37. Bahruz Samadov is a political scientist, researcher, freelance journalist and peace activist known for openly criticising the Azerbaijani government and advocating for peace, particularly around the Karabakh conflict. In August 2024, while visiting Baku from his studies in Prague, Mr Samadov was arrested and charged with "high treason." Accusations included espionage, dissemination of state secrets, and helping a foreign state or organisation plan hostile activities against Azerbaijan. The evidence allegedly stemmed from his writings, public calls for peace, and online conversations with Armenian nationals – interactions mainly of routine and public nature.[58]

38. On 23 June 2025, the Baku Grave Crimes Court sentenced him to 15 years in prison. Human rights observers widely condemned the trial as unfair, pointing to a lack of credible evidence, political motivations, and violations of the right to a public hearing.[59] He reportedly attempted suicide and went on a hunger strike after the prosecution demanded a 16-year sentence. He and his supporters assert that his only "crime" was advocating for peace with Armenia.[60]

39. Another concerning example of crackdown against academics is the prosecution of Iqbal Abilov, a Talysh academic and ethnographer who grew up in Belarus. Previously, he served as a lecturer at the Belarusian State University and is known for his research on the Talysh, an ethnic minority group in Azerbaijan. Upon his visit to Baku, he was repeatedly summoned for questioning by the State Security Service, had his passport confiscated when trying to return to Belarus, and was ultimately detained and moved to a Baku detention centre without his family being notified.

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53. www.irfs.org/news-feed/head-of-azerbaijani-ngo-hafiz-hasanov-placed-under-house-arrest/.
54. *Mammadli v. Azerbaijan*, no. 47145/14, § 104, 19 April 2018.
55. Communication from the authorities (20/05/2022) in the case of *Mammadli v. Azerbaijan* (Application No. 47145/14), DH-DD(2022)548.
56. https://srdefenders.org/azerbaijan-ongoing-prosecution-and-detention-of-anar-mammadli-and-deterioration-of-his-health-joint-communication/.
57. OMCT, 'Azerbaijan: arbitrary detention and judicial harassment against Rufat Safarov', Urgent interventions, 20 December 2024. Available at: www.omct.org/en/resources/urgent-interventions/arbitrary-detention-and-judicial-harassment-against-rufat-safarov; PACE, 'PACE rapporteurs dismayed by the arrest of Azerbaijani human rights defender Rufat Safarov', News, Legal issues and human rights, 4 December 2024. Available at: https://pace.coe.int/fr/news/9708/pace-rapporteurs-dismayed-by-the-arrest-of-azerbaijani-human-rights-defender-rufat-safarov.
58. https://cpj.org/2024/09/azerbaijani-columnist-bahruz-samadov-detained-on-treason-charges/.
59. www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/azerbaijan-sentencing-and-arbitrary-detention-of-prominent-peace.
60. https://oc-media.org/azerbaijani-researcher-bahruz-samadov-attempts-suicide-in-prison/.

40. On 24 July 2024, Mr Abilov was remanded in pre-trial detention on charges of "high treason," "incitement of national hatred," and allegedly making appeals against the State, which have been described by international observers and human rights groups as "fabricated." The prosecution reportedly relied on his academic research and a Skype conversation with an Armenian scholar as grounds for the case – a tenuous link but sufficient to result in a closed trial and, in May 2025, a sentence of 18 years' imprisonment. His conviction was deplored by the Assembly's General Rapporteur for political prisoners, Ms Azadeh Rohjan (Sweden, SOC).[61]

3. Wider climate of restrictions on free speech in Azerbaijan

41. Since 2023, Azerbaijan has seen a worrying intensification of repressive measures targeting anyone perceived as a government critic. The cases mentioned in the preceding section demonstrate a clear pattern of using a combination of targeted arrests, restrictive laws, and harassment to dismantle what remained of its independent media and civil society. This large-scale crackdown has been characterised by the misuse of criminal law for political purposes, including through the use of charges such as smuggling, money laundering or tax evasion. I find it utterly shocking that a Council of Europe member State, legally bound to abide by the European Convention on Human Rights, finds itself at the rock-bottom of global press and academic freedom rankings. The fact that not a single independent media outlet operates from within Azerbaijan is, in my view, incompatible with the aim of the Council of Europe.

42. Several international NGOs have denounced a "disturbing pattern of arbitrary arrests and detentions of government critics, civil society activists and human rights defenders through reprisal prosecutions and the misuse of criminal law in disregard of the rule of law".[62] This repressive strategy is accompanied by coercive measures such as prolonged pre-trial detention, searches without procedural guarantees, the freezing of bank accounts, travel bans and the denial of the right of access to a lawyer. Numerous reports of ill-treatment, obstacles to effective defence and violations of the right to a fair trial, particularly during preliminary hearings, have also been raised. Judicial decisions handed down in this context are frequently marred by procedural irregularities, lack sufficient reasoning and appear disconnected from the established facts, reflecting the lack of independence of the judiciary.

43. Another concerning aspect of restricting free speech in Azerbaijan is the reported State-sponsored surveillance in Azerbaijan. According to reports,[63] more than 1 000 Azerbaijani phone numbers, including those of at least 48 journalists, were selected as potential targets for the highly invasive Pegasus spyware. Forensic analysis confirmed that the devices of prominent journalists such as Khadija Ismayilova and Sevinc Vagifgizi were infected with the "zero-click" malware, granting operators total access to their encrypted messages, private photos, and real-time location while secretly activating their cameras and microphones. On 24 September 2025, the European Court of Human Rights communicated the case of *Ganbarova and Others v. Azerbaijan*,[64] which concerns the alleged use of Pegasus spyware against the 25 applicants. The Assembly has already noted and addressed these allegations in its Resolution 2513 (2023) "Pegasus and similar spyware and secret State surveillance".

44. The recent introduction of the Centralised Information and Digital Analytics System, known by the acronym MİRAS, has prompted concerns regarding an unprecedented expansion of state surveillance powers in Azerbaijan. Established by a November 2025 decree and managed by the State Security Service, the platform is designed to consolidate vast amounts of personal data from across all government agencies into a single, centralised database that is expected to be fully operational by May 2026. Human rights organisations, including Human Rights Watch, have raised alarms that this system lacks judicial oversight and effectively creates a "sweeping" infrastructure for monitoring dissidents, journalists, and activists.[65]

45. Despite the well-established case-law of the European Court of Human Rights, such as the *Mahmudov and Agazade v. Azerbaijan* judgment,[66] criminal defamation laws that include substantial prison sentences continue to exist in Azerbaijan. The existence of these laws is part of the wider picture contributing to a climate

61. https://pace.coe.int/en/news/9898/azerbaijan-pace-general-rapporteur-deplores-sentencing-of-a-talysh-academic-to-18-years-in-prison.
62. Communication NGO Free Voices collective & the Independent Lawyers Network & European Human Rights Advocacy Centre, 15 January 2025 in the *Mammadli group of cases v. Azerbaijan.* Available at: https://hudoc.exec.coe.int/eng?i=DH-DD(2025)89E.
63. https://forbiddenstories.org/pegasus-the-new-global-weapon-for-silencing-journalists/; www.occrp.org/en/investigation/life-in-azerbaijans-digital-autocracy-they-want-to-be-in-control-of-everything.
64. No. 45877/22, 13 October 2025.
65. www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/15/azerbaijans-surveillance-platform-risks-sweeping-privacy-violations.

of disdain for free speech and for journalism. The above-mentioned judgment dates from 2008, Azerbaijan has therefore failed to comply with a binding judgment of the Court to remove lengthy prison sentences for defamation in its criminal law for more than 18 years. Such a failure to act in a reasonable time-frame is not compatible with Azerbaijan's clear international legal obligation under Article 46 § 1 of the Convention to implement that judgment. Moreover, 13 years ago, the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) adopted its Opinion on the Legislation pertaining to the Protection against Defamation of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In particular, the Venice Commission found it "worrying that, in spite of the authorities' repeatedly stated commitment to work towards decriminalisation, defamation is still associated with excessively high criminal sanctions, including imprisonment".[67]

46. All of these factors point to a widespread climate of intolerance towards freedom of expression, political pluralism and the legitimate role of civil society actors. This targeted repression has clearly intensified in the run-up to COP29 in Baku, as well as following the presidential election in February 2024 and the parliamentary elections in September of the same year.[68]

47. In addition to the above practices, the regulatory environment for the media has become more difficult with the adoption of draconian laws to control the media and curtail freedom of expression.[69] The Law on the Media, enacted in late 2021, confers vast regulatory powers on the executive, undermining the editorial independence of the media and allowing extensive control over their activities. It contains ambiguous definitions, especially around what constitutes a "journalist" or "media entity", paving the way for arbitrary enforcement and exclusion of many independent voices. The Media Development Agency, which is under government control, exercises discretionary power over registration, as evidenced by the arbitrary refusal to accredit at least 40 media outlets and some 20 independent journalists. The media environment is thus being gradually stripped of all independent voices, with State-controlled media being used to publicly discredit critical journalists through smear campaigns. In such a climate, self-censorship flourishes, and investigative journalism disappears.

48. The Venice Commission, in its opinion of 20 June 2022 on the Law on Media, came to the conclusion that, in the context of an already extremely confined space for independent journalism and media in Azerbaijan, the Law would have a further "chilling effect".[70] The opinion noted multiple obstacles to the independent exercise of journalism, including the centralisation of regulatory power, registration requirements and discriminatory restrictions applied to journalists not affiliated with State-recognised media".

49. Azerbaijani civil society is also subject to a particularly restrictive legislative framework that hinders freedom of association. The legal environment established by the authorities severely limits the ability of NGOs to form, operate legally and receive funding, particularly from foreign sources. This repressive context is fuelled by the abusive use of NGO regulations, resulting in arbitrary refusals to register, unjustified administrative obstacles and intrusive financial surveillance. The legislation in force requires subsidies to be registered with the Ministry of Justice, leading to systematic delays and unjustified blockages. This close monitoring exposes NGOs to severe penalties for non-compliance, which is often defined in vague or arbitrary terms. Furthermore, independent organisations are gradually being marginalised in favour of pro-government entities (GONGOs), which enjoy the endorsement and support of the state, in violation of the principle of pluralism of associations.[71] In the absence of official recognition, NGO members who continue their work are exposed to increased risks of criminal prosecution, administrative harassment and arbitrary detention.[72] None of the recommendations included in the Venice Commission's opinion of 15 December 2014 on the Law on non-governmental Organisations (Public Associations and Funds)[73] have been implemented, despite the lapse of over 11 years.

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66. MAHMUDOV AND AGAZADE v. Azerbaijan | Application N°: 35877/04 | Date(s) of Judgment: 18/12/2008.
67. Opinion on the Legislation Pertaining to the Protection against Defamation of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Adopted by the Venice Commission, at Its 96th Plenary Session, (Venice, 11-12 October 2013).
68. Human Rights Watch, 'Azerbaijan: Virulent crackdown on government critics,' 8 October 2024. Available at: www.hrw.org/fr/news/2024/10/08/azerbaidjan-repression-virulente-contre-les-detracteurs-du-gouvernement.
69. New Azerbaijan Media Law Increases Restrictions on the Press, *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 10 February 2022.
70. Joint Opinion of the Venice Commission and the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI) of the Council of Europe on the Law on Media, Adopted by the Venice Commission at Its 131st Plenary Session (Venice, 17-18 June 2022.
71. www.amnesty.be/infos/actualites/article/droits-humains-azerbaidjan-pays-hote-cop29.
72. www.hrw.org/fr/news/2024/10/08/azerbaidjan-repression-virulente-contre-les-detracteurs-du-gouvernement.
73. Opinion on the Law on non-governmental Organisations (Public Associations and Funds) as amended of the Republic of Azerbaijan, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 101st Plenary Session (Venice, 12-13 December 2014).

50. This restrictive legal environment contributes to the development of a climate of violence and self-censorship that necessarily shrinks the civic space. Since November 2023, government media outlets have intensified their smear campaign against civil society and media entities, accusing them of collaborating with Western organisations and human rights organisations.[74] More than 200 incidents in which journalists have been prevented from carrying out their duties have been recorded, without any enforcement of Article 163 of the Azerbaijani Penal Code, which punishes the obstruction of journalists' legal professional activities.

51. The European Court of Human Rights has identified, in its judgments, many serious human rights violations experienced by Azerbaijani human rights defenders and journalists. The implementation of these judgments by the Azerbaijani authorities has been very poor.

52. The *Mammadli v. Azerbaijan*[75] group of cases concerns human rights defenders and one journalist, who were all targeted with criminal proceedings in order to silence them for their work. All of the applicants were subjected to arrests and detentions that the Court found to have been a misuse of criminal law, which was used to punish and silence them, in violation of Article 18 in conjunction with Article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights. During its supervision of the implementation of this group, the Committee of Ministers noted that the judgments revealed "a troubling pattern of arbitrary arrests and detention of government critics, civil society activists and human-rights defenders through retaliatory prosecutions and misuse of criminal law in defiance of the rule of law."[76]

53. The *Mammadli* group includes eight judgments concerning thirteen individuals. As of May 2026, there were seven individuals in the group who had not received the individual measures needed to implement their case. The main measure which remains outstanding is for the Plenum of the Supreme Court to review their cases, in order to erase their criminal records and remove all negative consequences of the arbitrary criminal proceedings against them. Their cases have now been pending at the Supreme Court for over five years. In its analysis of the cases, the Council of Europe's Department for the Execution of Judgments concluded that, judging by this delay, "In all the circumstances, the implication cannot be avoided that the political motives found to have prompted the prosecutions from the outset still persist." Due to the seriousness of these cases, the Committee of Ministers reviews them at every quarterly human rights meeting. Prior to the meetings, the Azerbaijani authorities assure the Committee of Ministers that the Supreme Court of Azerbaijan has the outstanding cases on its agenda. However, the cases never quite get to the top of that agenda.

54. The failure to implement the cases has very significant consequences for the applicants. A criminal record can have far-reaching effects on private life in Azerbaijan, including making it very difficult to find employment. Whilst the cases have been pending at the Supreme Court, one of the applicants has reportedly committed suicide, another has tried to commit suicide, and a third has been re-arrested on what many observers consider to be politically motivated charges. Youth activist Bayram Mammadov was found drowned in Istanbul, which the Turkish authorities reported as a suicide (though some observers regard his death as suspicious).[77] Another youth activist, Giyas Ibrahimov, reportedly tried to set himself on fire in front of the Azerbaijani Presidential Administration but was arrested by the police.[78] As already mentioned, elections monitoring specialist and Václav Havel Human Rights Prize winner Anar Mammadli has been re-arrested by the Azerbaijani authorities in connection with a case that has been widely criticised for being politically motivated and, despite assurances by the Azerbaijani government that his past criminal record had been expunged, he is being tried as a repeat offender.[79][80]

55. In order to implement general measures in the *Mammadli* group, the authorities must take appropriate steps to prevent any further abuses of the criminal justice system, including by ensuring the independence and impartiality of both the prosecution and the judiciary. The Committee of Ministers has welcomed certain steps taken by the Azerbaijani authorities in this regard, involving structural changes that were made to the role of the judiciary within the Judicial Legal Council. However, the Committee of Ministers has also noted

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74. www.voanews.com/a/azerbaijan-accused-of-cracking-down-on-critics-ahead-of-cop29/7870259.html.
75. Application No. 47145/14, judgment of 19 April 2018.
76. CM/Del/Dec(2025)1521/H46-4, 6 March 2025.
77. OC Media, Calls for answers over death of Azerbaijani activist Bayram Mammadov in Istanbul, 19 May 2021.
78. JAM News, Former political prisoner tried to burn himself alive in Azerbaijan, 7 January 2022.
79. Lise Christoffersen (Norway, SOC) and Ian Liddell-Grainger (United Kingdom, EC/DA), Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) rapporteurs for the monitoring of Azerbaijan, and Hannah Bardell (United Kingdom, NR), PACE rapporteur on "Threats to life and safety of journalists and human rights defenders in Azerbaijan", PACE rapporteurs deeply concerned by the detention of Anar Mammadli, 30 April 2024.
80. For a summary of this group of cases, see https://hudoc.exec.coe.int/eng?i=004-50875. The other four applicants waiting for the implementation of their cases are: civil society leader Intigam Aliyev; human rights defenders Leyla Yunusova and her husband Arif Yunusov; and journalist Khadija Ismayilova.

reports of a wave of recent arrests and detentions of journalists and activists in the country, which indicates that the changes to the Judicial Legal Council have had little practical effect. In June 2024, the Committee of Ministers welcomed the fact that a draft law was introduced in the Parliament to amend certain provisions of the Law on Courts and Judges, aimed at curtailing any potential influence on the judiciary by the executive branch. However, the Committee of Ministers is still waiting for information on whether the draft law has actually been passed. Despite the encouragements from the Committee of Ministers, and the availability of the Council of Europe secretariat, there has been no high-level dialogue in regard to the implementation of these cases.[81]

56. The implementation of other judgments concerning journalists and human rights defenders in Azerbaijan has arguably been even worse. The case of Khadija Ismayilova v. Azerbaijan[82] concerns a journalist known for her work on allegations of corruption against the family of the President of Azerbaijan. She was sent a letter threatening her with public humiliation if she did not stop her investigative reporting. When she refused, a video featuring scenes of a sexual nature involving Ms Ismayilova and her then boyfriend, taken with a hidden camera secretly installed in her bedroom, was posted on the internet. Ms Ismayilova contended that the secret surveillance had been carried out at the request of the authorities, or at the very least that they failed to investigate it, and that it was part of a campaign of intimidation against her. The Court ruled that the events had been linked to Ms Ismayilova's journalistic activities and that the Azerbaijani authorities had never properly investigated. The Court found, in particular, that obvious leads had not been followed up: for example, no formal statement had been taken from a telephone engineer who admitted being instructed to install a second telephone line in Ms Ismayilova's flat and to trace wires to it.

57. An investigation was eventually launched, which Ms Ismayilova noted still did not involve any elementary active evidence gathering, such as interviewing the telephone engineer to find out who had instructed him.[83] In March 2025, the Committee of Ministers issued an Interim Resolution, finding that the Azerbaijani authorities had still not rectified the problems with the investigation which had been identified by the Court six years earlier.[84] In order to implement general measures in the case, the Committee of Ministers has, inter alia, invited the authorities to provide information on the creation of an enabling environment to ensure the safety of journalists against attacks from state and non-state actors.[85] The Committee of Ministers has not yet recorded any progress.

58. A serious and widespread problem that human rights defenders face in Azerbaijan are barriers to forming organisations. Without the possibility to register legal entities, it is very difficult for lawyers and activists to work together towards common human rights goals. The group Ramazanova v. Azerbaijan[86] includes 19 cases involving NGOs that were unjustifiably dissolved or refused permission to register by the Azerbaijani authorities. The individual measures of 10 of the cases remain pending implementation, whilst the Committee of Ministers is awaiting additional information from the Azerbaijani authorities on the implementation of general measures needed to resolve the underlying problem.[87]

59. Furthermore, in April 2025, President Aliyev explicitly stated that Azerbaijan would no longer recognise the validity of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights or implement them. He justified this by pointing to Azerbaijan's exclusion from participating in the election of the Court's judges, arguing that, since his country had been deprived of voting rights in the Parliamentary Assembly, the Court's decisions would not be valid for Azerbaijan.[88]

4. Conclusions

60. Since 2023, Azerbaijan has steadily escalated its efforts to silence critical voices, using a combination of targeted arrests, restrictive laws, and harassment to dismantle what remained of its independent media and civil society. The authorities have carried out waves of arrests targeting journalists, human rights defenders, pro-democracy activists, anti-corruption experts and political dissidents. Well-known outlets such as Abzas

81. See for example CM/Del/Dec(2025)1521/H46-4, 6 March 2025.
82. Application No. 65286/13, judgment of 10 January 2019.
83. See for example Rule 9.1 submission from the applicant, DH-DD(2022)615, 7 June 2022.
84. Interim Resolution CM/ResDH(2025)29, 6 March 2025.
85. Decision of the Committee of Ministers concerning *Khadija Ismayilova v. Azerbaijan* (Application No. 65286/13), 1390th meeting, 1-3 December 2020 (DH), CM/Del/Dec(2020)1390/H46-3.
86. Application No. 44363/02, judgment of 01/02/2007. For information on the implementation of this group see: https://hudoc.exec.coe.int/eng?i=004-1607.
87. For information on the implementation of this group see: https://hudoc.exec.coe.int/eng?i=004-1607.
88. https://president.az/en/articles/view/68514.

Media, Toplum TV, Kanal 13, and Meydan TV have seen their reporters detained on charges such as smuggling, fraud, and other criminal offences seen as a retaliation for their independent journalism. Some of the most prominent voices in the civil society remain imprisoned.

61. Experts invited to a public hearing before the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights in June 2025 noted that, as a result of the new wave of repressions, not a single independent media outlet operates in Azerbaijan anymore. Most Azerbaijanis can now only access news via pro-government television and State-controlled outlets. Critical journalism has become dangerous, forcing some reporters into exile and driving others to self-censorship or stop their work entirely.

62. The Assembly has repeatedly and consistently sounded the alarm about the systemic pattern of silencing dissent and stifling independent voices in Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, its calls have fallen on deaf ears in Baku. Regrettably, the Assembly has often been one of the few international institutions to speak out. Even worse, all too often, the debate has focused on what concessions to make to promote the return of the parliamentary delegation of Azerbaijan to the Assembly, rather than how to promote a change of direction in Azerbaijan.

63. I would like to recall the words of the Heads of State and Government of Council of Europe member States in Reykjavik: “We have a common responsibility to fight autocratic tendencies and growing threats to human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Those core values are the bedrock of our continued freedom, peace, prosperity and security for Europe.” At a time of major geopolitical shifts, our values are not only our bedrock but also our safety net. They are the best guarantee of our democratic security.

64. It is in the interests of all Council of Europe member States that the structural and systemic problems with regard to freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, the right to liberty and the right to a fair trial in Azerbaijan are addressed. This is why, in addition to addressing a number of recommendations to the Azerbaijani authorities, I am also addressing a number of recommendations to Council of Europe member States themselves and the Secretary General. Furthermore, the Assembly should continue to play a role through its monitoring procedure, as well as by paying continued and focused attention to the issue of human rights defenders and independent media in Azerbaijan.

65. Turning a blind eye on systematic, extensive and serious human rights violations is not a long-term solution and will not lead to a safer, more peaceful Europe.