

**Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center's**  
**Four-Months Review: Monthly Human Rights Developments**  
**In Azerbaijan**  
**January–April 2025**

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● **January 2025**

- *New Arrest and Charges in ‘Toplum TV case’ as Preliminary Investigation Concludes*
- *Trials Continued in Politically Sensitive Cases & Three Activists Sentenced to Jail*
- *Meydan TV: Pre-Trial Arrest Hearings Continue Without Judicial Fairness*
- *Municipal Elections Failed to Meet International Standards Say the Critics, Pressure Intensifies on Oppositional Political Parties*

● **February 2025**

- *4 More Journalists Detained as Number of Political Prisoners reach 357 from 331 on 12 February 2025*
- *Trials Continued in Politically Motivated Cases*
- *International Media Outlets Forced to Suspend Operations*
- *Court Extends Pre-trial Detention of Anar Mammadli and Imran Aliyev, Involving New Accused*

● **March 2025**

- *New Crackdown on Civil Society as USAID’s Local Partners are Penalized*
- *International Organizations Face Suspension of Activities in Azerbaijan*
- *Trials Continued in Politically Sensitive Cases*
- *From Academia to Prison: Fazil Gasimov Sentenced to 9 Years Jail*

● **April 2025**

- *Arrests Continued in ‘NGO Case’ related to USAID activities*
- *Aggravated Charges and New Accused in the Anar Mammadli case*
- *Trials in Politically Sensitive Cases Continued in April*
- *Political Prisoners Face Denied Access to Adequate Medical Care*
- *Political Prisoners Report Poor Transportation Standards*
- *Two Members of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party detained while one sentenced to jail*
- *Authorities Disallow Protest by Opposition*

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## 1. *Toplum TV* Case: New Arrest as Investigation Concludes

On 17 January 2025, journalist Farid Ismayilov, previously under police custody in the ‘*Toplum TV* case’ was detained by police following a home search of his home without a lawyer present with his devices seized. On the same day, F. Ismayilov was ordered by Khatai District Court, for 2 months and 20 days of pre-trial detention.<sup>1</sup> He was charged under Article 162-1.1 (engaging employees without a valid employment contract) of the Criminal Code (CC) following an earlier one under Article 206.3.2 (smuggling by a group in prior collusion), which had first been brought against him in March 2024.

Following arrest of Farid Ismayilov, pro-government media outlets published leaked private conversations involving Farid Ismayilov, in what appeared to be a coordinated smear campaign portraying him as a foreign agent.<sup>2</sup> The publication of confidential investigative materials by government aligned media has become a recurring tactic in politically motivated cases, including of *Abzas Media* (November 2023), *Toplum TV* (March 2024), Anar Mammadli (April 2024), *Meydan TV* (December 2024) and others showing persistent use of the tactic by the authorities, discrediting dissent voices and undermining presumption of innocence.<sup>3</sup>

Farid Ismayilov became the 8th person arrested in the ‘*Toplum TV* case’, launched in March 2024 when coordinated raids on offices of *Toplum TV* and related homes led to arrest of 7 journalists whereas 2 were placed under police supervision.<sup>4</sup> On 21 January 2025, defense lawyers in the ‘*Toplum TV* case’ reported aggravated under Articles 192.3.2 (Illegal entrepreneurship with large income), 193-1.3.1 and 193-1.3.2 (legalization of property obtained through crime by organized group involving significant amount), 206.4 (smuggling by organized group in prior collusion) and 213.2.1 (tax evasion by organized group).<sup>5</sup> All accused view the charges as politically motivated retaliation for their journalism and activism

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<sup>1</sup> Jam News, ‘Another journalist arrested in Azerbaijan over *Toplum TV* case’, (January 2025), <https://jam-news.net/another-journalist-arrested-in-azerbaijan-over-toplum-tv-case/>

<sup>2</sup> Lent.az, ‘Shocking details in the *Toplum TV* case’, (February 2025), <https://www.lent.az/xeber/hadise/toplum-tv-isinin-sok-detallari-40628976>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>3</sup> Meydan TV, ‘Investigative authorities leak the investigation secrets in pro-government media’, (January 2025), <https://www.meydan.tv/az/article/istintaq-organlari-hakimiyy%C9%99tyonlu-mediada-istintaq-sirrini-yayir/?tztc=1>.

Meydan TV, ‘How government-aligned media in Azerbaijan compromises the presumption of innocence in the ongoing crackdown on independent journalists’, (August 2024), <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/how-government-aligned-media-in-azerbaijan-compromises-the-presumption-of-innocence-in-the-ongoing-crackdown-on-independent-journalists/>

<sup>4</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists, ‘Azerbaijani police raid *Toplum TV*, detain journalists over alleged currency smuggling’, (January 2025), <https://cpj.org/2024/03/azerbaijani-police-raid-toplum-tv-detain-journalists-over-alleged-currency-smuggling/>

<sup>5</sup> *Toplum TV*, ‘The charges have been intensified in the *Toplum TV* case’, (January 2025), <https://toplummedia.tv/siyaset/pspan-stylefont-size18pxspan-stylefont-familytimes-new-romantimeserifstrongldquotoplum-tv-isirdquo-uumlzre-itihamlar-agirlasdirdistrongspanspanp>, [available in Azerbaijani]

## 2. Trials Continued in Politically Sensitive Cases & Three Sentenced to Jail

### *Court Sentences Rail Abbasov (6.6 years) and Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu (10 years) To Jail – 9 and 12 January 2025*

On January 13, 2025, the Baku Court on Grave Crimes sentenced prominent civil society organization's leader Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu to 10 years in prison, ordered the confiscation of his apartment and money from his bank account, and imposed a one-year ban on engaging in educational activities after release.<sup>6</sup> Initially detained in December 2022 and charged under Articles 221.2.2 (hooliganism against official person), 289.1 (contempt of court), the charges were later aggravated with the Articles 192 (Illegal entrepreneurship with large income), 193-1 (legalization of property obtained through crime by organized group), 206 (smuggling), 213.1 (tax evasion), and 320.1 and 320.2 (knowingly using forged official documents). B.Hajiyeu rejected charges as politically motivated in response to his criticism of Interior Minister Vilayat Eyvazov and calls for sanctions against Azerbaijani officials as his arrest followed the sanction by the US to a high-ranking law-enforcement official.<sup>7</sup>

On January 9, civic activist Rail Abbasov was sentenced to 6 years and 6 months in prison under Article 178.3.2 (fraud with significant amount) of the CC.<sup>8</sup> Abbasov rejected the charges as fabricated, presented evidence in court to dispute the charges and mentioned inconsistencies in the testimony of the alleged victim. In his final statement, he directly linked his prosecution to his close friendship with Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu, claiming he was targeted in retaliation for defending him and maintaining public support.

### *Chair of Trade Union is Sentenced to 8 Years in Prison – 14 January 2025*

On January 14, 2025, Afiaddin Mammadov, chair of the Workers Table Unions Confederation, was sentenced to 8 years in prison by the Baku Court on Grave Crimes under Articles 126.2.4 (inflicting bodily harm with hooliganism intent), 221.3 (hooliganism with use of force) and 228.4 (unlawful possession of cold weapons) of the CC.<sup>9</sup> Arrested in September 2023 for alleged stabbing, Mammadov denied the charges, stating the incident was staged and that he was targeted for his labor rights advocacy and criticism of the authorities. His lawyer cited due process violations, including the absence of credible evidence and the court's refusal to allow media access. WTUC and rights groups condemned the conviction as politically motivated and part of a broader campaign against labor activists, noting that three other union members are also in custody on fabricated charges.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jam News, 'Azerbaijani activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu sentenced to 10 years in prison', (January 2025), <https://jam-news.net/azerbaijani-activist-bakhtiyar-hajiyeu-sentenced-to-10-years-in-prison/>

<sup>7</sup> Caucasus Watch, 'US Sanctions Azerbaijani Internal Ministry Official', (December 2022), <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/us-sanctions-azerbaijani-internal-ministry-official.html>

<sup>8</sup> Meydan TV, 'Activist who called himself Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu's hostage sentenced to 6 years and 6 months in prison', (January 2025), <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/activist-who-called-himself-bakhtiyar-hajiyeus-hostage-sentenced-to-6-years-and-6-months-in-prison/>

<sup>9</sup> Voice of America, 'Afiaddin Mammadov sentenced to 8 years in jail', (January 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7936073.html>, [available in Azerbaijani];

<sup>10</sup> Free Anar Mammadov, 'Afiaddin Mammadov', accessed 1 April 2025, <https://free-anar.site/political-prisoners/afiaddin-mammadov/>; Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'We Try to Stay Invisible', (October 2024), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/10/08/we-try-stay-invisible/azerbaijans-escalating-crackdown-critics-and-civil-society>

### *Nicad Ibrahim: Trial Starts in Activist's Case with Aggravated Charges*

On January 21, the Baku Court on Grave Crimes held a pre-trial hearing in the criminal case against civic activist Nicad Ibrahim for alleged altercation resulting in stabbing.<sup>11</sup> Initially arrested on 6 September 2024 and charged under Article 126.1 (inflicting bodily harm), aggravated charges now include Articles 126.2.4 (inflicting bodily harm with hooliganism intent) and 221.3 (hooliganism with use of force) of the CC, with possible jail time up to 11 years. His lawyer reported that Ibrahim was brought to court in handcuffs and kept under tight surveillance in a glass cage, conditions that followed his previous suicide attempt. Namely, following his arrest, he twice attempted suicide, once in Nasimi District Police Department (9 September 2024) and once again in the Baku Court on Grave Crimes (13 January 2025), protesting his unfair arrest and lack of evidence against him.<sup>12</sup> Ibrahim, with history of politically motivated imprisonment in 2021 (charged with risking public health during pandemic) is considered as political prisoner.

### *Journalists Report Mistreatment in Abzas Media Trials – 21 January 2025*

On 21 January 2025, the Baku Court on Grave Crimes continued hearings in *Abzas Media* case, where director Ulvi Hasanli testified that the €40,000 allegedly found in the outlet's office was planted by police during a raid, describing his violent arrest by masked officers and subsequent denial of access to surveillance footage and forensic analysis of the seized cash.<sup>13</sup> He submitted motions highlighting inhuman detention conditions and obstacles to communication with lawyers and family, issues also reported by another arrested journalist Nargiz Absalamova, who reported cold, unsanitary cells and recurring illness. Despite formal complaints, none of these claims have been meaningfully investigated by the authorities.

The case, launched in November 2023, led to the arrest of 7 journalists and 2 civil society members on serious charges, including smuggling, money laundering, Illegal entrepreneurship, document forgery, and tax evasion.<sup>14</sup> The accused deny the charges, calling them retaliation for exposing high-level corruption of the government of Azerbaijan. Human rights groups view the case as politically motivated and cite due process violations and ill-treatment.<sup>15</sup>

### **3. Meydan TV: Pre-Trial Arrest Hearings Continue Without Judicial Fairness**

In January 2025, appeal complaints in Meydan TV case continued. On 13, 17, 23 and 30 January, the Khatai District Court's hearings, the Court rejected motions by defence lawyers requesting the transfer of 5 *Meydan TV* employees from pre-trial detention to house arrest.<sup>16</sup> Lawyers noted that

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<sup>11</sup> VOA, 'Pre-trial hearing held in the case of civic activist Nicad Ibrahim', (January 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7945895.html>

<sup>12</sup> VOA, 'Activist Nicad Ibrahim attempted suicide', (September 2024), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7871881.html>

<sup>13</sup> Abzas Media, 'The next court hearing in the "Abzas Media case" has been held, with Ulvi Hasanli delivering his testimony', (January 2025), <https://abzas.org/en/2025/1/abzas-media-isi-uzr-novbtib84ffc0c-1/>

<sup>14</sup> Radio Liberty, 'Charges aggravated in Abzas Media case', (September 2025), <https://www.azadliq.org/a/nergiz-absalamova/33081609.html>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>15</sup> Abzas Media, 'European Deputies Call on Ilham Aliyev to Release Political Prisoners', (April 2025), <https://abzas.org/en/2025/4/european-deputies-call-on-ilha9815fce4-d/>

EU Neighbors EAST, 'EU reiterates its call on Azerbaijan to release all those imprisoned for exercising their fundamental rights', (May 2024), <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/eu-reiterates-its-call-on-azerbaijan-to-release-all-those-imprisoned-for-exercising-their-fundamental-rights/>

<sup>16</sup> VOA, 'Court keeps Meydan TV journalist in Prison' (January 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7956783.html>, [available in Azerbaijani]

VOA, 'Aynur Elgunash and Natig Javadli remain in prison', (January 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7941155.html> [available in Azerbaijani];

VOA, 'Meydan TV journalist remains in prison', (January 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7936261.html>, [available in Azerbaijani];

Toplum TV, 'Court orders another journalist to remain in prison, (January 2025), <https://toplummedia.tv/siyaset/pspan-stylefont-size18pxspan-stylefont-familytimes-new-romantimesseriifstrongmeydan-tv-nin-daha-bir-jurnalistinin-vesateti-temin-edilmedistrongspanspanp> [available in Azerbaijani]

the court provided no legal justification for its decisions and appeared to act in alignment with prosecutorial requests, dismissing defense motions despite the lack of evidence and the absence of grounds justifying continued detention. Meanwhile, journalists Ulviyya Ali and Khanim Mustafayeva were also interrogated as witnesses in the case in January and then put under travel bans they deem unlawful and plan to challenge in court.<sup>17</sup> The ‘*Meydan TV* case’ stems from the 6 December 2023 arrest of six *Meydan TV* employees and a media trainer, all charged under Article 206.3.2 (smuggling by a group in prior collusion). Accused journalists all deny the charges, insisting that the case is politically motivated and designed to silence independent journalism.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. Municipal Elections Failed to Meet International Standards Say the Critics

On January 29, 2025, Azerbaijan held municipal elections that were widely criticized for their lack of competitiveness, public engagement, and transparency. Despite the Central Election Commission’s declaration of a successful vote, turnout was reported at a record low of 31.42% - around 1% down from 2019 Elections.<sup>19</sup> In the absence of international observers, independent monitors documented widespread irregularities, including ballot stuffing, carousel voting, candidate harassment, and the misuse of administrative resources.<sup>20</sup> Key opposition parties and civil society members expressed no hope in elections to be held democratically and highlighted the issue with insufficient power and superficial role of municipalities in local-level governance.<sup>21</sup>

#### 5. Pressure Intensifies on Oppositional Political Parties

In January, pressure on opposition political parties continued as 4 opposition party members were detained by police: Ramil Eynaliyev, Asgar Aghasoy, and Alisahib Karimov from the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan (PFPA), and Alikram Khurshidov from the Musavat Party. They were charged with disobeying police orders and minor hooliganism and each received administrative detention sentences ranging from 10 to 30 days.<sup>22</sup>

All detainees and both parties rejected the charges of hooliganism and disobeying police (Articles 510 and 535 of Code on Administrative Offences) as they are widely used to silence opposition, claiming that the arrests were retaliation for critical posts made by their members on social media.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Coalition for Women in Journalism, ‘Azerbaijan: WPF condemns authorities harassment of VOA Reported Ulviyya Ali’, (January 2025), <https://www.womeninjournalism.org/alerts/azerbaijan-wpf-condemns-authorities-harassment-of-voa-reporter-ulviyya-ali>;

Coalition for Women in Journalism, ‘Authorities Bar Journalist Khanim Mustafayeva from Leaving the Country’, (January 2025), <https://www.womeninjournalism.org/alerts/azerbaijan-authorities-bar-journalist-khanim-mustafayeva-from-leaving-the-country>

<sup>18</sup> Reporters Without Borders, ‘RSF calls for release of Meydan TV journalists’, (December 2024),

<https://rsf.org/en/post-cop29-crackdown-azerbaijan-rsf-calls-release-meydan-tv-journalists>

<sup>19</sup> Central Election Commission, ‘Protocol of the Central Election Commission on the general voting results of the Municipal Elections held on January 29, 2025’, (February 2025), <https://www.msk.gov.az/en/elections/view/1456>

<sup>20</sup> BBC Azerbaijan, ‘Municipal Elections; Ballot box stuffing, carousel and other irregularities’, (January 2025), <https://www.bbc.com/azeri/articles/ce856gy9e970>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>21</sup> Abzas Media, ‘Politicians do not believe that anything will change in the management of municipalities or municipal elections’, (January 2025), <https://abzas.org/az/2024/12/siyasilr-n-bldiyyilrin-n3c7facfe-a/>, [available in Azerbaijani];

Radio Liberty, ‘Those that are satisfied and dissatisfied with the municipal elections’, (January 2025), <https://www.azadliq.org/a/belediyye-secki-muxalifet/33296968.html>, [available in Azerbaijani];

<sup>22</sup> See: Ramil Eynaliyev – 30 days; VOA, ‘PFPA members sentenced to 30 days of administrative arrest’, (January 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7940203.html>, [available in Azerbaijani];

Asgar Aghasoy – 30 days; VOA, ‘PFPA member arrested’, (January 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7933829.html>, [available in Azerbaijani];

Alikram Khurshidov – 10 days - VOA, ‘Member of Musavat Party arrested’, (January 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7942320.html>, [available in Azerbaijani];

Alisahib Karimov – 30 days; Institute for Reporters Freedom and Safety (IRFS), ‘PNFA Activist Arrested for 30 Days for Criticism on Social Media’, (January 2025), <https://www.irfs.org/news-feed/pnfa-activist-arrested-for-30-days-for-criticism-on-social-media/?tztc=1>

<sup>23</sup> Meydan TV, ‘10 PFPA members have been arrested in the last 3 months’, (February 2025), <https://www.meydan.tv/az/article/son-3-ayda-10-n%C9%99f%C9%99f-axcp-f%C9%99ali-h%C9%99bs-olunub/>, [available in Azerbaijani]

## 1. Four More Journalists Detained as Number of Political Prisoners Rises from 331 on 10 December 2024 to 357 on 12 February 2025

### *Three Journalists arrested in relation to Meydan TV case in February*

On 5, 21 and 28 February, 3 more journalists, Shamshad Aghayev, Nurlan Gahramanli and Fatima Movlamli were detained by police in connection with ongoing criminal case against *Meydan TV*.<sup>24</sup> Khatai District Court ordered the pretrial detention of Meydan TV contributors Shamshad Agha (2 months, 1 day), Nurlan Gahramanli (1 month, 17 days), and Fatima Movlamli (1 month, 9 days) under Article 206.3.2 for alleged smuggling. All deny the charges. Their homes were searched, devices seized, and police claimed to find €2000 under Movlamli's mattress — a practice frequently used by police in most of politically motivated cases.<sup>25</sup>

Following his arrest, on 30 March, in a letter from detention, Shamshad Agha described the abuse, including, physical mistreatment, a late-night home search conducted without a lawyer present, and the forced disclosure of his mobile phone password under threats and denial of medication.<sup>26</sup> Aghayev also responded to pro-government media-led smearing campaign against him, calling it manipulative and ridiculous and rebutting allegations of chairing Meydan TV.<sup>27</sup>

These arrests are part of a wider crackdown on *Meydan TV*, a Berlin-based independent media outlet known for its critical reporting on the Azerbaijani government. On 6 December 2023, six journalists were arrested alongside media trainer all charged under the same smuggling provision and placed in 4-month pre-trial detention. Human rights organizations and international observers have condemned the arrests as politically motivated and called for the immediate release of those detained.<sup>28</sup>

### *A Journalist – Shahnaz Baylargizi arrested in relation to Toplum TV case – 5 February 2025*

On February 6, 2025, the Khatai District Court ordered the pre-trial detention of journalist Shahnaz Baylargizi for 3 months and 15 days following her arrest the previous day.<sup>29</sup> Journalist is charged

<sup>24</sup> CPJ, 'Azerbaijan arrests 2 more journalists in Meydan TV case', (February 2025), <https://cpj.org/2025/03/azerbaijan-arrests-2-more-journalists-in-meydan-tv-case/>;

OC Media, 'Another journalist arrested as Azerbaijan's media crackdown continues', (February 2025), <https://oc-media.org/another-journalist-arrested-as-azerbaijans-media-crackdown-continues/>;

<sup>25</sup> OC Media, '10th independent Azerbaijani journalist arrested in Meydan TV case', (February 2025), <https://oc-media.org/10th-independent-azerbaijani-journalist-arrested-in-meydan-tv-case/>;

<sup>26</sup> Azadliq Newspaper, Post on Facebook.com', accessed 1 April 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/azadliqqazeti/posts/%C5%9F%C9%99m%C5%9Fad-a%C4%9Fam%C9%99n-nec%C9%99-siyasi-m%C9%99hbus-oldumsiyasi-m%C9%99hbus-%C5%9F%C9%99m%C5%9Fad-a%C4%9Fan%C4%B1n-m%C9%99ktubu-yay%C4%B1%C4%B1/971418335106142/>. [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>27</sup> APA, 'New Facts Emerge from Meydan TV case: Shamshad Aghayev was the New Head of Meydan TV', (February 2025), <https://en.apa.az/media/new-facts-emerge-from-meydan-tv-case-shamshad-aghayev-was-the-new-head-of-meydan-tv-460276>;

Toplum TV, 'The things pro-government media claim to be facts are materials I have published myself', (March 2025), <https://toplummedia.tv/mehkeme/pldquohoumlkumetin-fakt-kimi-siridigi-fotolari-oumlzuumlml-paylasmisamrdquo-semsad-agap>. [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>28</sup> Ibid (n18)

<sup>29</sup> CPJ, 'Azerbaijani Journalist Given 3 month Pretrial Detention in Foreign Funding Case', (February 2025), <https://cpj.org/2025/02/azerbaijani-journalist-given-3-month-pretrial-detention-in-foreign-funding-case/>



in related to *Toplum TV* case under Articles 162-1.1 (engaging employees without a valid employment contract), 192.3.2 (Illegal entrepreneurship with large income), 193-1.3.1 and 193-1.3.2 (legalization of property obtained through crime by organized group involving significant amount), 206.4 (smuggling by an organized group with prior collusion), and 213.2.1 (tax evasion by organized group) of the CC. Authorities also conducted search of her home without a lawyer present and seized personal devices whereas her arrest was followed a smear campaign in pro-government media linking her to '*Toplum TV* case' and discrediting the journalist.<sup>30</sup> Due to health concerns, her pre-trial detention was replaced with house arrest on February 26.<sup>31</sup>

Baylargizi is one of 10<sup>th</sup> individuals facing prosecution in connection with the '*Toplum TV* case,' which has led to the arrest of 8 others and forced the media outlet to relocate its management abroad.<sup>32</sup> On 17 and 20 February, and 24 March, pro-government media outlets continued smearing campaign targeting *Toplum TV* journalists depicting them as foreign agents destabilizing the country.<sup>33</sup>

## 2. Trials Continued in Politically Sensitive Cases

### *Mohyaddin Orujov - Trade Union Activist Sentenced to Jail*

On February 25, 2025, the Baku Court on Grave Crimes sentenced trade union activist Mohyaddin Orujov to 3 years under Article 234.1 (drug possession) of the CC.<sup>34</sup> The defense argued that the arrest was illegal, citing discrepancies between the documented time of detention (13:00) and video footage (around 19:00), as well as procedural violations. Orujov denied having the narcotics, claiming he was targeted after filing a labor rights complaint in October 2023 and exposing police abuse after a previous administrative detention.<sup>35</sup> Orujov's case is regarded as politically motivated whereas, on 12 February, the Union for the Freedom of Political Prisoners reported 357 recognized political prisoners in Azerbaijan, a classification the government continues to reject.<sup>36</sup> Three other members of the confederation remain imprisoned, including Chair Afiiyaddin Mammadov (14 January 2025) and activists Elvin Mustafayev (31 January 2024) and Aykhan Israfilov (2 April 2024), all sentenced to jail on drug-related charges.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid (n2)

<sup>31</sup> Meydan TV, 'Shahnaz Baylargizi Released Under House Arrest', (February 2025), <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/shahnaz-baylargizi-released-under-house-arrest/>

<sup>32</sup> Meydan TV, 'Toplum TV will continue its operations abroad', (February 2025), <https://d9mc3ts4czbpr.cloudfront.net/en/article/toplum-tv-will-continue-its-operations-abroad/>

<sup>33</sup> Qafqazinfo, 'New facts in 'Toplum TV and 'Abzas Media' cases', (February 2025), <https://qafqazinfo.az/news/detail/toplum-tv-ve-abzas-media-islerinde-yeni-faktlar-462054>, [available in Azerbaijani];

Qafqazinfo, 'It is now sure that Akif Gurbanov managed the projects', (February 2025),

<https://qafqazinfo.az/news/detail/hemin-layihelerin-basinda-akif-qurbanovun-durdugu-tesdiqlenir-462379>

Qafqazinfo, 'Akif Gurbanov directly managed Toplum TV's activities', (February 2025), Qafqazinfo, 'US propaganda network forced to change its thesis on the "Toplum TV" case', (March 2024), <https://qafqazinfo.az/news/detail/abs-tebligat-sebekesi-toplum-tv-isi-uzre-tezisini-deyismeye-mecbur-olub-430991>; <https://qafqazinfo.az/news/detail/akif-qurbanov-toplum-tv-nin-fealiyyetine-birbasa-rehberlik-edib-462164>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>34</sup> OC Media, 'Azerbaijani Labour Activist Sentenced to 3 years in Prison on Drug Charges', (February 2025), <https://oc-media.org/azerbaijani-labour-activist-sentenced-to-three-years-in-prison-on-drug-charges/>

<sup>35</sup> Radio Liberty, 'Activist in Prison; Due to my publication of torture by head of the Police station...', (February 2025), <https://www.azadliq.org/a/mohyeddin-orucov-hokm-isci-masasi/33328005.html>;

OC Media, 'Azerbaijani activist given 30 days sentence for criticising president online', (October 2023), <https://oc-media.org/azerbaijani-activist-giver-30-day-sentence-for-criticising-president-online/>

<sup>36</sup> Toplum TV, 'There are 357 people in the new list of the political prisoners', (February 2025), <https://toplummedia.tv/siyaset/pyeni-siyasi-mehbus-siyahisinda-157-neferin-adi-varp>; [available in Azerbaijani]; European Parliament, 'Motion for a Resolution on the situation in Azerbaijan, violation of human rights and international law and relations with Armenia', (October 2024), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-10-2024-0136\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-10-2024-0136_EN.html);

Institute for Peace and Democracy, 'Political Prisoners, 12 February 2025', (February 2025), <https://www.ipd-az.org/political-prisoners-for-12-february-2025/>

<sup>37</sup> VOA, 'Member of trade union to sentenced to 3 years of jail time', (January 2024), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7464923.html>, [available in Azerbaijani];

VOA, 'Aykhan Israfilov sentenced to 3 years in jail', (April 2024), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7553612.html>, [available in Azerbaijani];

### *Trial Hearings Continued Abzas Media case*

Trials in the Abzas *Media* case continued on February 11 and 18 accompanied by protests by journalists. Most of the defendants refused to appear in both hearings in protest of what they described in a joint statement as systemic inhumane treatment and violence in the Baku Detention Facility. The journalists alleged that complaints about beatings, threats, and psychological abuse by prison staff, particularly against women detainees Sevinj Vagifgizi, Nargiz Absalamova, and Elnara Gasimova, were ignored, with the acts being framed as retaliation for exposing human rights violations.<sup>38</sup> They also reported obstruction of family visits and phone calls, and claimed that prison staff admitted acting on orders ‘from above’. Lawyer noted that Farid Mehralizada had intended to boycott the hearing but was taken to court against his will.<sup>39</sup>

The ‘*Abzas Media* case’, launched in November 2023, has led to the arrest of at least seven journalists under Articles 206.4 (smuggling by organized group in prior collusion), 192.3.2 (Illegal entrepreneurship with large income), 193-1.3.1 and 193-1.3.2 (legalization of property obtained through crime by organized group involving significant amount), 320.1 and 320.2 (knowingly using forged official documents) and 213.2.1 (tax evasion by organized group) of the CC, that could lead to up to 12 years in prison. All accused deny the charges and assert their arrest is retaliation for their investigative reporting. Human rights groups and international organisations continue to call for their release and for Azerbaijan to end its crackdown on independent journalism.<sup>40</sup>

### *Trials Continue in Opposition Politician Tofig Yagublu’s Case*

On 14, 19 and 26 February, the Baku Court on Grave Crimes held three hearings in the ongoing trial of opposition politician Tofig Yagublu. The proceedings have been marked by serious fair trial concerns, including prolonged delays, limited hearing frequency, and the systematic rejection of defence motions, including requests to question witnesses, review whatsapp messages and replace pre-trial detention with house arrest, without sufficient justification.<sup>41</sup> The defence highlighted inconsistencies in the prosecution’s case, including contradictory witness statements and overlooked evidence, while Yagublu denied all charges and declared he would begin a hunger strike if convicted. The prosecutor asked the court to sentence Yagublu to 10 years in prison, as he asked for time to prepare a final statement.

Yagublu was arrested on 14 December 2023 and is charged with Articles 178.3.2 (fraud with significant amount) and 320.1 and 320.2 (knowingly using forged official documents). Domestic and international right groups view the trial as politically motivated aimed at silencing dissent and calling for the release of Yagublu.<sup>42</sup>

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VOA, ‘Afiaddin Mammadov sentenced to 8 years in jail’, (January 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7936073.html>, [available in Azerbaijani];

<sup>38</sup> VOA, ‘Detainees in Abzas Media case refuse to participate in the trial’, (February 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7970449.html>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>39</sup> VOA, ‘Detainee Farid Mehralizada in Abzas Media case was forcibly brought to the trial’, (February 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7970767.html>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid (n15)

<sup>41</sup> VOA, ‘Tofig Yagublu asked for time for final statement’, (February 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7990231.html>, [available in Azerbaijani]

VOA, ‘Prosecutor asks for 10 year sentence for Tofig Yagublu’, (February 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7980636.html>, [available in Azerbaijani]

VOA, ‘They can not bring arguments or justify’, (February 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7976162.html>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>42</sup> HRW, ‘Prominent Opposition Figure Arrested’, (December 2023), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/19/azerbaijan-prominent-opposition-figure-arrested>; Amnesty International, ‘Azerbaijan Authorities Must Immediately Release Tofig Yagublu and Urgently Provide Medical Care as His Health



On February 21, the Baku Court on Grave Crimes held a preparatory hearing in the case of Bahrüz Samadov, a peace activist and PhD student at Charles University, who was arrested on August 21, 2023, and faces charges under Article 274 (treason) allegedly for cooperation with Armenian Intelligence. Samadov, known for his critical writings on the Azerbaijani government and his research on the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, denied the charges, arguing that prosecuting scholars damages the country’s international reputation.<sup>43</sup> His lawyer reported that, Samadov was beaten and forced to open his phone while in custody of State Security Service, noting that the General Prosecutors Office have not investigated the complaint on mistreatment thoroughly.<sup>44</sup> The court rejected most defense motions, including requests to replace his pre-trial detention with house arrest, even though he posed no flight risk and cares for his elderly grandmother. His arrest, which was followed by a smear campaign from pro-government media in August 2024, is widely recognized as politically motivated.<sup>45</sup>

On 26 February, ethnic Talish researcher and co-founder of the Latvia-registered Talish National Academy, Iqbal Abilov, appeared in a closed preparatory hearing held online from the Baku Detention Facility. Abilov was arrested during a family visit to Azerbaijan on 22 July 2023 and faces charges under Articles 274 (treason), 281.3 (anti-state calls made on behalf of foreign entities), and 283.1 (inciting ethnic hatred), allegedly based on purported collaboration with Armenian intelligence.<sup>46</sup> According to his lawyer, the court rejected defence motions for a public trial and for replacing his detention with house arrest as his case was transferred to the Lankaran Court on Grave Crimes despite procedural irregularities.<sup>47</sup> Abilov denies all charges, and his arrest is widely regarded as politically motivated.

### **3. International Media Outlets Forced to Suspend Operations**

In February 2025, Azerbaijan witnessed an intensified informal pressures and accreditation cancellations on remaining a few independent media outlets operating within its borders and known for critical coverage as several prominent outlets, including *Voice of America* (VOA), *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (RFE/RL), *BBC Azerbaijani Service*, and the independent *Turan Information Agency* (Turan) faced suspension of operations or targeted discreditation campaigns. On 13 February, *Turan*, one of the longstanding champions of local independent media outlets,

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Deteriorates’, (April 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/>;

Meydan TV, ‘United States called for the immediate release of Tofig Yagublu and Bakhtiyar Hajiyev’, (January 2025), <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/the-united-states-called-for-the-immediate-release-of-tofig-yagublu-and-bakhtiyar-hajiyev/>;

<sup>43</sup> VOA, ‘Bahrüz Samadov started hunger strike in prison’, (February 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7983349.html>, [available in Azerbaijani];

<sup>44</sup> Radio Liberty, ‘Bahrüz Samadov announced that he had started a hunger strike in prison: ‘Once upon a time, Bagirov was destroying intellectuals, just like now...’, (February 2025), <https://www.azadliq.org/a/behrüz-semədov-acliq/33323163.html>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>45</sup> Oxu.az, ‘Why did Bahrüz Samadov work for Armenians?’, (August 2024), <https://oxu.az/siyaset/ermenistana-isleyen-sebke-ifsa-olundu-kimlerin-adi-var>, [available in Azerbaijani];

Amnesty International, ‘Azerbaijan: Release Bahrüz Samadov and other government critics targeted during election campaign’, (September 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/09/azerbaijan-release-bahrüz-samadov-and-other-government-critics-targeted-during-election-campaign/>;

Amnesty International, ‘Azerbaijan: Academics Arrested on Fabricated Charges: Iqbal Abilov and Bahrüz Samadov’, (September 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/8554/2024/en/>;

<sup>46</sup> Amnesty International, ‘Azerbaijan: Academics Arrested on Fabricated Charges: Iqbal Abilov and Bahrüz Samadov’, (September 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/8554/2024/en/>;

<sup>47</sup> Tolish Media, Post on Facebook.com, accessed on 2 April 2025, [https://www.facebook.com/TolishMedia/photos/igbal-%C9%99bilovun-ilk-m%C9%99hk%C9%99m%C9%99-iclas%C4%B1-k%C3%BCrd%C9%99xan%C4%B1-t%C9%99cridxanas%C4%B1nda-onlayn-ke%C3%A7irilibfevr/1063294902482876/?\\_rdc](https://www.facebook.com/TolishMedia/photos/igbal-%C9%99bilovun-ilk-m%C9%99hk%C9%99m%C9%99-iclas%C4%B1-k%C3%BCrd%C9%99xan%C4%B1-t%C9%99cridxanas%C4%B1nda-onlayn-ke%C3%A7irilibfevr/1063294902482876/?_rdc), [available in Azerbaijani]

announced its closure citing financial difficulties, further deteriorating the freedom of expression and access to critical information in the country.<sup>48</sup> On 20 February, *BBC Azerbaijani Service* was likewise forced to close its Baku office after receiving only a verbal order from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), lacking any formal documentation.<sup>49</sup> In late February, VOA's reporters' accreditation were cancelled by the MFA as both *VOA* and *RFE/RL* were amid chaos following the news of funding cuts by the Trump administration.<sup>50</sup>

These closures were preceded by months of coordinated smear campaigns, especially against *VOA* and *RFE/RL* led by pro-government media, accusing these organizations of foreign interference and bias.<sup>51</sup> Notably, Hikmat Hajiyev, the presidential aide, also made disparaging remarks against these broadcasters during the COP29 event in Baku in November 2024, signaling official disapproval at the highest levels.<sup>52</sup> After announcing its closure on 13 February, Turan faced smear attacks from pro-government media (*Day.az*), which it rejected and clarified its income came from legal commercial sources, not foreign funding.<sup>53</sup>

These developments reflect a further escalation in Azerbaijan's systematic dismantling of independent media, which targets not only domestic critical voices but also international outlets with a longstanding presence in the country. The lack of formal legal procedures, such as the verbal order to the BBC and cancellation of VOA accreditations, indicates an increasingly arbitrary and opaque environment in which authorities bypass even nominal legal standards. Turan's closure, in particular, marks a significant blow to local journalism, as it was the last remaining outlet with a locally based office providing independently verified information.

#### **4. Court Extends Pre-trial Detention of Anar Mammadli and Imran Aliyev, Involving New Accused**

On February 15, 2025, Khatai District Court extended the pre-trial detention of Anar Mammadli, head of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center (EMDS), and Imran Aliyev, head of the parliamentary watchdog platform *Meclis.info* by 3 months.<sup>54</sup> Both were initially arrested in April 2024 charged with Article 206.3.2 (smuggling by a group in prior collusion) and remain in Baku Detention Facility since then as the Court unanimously approved prosecutorial motions on extending periods of reprimand.

Separately, on February 27, 2025, civic activist Elgiz Gahraman was charged in the Imran Aliyev case, alternatively so-called 'Meclis.info case', and placed under police supervision. According to his public statement, he and Imran Aliyev now face aggravated charges under 8 articles - 192.3.2 (Illegal entrepreneurship with large income), 193-1.3.1 and 193-1.3.2 (legalization of property

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<sup>48</sup> Eurasianet, 'Financial Pressure Force Azerbaijan's Last Bastion of Independent Media to Suspend Operations', (February 2025), <https://eurasianet.org/financial-pressure-force-azerbaijans-last-bastion-of-independent-media-to-suspend-operations>

<sup>49</sup> BBC, 'Azerbaijan orders suspension of BBC News Azerbaijani in Baku', (February 2025), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4g7ewd9ne0o>

<sup>50</sup> OC Media, 'Azerbaijani government shuts down regional departments of Voice of America and Sputnik', (February 2025), <https://oc-media.org/azerbaijani-government-shuts-down-regional-departments-of-voice-of-america-and-sputnik/>

<sup>51</sup> Report, 'Opinion: Deserved Logical End of USAID, Voice of America and Radio Liberty', (March 2025), <https://report.az/analitika/usaaid-amerikanin-sesi-ve-azadliq-radiosunun-layiq-oldugu-mentiqi-son-serh/>, [available in Azerbaijani];

Report, 'MP: USAID, Voice of America and Radio Liberty harmed not only Azerbaijan, but also US', (March 2025), <https://report.az/en/domestic-politics/mp-usaid-voice-of-america-and-radio-liberty-harmed-not-only-azerbaijan-but-also-us/>, [available in Azerbaijani];

<sup>52</sup> Report, 'Presidential Aide: Rule of law and media freedom fully ensured in Azerbaijan', (November 2024), <https://report.az/en/media/presidential-aide-rule-of-law-and-media-freedom-fully-ensured-in-azerbaijan/>

<sup>53</sup> Abzas Media, 'Turan Issues Statement: "We Have Not Received Funding from USAID or Other Organizations"', (February 2025), <https://abzas.org/en/2025/3/turan-issues-statement-wea9b51eec-2/>

<sup>54</sup> VOA, 'Court extends pre-trial detention for Anar Mammadli and Imran Aliyev', (February 2025), <https://www.amerikaninseesi.org/a/7976359.html>

obtained through crime by organized group involving significant amount), 206.4 (smuggling by organized group in prior collusion), 213.2.1 (tax evasion by organized group) and others of the CC, charges carry a possible penalty of up to 12 years in prison.<sup>55</sup>

Mammadli, a prominent election expert and long-time advocate for electoral transparency, previously served a prison sentence from 2013 to 2016 on charges widely regarded as fabricated where international rights groups had declared him a prisoner of conscience. Imran Aliyev, who was detained at Baku airport on April 18, 2024, led a platform that monitors parliament's performance promoting legislative accountability. Gahraman had previously been arrested in 2016 on drug-related charges that were widely seen as a pretext for silencing dissent. Human rights defenders and international actors view the charges as politically motivated reprisals for their critical election-related reporting and civic activism calling for Mammadli and Aliyev's release, whereas their arrests were accompanied by smear campaigns by pro-government media.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> VOA, 'Elgiz Gahraman is accused in Meclis.info case', (March 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/8002894.html>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>56</sup> EU Neighbors East, 'Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum urgently call for unconditional release of Azerbaijani human rights defender Anar Mammadli', (May 2024), <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/eastern-partnership-civil-society-forum-urgently-call-for-unconditional-release-of-azerbaijani-human-rights-defender-anar-mammadli/>; Turan Information Agency, 'Deeply Troubled': State Dept On Detention of Anar Mammadli', (May 2024), <https://web.archive.org/web/20240510164039/https://turaz.az/en/politics/deeply-troubled-state-dept-on-detention-of-anar-mammadli-779984>; Amnesty International, 'Urgent Action: Release Arrested Journalists', (May 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/EUR5579462024ENGLISH.pdf>; OC Media, 'Azerbaijani pro-government media attacks pro-democracy activist Mammadli', (March 2025), <https://oc-media.org/azerbaijani-pro-government-media-attacks-pro-democracy-activist-mammadli/>

## 1. Local Recipients of USAID Face Harassment and Arrest in Escalating Crackdown

On March 14, NGO leaders such as Bashir Suleymanli (Institute for Citizens' Rights) and Mammad Mammadzada (Election Monitoring Alliance) were detained by the General Prosecutor's Office and sentenced to pre-trial detention of 3 months and 28 days by Binagadi District Court.<sup>57</sup> A preventive arrest warrant was also issued in absentia for Subhan Hasanli, a lawyer and director of the Center for Social Rights on 15 March.<sup>58</sup> Other detainees, including Khalid Aghaliyev, Hafiz Hasanov, and Zamin Zakiyev, were interrogated and later released. However, on March 21, election expert Hafiz Hasanov was charged and placed under house arrest, while Mehriban Rahimli, a consultant for the U.S. German Marshall Fund, was also charged and put under police supervision.<sup>59</sup> They are all charged under Articles 193-1.3.2 (legalization of property obtained through crime, when committed in large amounts), 308.2 (abuse of official powers with grave consequences) and 313 (Forgery by an official) of the CC, charges possibly leading to up to 12 years in prison.

The escalation appears to happen through the reactivation of 2014 NGO criminal case (No. 142006023) by the General Prosecutor's Office following the executive order by the Trump administration freezing USAID funds and a growing smear campaign against the agency within Azerbaijan carried-out by pro-government media organizations.<sup>60</sup> Interrogations reportedly focused on contracts involving USAID, the Black Sea Trust (GMF), and other US-based funding sources, raising concerns over the criminalization of foreign-funded civic activity through legally permissible service contracts. The arrests on 14 March were preceded by President Ilham Aliyev's public condemnation of USAID on 13 March 2025, in which he accused the agency of illegal financing and promised to share information with U.S. authorities.<sup>61</sup>

## 2. International Organizations Face Suspension of Activities in Azerbaijan

USAID was not the only international organization becoming target amid intensified crackdown on Azerbaijan. On 4 March, pro-government media outlets circulated news on steps to close 4 offices of the United Nations (UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNHCR) alongside International Committee of Red Cross and International Centre for Migration Policy Development.<sup>62</sup> The news

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<sup>57</sup> Abzas Media, 'Crackdown in Baku Continues: 4 Human Rights Defenders Detained, 2 Arrested', (March 2025), <https://abzas.org/en/2025/4/crackdown-in-baku-continues-462793f35-3/>

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> Meydan TV, 'Investigation into NGOs involves dozens, with some under police supervision and house arrest Prosecutor General's Office. Photo: Meydan TV', (March 2025), <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/investigation-into-ngos-involves-dozens-with-some-under-police-supervision-and-house-arrest/>

<sup>60</sup> Report, 'MP: USAID, Voice of America and Radio Liberty harmed not only Azerbaijan, but also US', (March 2025), <https://report.az/en/domestic-politics/mp-usaid-voice-of-america-and-radio-liberty-harmed-not-only-azerbaijan-but-also-us/>, [available in Azerbaijani];

APA, 'USAID - support for terrorism under the guise of humanitarian aid? Analysis', (February 2025), <https://en.apa.az/political/usaid-support-for-terrorism-under-the-guise-of-humanitarian-aid-analysis-460566>;

Azernews, 'Global rejection of USAID - Azerbaijan's stance and broader implication', (February 2025), <https://www.azernews.az/analysis/237251.html>

<sup>61</sup> OC Media, 'Civil society crackdown continues as Azerbaijan ramps up attacks on USAID', (March 2025), <https://oc-media.org/civil-society-crackdown-continues-as-azerbaijan-ramps-up-attacks-on-usaid/>

<sup>62</sup> Modern.az, 'UN agencies in Azerbaijan SUSPEND their activities, (March 2025), <https://modern.az/olke/508769/bmt-nin-azerbaycandaki-qurumlari-fealiyyetini-dayandirir/>, [available in Azerbaijani]

were also accompanied by a letter allegedly by head of Presidential Administration Samir Nuriyev to Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, which was later deleted from the news pieces. On 5 March, pro-government outlets announced formal closure of Transparency International's Azerbaijan office, while discrediting the organization as biased against the country.<sup>63</sup> On the same day, the head of 'Erasmus+' program in Azerbaijan – Parviz Baghirov – announced the closure of the program without a clearly stated reason.<sup>64</sup> While no substantial explanation was given for these steps, pro-government media also organized smear campaign discrediting UN programs in Azerbaijan.<sup>65</sup> Observers and critics view these developments as part of a strategy to isolate Azerbaijan from global institutions, suppress civic engagement, and stifle dissent. They argue that the government is leveraging global trends, such as the rise of right-wing politics in the West, to justify reducing international presence and silencing critical voices.<sup>66</sup>

### 3. Trials Continued in Politically Sensitive Cases

#### *Abzas Media Journalists Protested the Court Hearing*

On March 4, 2024, imprisoned *Abzas Media* journalists, Ulvi Hasanli, Sevinj Vagifgizi, Nargiz Absalamova, and Elnara Gasimova refused to participate in their scheduled court hearing for the third consecutive time. They cited the authorities' failure to investigate their complaints of physical and psychological abuse in custody, also demanding to be transported together to court, criticizing their separation and differential treatment.<sup>67</sup> They described the abuse as politically motivated retaliation for exposing misconduct by staff of Baku Detention Facility. Following their boycott, they reportedly faced reprisals in Baku Detention Facility, including bans on in-person family visits and verbal harassment.<sup>68</sup> At a subsequent March 11 hearing, journalists appeared in court, where Sevinj Vagifgizi and Elnara Gasimova gave testimonies, reiterating that they are being detained solely for exposing corruption and human rights violations, not for any financial crimes. They emphasized that none of the alleged smuggling evidence has ever been substantiated, and described the conditions under which they are held as inhumane, including prolonged forced waits in unsanitary, cold basement cells.<sup>69</sup>

#### *Court Sentences Prominent Oppositional Politician Tofiq Yagublu to 9 Years in Jail*

Trials in the case Tofiq Yagublu, a prominent opposition leader, was finalized on 10 March, with the Baku Court on Grave Crimes sentencing him to 9 years in prison related to an alleged financial transaction involving a person seeking to German citizenship.<sup>70</sup> Yagublu denies the charges, pointing at due procedural irregularities in his case and political motivation behind his arrest in retaliation for his harsh criticism of the government.

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<sup>63</sup> Oxu.az, 'Transparency International's Azerbaijani section suspends operations', (March 2025), <https://oxu.az/cemiyyet/transparency-international-in-azerbaycan-bolmesi-fealiyyetini-dayandirir>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>64</sup> ToplumTV, 'Erasmus+ program suspends operations in Azerbaijan', (March 2025), <https://toplummedia.tv/sosial/pldquoerasmusrdquoun-proqrami-azerbaycanda-fealiyyetini-dayandiribp>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>65</sup> APA, 'Why does Azerbaijan want to close UN offices? - ANALYSIS', (March 2025), <https://apa.az/siyasi/bmt-ile-yeni-realliqlara-uygun-emekdasliq-890920>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>66</sup> Jam News, 'Azerbaijan: Opposition and Media Representatives Respond to International Organizations' Shutdown', (March 2025), <https://jam-news.net/azerbaijan-opposition-and-media-representatives-respond-to-international-organizations-shutdown/>

<sup>67</sup> Abzas Media, "'Abzas' Journalists Refuse to Participate in Court Hearings", (March 2025), <https://abzas.org/en/2025/3/abzas-journalists-refuse-to6a99117f-4/>

<sup>68</sup> Radio Liberty, 'Journalists face pressure for protesting trials', (March 2025), <https://www.azadliq.org/a/abzas-media-jurnalisteri-mehkemeye-gelmirler/33336144.html> [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>69</sup> VOA, 'Abzas Media journalists gave free testimonies', (March 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/8007199.html>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>70</sup> Meydan TV, 'Tofiq Yagublu sentenced to 9 years of imprisonment', (March 2025), <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/tofig-yagublu-sentenced-to-9-years-of-imprisonment/>



Tofiq Yagublu was detained on December 14, 2023, and charged under Articles 178.3.2 (fraud with significant amount) and 320.1, 320.2 (knowingly using forged official documents) of the CC. Authorities claim he and an associate extorted €25,000 and 10,000 AZN (overall €30000 appr.) by promising to secure German citizenship, allegedly evidenced through WhatsApp messages Yagublu insists were fabricated. Human rights groups have condemned his imprisonment and called for immediate release.<sup>71</sup>

### *Court Extends Pre-trial Detention of Human Rights Defender Rufat Safarov*

On 18 March 2025, the Binagadi District Court extended the pre-trial detention of human rights defender Rufat Safarov, Executive Director of the legal advocacy group ‘Defence Line’, by 2 months.<sup>72</sup> Arrested on 3 December 2024 and charges under Articles 178.3.2 (fraud with significant amount), 221.1 (hooliganism), and 127.2.3 (inflicting serious harm to health) of the CC, Safarov has rejected the accusations as politically motivated, noting that his detention occurred days before he was to receive the U.S. State Department’s ‘Global Human Rights Defender’ award. From detention, he revealed that Azerbaijani authorities pressured him to decline the award amid strained U.S.-Azerbaijan relations, warning of consequences for refusal, pressure he believes led directly to his imprisonment.<sup>73</sup> His case was symbolically recognized during the award ceremony in Washington, where Secretary of State Antony Blinken placed the award on an empty chair in his honor.<sup>74</sup>

Following his arrest, pro-government media circulated leaked voice messages of his family members unrelated to the allegations, aiming to discredit him, reflecting a wider smear campaign. A former prosecutor who resigned in protest in 2015, Safarov has previously faced politically motivated persecution, including a 2016 conviction. Considering the timing and nature of the current charges, rights groups widely regard his current detention as part of an ongoing crackdown on human rights defenders and dissent in Azerbaijan.<sup>75</sup>

### *Court Extended Pre-trial Detention of Meydan TV Employees*

On March 14, 2025, the Khatai District Court extended the pre-trial detention of several journalists arrested in connection with the ‘Meydan TV case’ by another 3 months.<sup>76</sup> Accused 10 journalists are all facing charges under Article 206.3.2 (smuggling by a group in prior collusion) of the CC. The accused reject the charges, asserting that the case is politically motivated and intended to suppress independent journalism, an assessment shared by numerous domestic and international media freedom and human rights organizations.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid (n42)

<sup>72</sup> Radio Liberty, ‘Court extended pretrial detention of Rufat Safarov’, (March 2025), <https://www.azadliq.org/a/rufat-seferov-tahire-tahirqizi-cixis-stop/33264604.html>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>73</sup> Radio Liberty, ‘Rufat Safarov: I was offered to refuse the US award, I was punished for not agreeing’, (January 2025), <https://www.azadliq.org/a/rufat-safarov-mukafatdan-imtina-etmediyine-gore-cezalandirilib/33269986.html>

<sup>74</sup> VOA, ‘Azerbaijani rights defender receives US human rights award in absentia’, (December 2024), <https://www.voanews.com/a/azerbaijani-rights-defender-receives-us-human-rights-award-in-absentia/7897971.html>

<sup>75</sup> Amnesty International, ‘Azerbaijan: Authorities must immediately release human rights defender Rufat Safarov’, (December 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/azerbaijan-authorities-must-immediately-release-human-rights-defender-rufat-safarov/>;

VOA, ‘Rights groups, Western governments urge Azerbaijan to release human rights defender’, (December 2024), <https://www.voanews.com/a/global-community-calls-on-azerbaijan-to-release-human-rights-defender/7888986.html>

<sup>76</sup> Meydan TV, ‘Friday Wrap-up: Court Hearings for Meydan TV Journalists, Tofiq Yagublu’s Hunger Strike and European Parliament Resolution on Armenian Prisoners’, (March 2025), <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/friday-wrap-up-court-hearings-for-meydan-tv-journalists-tofig-yagublus-hunger-strike-and-european-parliaments-resolution-on-armenian-prisoners/>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid (n18)

#### 4. From Academia to Prison: Fazil Gasimov Sentenced to 9 Years Jail

On March 13, 2025, Azerbaijani academic and Istanbul University PhD student Fazil Gasimov was sentenced to 9 years in prison by the Baku Serious Crimes Court. He was prosecuted in connection with the politically motivated case against opposition leader and economist Gubad Ibadoghlu. Gasimov has denied all charges, including allegations of counterfeit currency, stating that the accusations are baseless and that he has no links to the alleged evidence.<sup>78</sup>

Gasimov, extradited from Turkey in August 2023, has reportedly endured severe torture and humiliation while in custody, including beatings, forced head shaving, and being bound during meetings with his lawyers. These abuses escalated after he attempted to speak in English with his family during a monitored phone call. Gasimov, who has been on a hunger strike for over five months, was transferred back to the Kurdakhani Pre-Trial Detention Center in Baku in a weakened state, with his legal documents confiscated.<sup>79</sup>

According to the Clooney Foundation for Justice, his trial was marked by serious violations, including being prevented from presenting key evidence, being cut off during his final statement, and reports of mistreatment in detention. His co-defendant, Anar Aliyev, received a 5-year sentence on related charges.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> <https://storage.googleapis.com/qurium/www.meydan.tv/az-article-qubad-ibadoglunun-istintaqi-c%C9%99rciv%C9%99sind%C9%99-saxlanilan-alim%C9%99-9-il-f%C9%99bs-c%C9%99zasi-verildi.html>

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/detained-azerbaijani-phd-student-fazil-gasimov-endures-alleged-torture-and-humiliation/>

<sup>80</sup> <https://x.com/ClooneyFDN/status/1909441200379097278>

## 1. Arrests Continued in ‘NGO Case’ related to USAID activities

On April 9, 2023, three more civil society leaders were arrested in connection with the so-called ‘NGO case’ in Azerbaijan. Asaf Ahmadov, the head of the Ganja Regional Community Center, social worker Zamin Zakiyev and civil society member Ahmad Mammadzada were all placed under a 3 month pretrial detention by the Binagadi District Court.<sup>81</sup> Subsequently, human rights defender Nargiz Mukhtarova and economist Galib Toghrul were also charged in the case and taken into police custody.<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, on 11 April, another civil society member, Aytaj Aghazada, was sentenced in absentia to 4 months of pre-trial detention, with a search warrant issued for her arrest.<sup>83</sup> The developments were followed by a smear campaign by pro-government media depicting NGO work as illegitimate and criminal activity.<sup>84</sup>

This decision was part of an ongoing investigation by the General Prosecutors Office that had already resulted in several arrests, including that of prominent civil society figures such as Mammad Mammadzada and Bashir Suleymanli in mid-March whereas German Marshall Fund’s informal focal point Mehriban Rahimli was taken into police custody and election expert Hafiz Hasanov put under house arrest and international search warrant were issued about activist Subhan Hasanli.<sup>85</sup> They are all charged under Articles 193-1.3.2 (legalization of property obtained through crime), article 213.1 (tax evasion), 308.2 (abuse of official powers with grave consequences) and 313 (document forgery) of the CC. Interrogations have focused on contracts with USAID, the Black Sea Trust (GMF), and other US-based donors, raising concerns about criminalizing foreign-backed civic activity. President Ilham Aliyev also made disparaging remarks on USAID and promised to share investigation materials with the Trump administration, further exposing the politically motivated nature of this crackdown.<sup>86</sup>

## 2. Aggravated Charges and 1 More Accused in the Anar Mammadli case

On 8 April 2025, Baku City Main Police Department re-charged Anar Mammadli with additional 6 charges under the CC, including Article 192.3.2 (illegal entrepreneurship), 193-1.1.1 and 193-1.3.2 (legalization of property obtained through crime by organized group involving significant amount), 206.4 (smuggling by organized group with prior collusion), 213.2.1 (tax evasion by organized group), 320.1 and 320.2 (knowingly using forged official documents). On April 8,

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<sup>81</sup> Meydan TV, ‘Friday Wrap-up: Arrests in NGO case, Khanlar Veliyev’s appointment as Constitutional Court Judge, Tofig Yagublu’s health concerns, and charges of AXCP members’, (April 2025), <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/friday-wrap-up-arrests-in-ngo-case-khanlar-veliyevs-appointment-as-constitutional-court-judge-tofig-yagublus-health-concerns-and-charges-of-axcp-members/>

IRFS, ‘Number of activists charged in Azerbaijan over grants to NGO cases reaches 10’, (April 2025), <https://www.irfs.org/news-feed/number-of-activists-charged-in-azerbaijan-over-grants-to-ngo-cases-reaches-10/>;

<sup>82</sup> Ibid

<sup>83</sup> Ibid

<sup>84</sup> Oxu.az, ‘How was nearly 1 million legalized? - NGO operating in secret’, (April 2025), <https://oxu.az/siyaset/1-milyona-yaxin-pul-nece-leqallasdirilib-gizli-fealiyyet-gosteren-qht>

<sup>85</sup> Ibid (n57)

<sup>86</sup> OC Media, ‘Civil society crackdown continues as Azerbaijan ramps up attacks on USAID’, (March 2025), <https://oc-media.org/civil-society-crackdown-continues-as-azerbaijan-ramps-up-attacks-on-usaid/>;  
Report, ‘President: USAID is completely Corrupt Structure’, (April 2025), <https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/president-usaid-is-completely-corrupt-structure/>

independent journalist and civic activist Anar Abdulla was officially charged in the same case and placed under police supervision after interrogation at the Baku city Main Police Department.<sup>87</sup>

Mammadli was arrested on April 29, 2024, after a search of his and his father's homes and initially charged under Article 206.3.2 (smuggling by a group in prior collusion), now faces additional charges carrying a potential prison sentence of up to 12 years. Anar Mammadli, a leading election rights advocate with a history of a politically motivated conviction in the past, denies the allegations whereas domestic and international actors assert that he is being targeted for his human rights and election monitoring activities.<sup>88</sup>

### 3. Trials in Politically Sensitive Cases Continued in April

#### *Trials Started in Toplum TV case*

On April 4 and 24, the Baku Court on Grave Crimes held the trials in the criminal case against 'Toplum TV'.<sup>89</sup> During the 4 April, lawyers submitted motions requesting the release of defendants currently held in pretrial detention into house arrest, which the court rejected without substantive justification. A separate motion concerning the deteriorating health of detained media expert Alasgar Mammadli was not addressed and remained pending. On 24 April, journalists gave free testimonies, pointing at lack of evidence and political motivation in the case.<sup>90</sup> Defendants also requested President and General Prosecutor to be summoned as witnesses, blaming authorities and pro-government media outlets on breach of presumption of innocence whereas the Court rejected all motions.

#### *Abzas Media Trials Continue as Journalist Report Mistreatment during Detention*

On 1, 8, 22 and 29 April, court proceedings in the *Abzas Media* case continued amid serious procedural concerns and allegations of rights violations. In first two hearings, defendant gave free testimonies as Farid Mehralizada testified that he had no affiliation with *Abzas Media* and was targeted for his economic reporting for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. He reported being abducted, physically and psychologically pressured by police, and denied access to basic rights during detention.<sup>91</sup> Other defendants raised concerns about poor detention conditions, while a witness stated his phone was accessed under coercion. The court reportedly blocked defendants from questioning witnesses, prompting protests from the journalists on trial. 22 and 29 April hearings continued with witness statements as witness Anvar Jafarov reported mistreatment and forced extortion of his password during his brief detention.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Meydan TV, 'Another journalist faces charges', (April 2025), <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/another-journalist-faces-charges/>

<sup>88</sup> Ibid (n56)

<sup>89</sup> Meydan TV, 'Trials of journalists accused in the Toplum TV case begins', (April 2025), <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/trial-of-journalists-accused-in-the-toplum-tv-case-begins/>

<sup>90</sup> Toplum TV, 'Let President Aliyev Come as Witness and General Prosecutor Come and Prove My Guilt', (April 2025), <https://toplummedia.tv/siyaset/pldquotoplum-tvrdquo-isi-ldquoilham-eliyev-gelsin-sahidlik-etsinrdquo-ldquobas-prokuror-gelsin-cinayetimi-suumlbut-etsinrdquo>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>91</sup> Radio Liberty, 'Detained Azerbaijani Journalist Farid Mehralizada Says Trial Is Politically Motivated', (April 2025), <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-farid-mehralizada-political-arrest-reports-rferl/33377467.html>

<sup>92</sup> Toplum TV, 'Witnesses were interrogated in the Abzas Media trial', (April 2025), <https://toplummedia.tv/mehkeme/pldquoabzas-media-isirdquonde-sahidler-dindirilibp>, [available in Azerbaijani]

Abzas Media, 'Abzas Media employees demanded freedom for Tofig Yagublu', (April 2025), <https://abzas.org/az/2025/4/abzasclar-tofig-yagublunun7f79e418-d/>, [available in Azerbaijani]

## *Government-Critic and Activist Emin Ibrahimov Sentenced to Jail*

On April 11, 2025, political activist and former diplomat Emin Ibrahimov was sentenced to 7 years in prison by the Baku Court on Grave Crimes charged under Article 126.2.4 (inflicting bodily harm with hooliganism intent) of the CC as the initial charge under Article 221.3 (hooliganism with use of force) of the CC was dropped.<sup>93</sup> Although prosecutors sought a 10-year sentence, Ibrahimov pleaded not guilty and requested acquittal in his final statement. He was arrested on July 22, 2024, following an alleged altercation near a metro station, where police claim he stabbed a man during a personal dispute. His lawyer, asserted that Ibrahimov was attacked by an unidentified individual before being detained by plainclothes officers and subjected to torture, including electric shocks, at Police Department No. 24 to obtain his phone password.<sup>94</sup>

A former official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Azerbaijan's embassies in the U.S. and Uruguay, Ibrahimov is known for his vocal criticism of the government, particularly its alignment with Russia. Domestic and international rights groups view the case as politically motivated, part of a broader crackdown on dissent since late 2022.<sup>95</sup>

## *Court Extended Pre-trial Detention of Opposition Politician Azar Gasimli*

On April 3, 2024, Yasamal District Court extended the pretrial detention of Azar Gasimli, the director of the Institute for Political Management, for an additional 2 months.<sup>96</sup> Gasimli was arrested on December 8, 2023, under Article 182.2.3 (extortion with use of force) of the CC, allegedly for demanding money through threats of violence.

However, Gasimli has consistently denied the accusations, asserting that his arrest is politically motivated, stemming from his outspoken political views and activities. The case has been widely regarded as an attempt to silence a critical voice, as Gasimli himself claims that the charges are fabricated to target him for his political criticism.<sup>97</sup>

## *Tofiq Yagublu Enters 30th Day of Hunger Strike as Court of Appeal is Set to Hear His Case on 6 May*

As of 30 April, prominent opposition figure Tofiq Yagublu has entered the 30th day of a hunger strike in protest of his unfair imprisonment, while his appeal hearing has been scheduled for May 6.<sup>98</sup> His daughter, Nigar Hazi, condemned the delay as a deliberate act by the authorities to endanger his life. Yagublu, who began his hunger strike on April 1 to demand his release, has already lost 13 kilograms and remains in critical condition at age 65. Despite serious health concerns, he was transferred to medical facility of the Penitentiary Service only 27th of April.<sup>99</sup> Convicted in March on fraud and forgery charges he calls politically motivated, this is not

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<sup>93</sup> Toplum TV, 'Court sentences government-critic former-diplomat to 7 years in prison', (April 2025), <https://toplummedia.tv/mehkeme/phakimiyeti-tenqid-eden-keccedilmis-diplomat-7-il-azadliqdan-mehrum-edildi>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>94</sup> Radio Liberty, 'Former Azerbaijani Diplomat Detained On Stabbing Charge', (July 2024), <https://www.rferl.org/a/emin-ibrahimov-diplomat-azerbaijan-detainment-stabbing-charge/33047304.html>

<sup>95</sup> Free Anar, 'Emin Ibrahimov', accessed 1 April 2025, <https://free-anar.site/az/political-prisoners/emin-ibrahimov/>

<sup>96</sup> Meydan TV, 'Azar Gasimli's detention extended', (April 2025), <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/azar-gasimlis-detention-extended/>

<sup>97</sup> OC Media, 'Former deputy chair of the REAL Party detained in Azerbaijan', (December 2024), <https://oc-media.org/azar-gasimli-was-sentenced-to-four-months-of-pre-trial-detention-after-being-detained-on-charges-of-extortion/>

<sup>98</sup> Toplum TV, 'Appeal Court Hearings Will Take Place on 6 May on Tofiq Yagublu's case', (April 2025), <https://toplummedia.tv/mehkeme/ptofiq-yaqublunun-sikayetini-iki-hefte-sonra-baxilacaq>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>99</sup> Toplum TV, 'Tofiq Yagublu transferred to medical facility', (April 2025), <https://toplummedia.tv/siyaset/ptofiq-yaqublu-muamlaice-muamlessisesine-koumlccediluumlrnuumlubp>



Yagublu's first hunger strike, but supporters warn this one may be life-threatening due to his deteriorating condition and the state's inaction.

## 5. Political Prisoners Face Denied Access to Adequate Medical Care

In recent months, reports surfaced highlighting the continued inhumane and discriminatory treatment of political prisoners in Azerbaijan, pointing to a broader, systemic pattern rather than isolated incidents. Terane Orujova, the mother of detained trade union member Mohyaddin Orujov, reported that her son's health had critically deteriorated in Baku Detention Center No. 3 due to inadequate medical care. She stated that Mohyaddin has been suffering from severe kidney problems, one kidney enlarged and the other with crystallization, yet he has been repeatedly denied proper treatment despite worsening pain.<sup>100</sup> She reported that her son is subjected to inhumane treatment in detention, where authorities ignore his repeated requests for proper medical care, offering only superficial pain relief and leaving him in severe physical pain and despair.

Similarly other political prisoners also reported denied access to medical care in past. On 8 July 2024, Alasgar Mammadli, imprisoned in connection with *Toplum TV* case, was subjected to ill-treatment and degrading conditions during a court-mandated biopsy procedure at a private clinic, where he was secretly transported under heavy guard, denied the presence of his chosen doctors, and prevented from undergoing additional necessary medical tests whereas the procedure was carried out in a highly restricted environment with security officers surrounding him, leading to physical injuries and further endangering his health.<sup>101</sup>

On another occasion, the lawyers of imprisoned human rights defender Anar Mammadli appealed to European Court of Human Rights to highlight denied access to adequate medical care despite serious symptoms, such as arthritis, stomach cramps, headaches, shortness of breath, and a persistent cough.<sup>102</sup> Other political prisoners also reported such mistreatment, raising alarm on recurring pattern in politically motivated cases.<sup>103</sup>

## 6. Political Prisoners Report Poor Transportation Standards

Between court hearings and detention centers, Azerbaijani political prisoners, including detained Abzas Media journalists, describe being transported in overcrowded, poorly ventilated, and outdated vehicles that lack basic human conditions.<sup>104</sup> These vehicles, often referred to as "bread trucks" or "refrigerators," expose prisoners to suffocating heat, unsanitary interiors, and physical danger due to unsafe modifications and lack of maintenance. Despite significant state funding, prisoners report that ventilation rarely works, seating is makeshift and painful, and vehicles are overloaded—sometimes carrying twice their intended capacity.

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<sup>100</sup> Abzas Media, Post on Facebook.com, accessed on 9 April 2025, [available in Azerbaijani] <https://www.facebook.com/AbzasMedia/posts/pfbid023TjqBROEKsdr2vAnqK1D9K3YCIYd187ktket96UmQqkGi2iCpexGHmrKrKb5wJzbl>

<sup>101</sup> Jam News, 'Founder of the persecuted Azerbaijani media does not have cancer. Family doubts the results of the "prison" biopsy', (July 2024), <https://jam-news.net/toplum-tv-case-alasgar-mammadli/>

<sup>102</sup> Amnesty Canada, 'Azerbaijan: Detained human rights advocate denied medical care', (November 2024), <https://amnesty.ca/urgent-actions/azerbaijan-detained-human-rights-advocate-denied-medical-care/>

<sup>103</sup> Abzas Media, 'Imprisoned journalists write on serious conditions in prison', (November 2024), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7881185.html>, [available in Azerbaijani];

Radio Liberty, 'Imran Aliyev's motion rejected and pre-trial detention extended', (November 2024), <https://www.azadliq.org/a/imran-eliyev-apellyasiya/33206958.html>, [available in Azerbaijani];

<sup>104</sup> Abzas Media, 'Penitentiary Service that carries prisoners in bread truck', (April 2025), <https://abzas.org/az/2025/4/cork-masnnda-dustaq-dasy574c9059-1/>, [available in Azerbaijani]

## 7. 2 Members of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party detained while 1 sentenced to jail

In April two more members of the opposition Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan (PFPA) were detained as trials continued in previously arrested members. On 1 and 8 April, PFPA Chair's driver Zaur Rzali and bodyguard Elnur Guliyev were detained and both sentenced to 30-day administrative arrest under Article 510 (hooliganism) and 535 (disobeying police) of the Code of Administrative Offences, charges intensively used to punish oppositional activists.<sup>105</sup> On April 15, PFPA activist Mehman Aliyev was sentenced to 5 years in prison under Article 234.1 (drug possession), a charge he claims was fabricated in retaliation for filming the detention of his relative, who was also later arrested on similar grounds.<sup>106</sup> On 10 April, Binagadi District Court rejected defense motions by PFPA members Zaur Asgarov and Gunduz Mirzayev, charged under Article 281.2 (anti-government calls by a group), to be transferred under house arrest despite legal arguments that pre-trial detention was no longer necessary.<sup>107</sup>

Meanwhile, reports also emerged in April about former bodyguards of Ali Karimli facing mistreatment in prison. Niyamaddin Ahmadov, currently serving a 13-year sentence on terrorism-related charges widely considered politically motivated—who was placed in solitary confinement in March, allegedly for possessing a poem critical of the government.<sup>108</sup> Another bodyguard of Karimli, Kanan Basgal, who was arrested on 22 March and charged with stabbing, was barred from phone calls and family visits in the Baku Detention Facility.<sup>109</sup> The PFPA considers these detentions and pressure part of a coordinated campaign to silence its leadership and stifle political activity as nearly 15 of its members remain behind bars, most denying the charges against them and asserting that their prosecution is politically driven.

## 8. Authorities Disallow Protest by Opposition

On April 23, the Baku City Executive Authority has once again rejected a request by the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan and the National Council of Democratic Forces to hold a peaceful rally, this time scheduled for April 27 at the 'Mahsul' stadium.<sup>110</sup> The planned demonstration, under the slogan 'Freedom for Political Prisoners, Including Tofiq Yagublu', reportedly aimed to draw attention to ongoing human rights violations in Azerbaijan. Authorities deemed the rally 'inappropriate', continuing a six-year pattern of systematically denying opposition-led public assemblies. Opposition leader Ali Karimli criticized the ban as a clear indication of the government's refusal to uphold constitutional rights and its fear of public dissent, calling on both Azerbaijani citizens and the international community to condemn the continued repression, stating that the denial of basic freedoms affects not only political activists, but society at large.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> See;

Elnur Guliyev; IRFS, 'Azerbaijani oppositionist Elnur Guliyev arrested', (April 2025), <https://www.irfs.org/az/news-feed/azerbaijani-oppositionist-elnur-guliyev-arrested/>;

Zaur Rzali; Radio Liberty, 'Ali Karimli's driver arrested for 30 days', (April 2025), <https://www.azadliq.org/a/eli-kerimli-surucu/33366652.html>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>106</sup> Radio Liberty, 'Another member of the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan was sentenced to 5 years in prison: 'Ali was shouting that they were slandering me...', (April 2025), <https://www.azadliq.org/a/axcp-mehman-eliyev-hebs/33386420.html>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>107</sup> Radio Liberty, 'PFPA activists accused of anti-state calls were not released under house arrest, even though the investigation was concluded', (April 2025), <https://www.azadliq.org/a/axcp-zaur-esgerov-gunduz-mirzeyev/33381925.html>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>108</sup> VOA, 'Niyamaddin Ahmadov has been put into solitary confinement cell in prison', (March 2025), <https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/7528021.html>; [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>109</sup> Radio Liberty, 'It is reported that bodyguard of PFPA chairman has been banned from meetings and phone calls', (April 2025), <https://www.azadliq.org/a/kenan-basgal-hebs/33356076.html>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>110</sup> Abzas Media, Post on Facebook.com, accessed on 24 April 2025,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1098084299018258&set=pb.100064500947953.-2207520000&type=3>, [available in Azerbaijani]

<sup>111</sup> Ali Karimli, Post on X, accessed 24 April 2025, <https://x.com/AliKarimli/status/1915099232404738469>

## Four Month's Summary on Human Rights

### Situation in Azerbaijan

#### January - April 2025

In the first four months of 2025, Azerbaijani authorities further escalated the human rights repression through new waves of unrelenting crackdowns on civil society, media, and political activism. Since mid-2023, authorities have escalated their crackdown on civil society through recurring police operations conducted approximately every two to three months. These actions have resulted in multiple waves of detentions and arrests, the freezing of bank accounts, property seizures, travel bans, and intense interrogations. Reports consistently indicated patterns of widespread ill-treatment, the imposition of travel bans, and coordinated smear campaigns disseminated through state-controlled media. Over the past four months, these measures have further dismantled the remaining civic space even further. Independent civic initiatives have been completely paralyzed, with particular impact on the media sector—virtually all independent media outlets along with NGOs have ceased operations within the country.

#### January 2025

In January 2025, Azerbaijani authorities escalated their crackdown on independent media, civil society and opposition voices through a series of new arrests, harsh sentences and aggravated charges. Journalist [Farid Ismayilov](#) became 9<sup>th</sup> person arrested in *Toplum TV* case where preliminary investigation concluded and 7 new charges were [introduced](#).

Trials continued in *Abzas Media* case, where journalists [testified](#) to planted evidence, violent arrests and inhuman detention conditions. In *Meydan TV* case, appeals to end pre-trial detention for five employees ([Aynur Elgunash](#), [Natig Javadli](#), [Khayala Aghayeva](#), [Aytaj Tapdig](#), [Aysel Umudova](#)) were rejected without any justification, and travel bans were imposed on 2 other journalists – [Ulviyya Guliyeva](#) and [Khanim Mustafayeva](#).

Activists such as [Rail Abbasov](#), [Bakhtiyar Hajiyev](#), and [Afiaddin Mammadov](#) received harsh sentences on 9 and 14 January 2025.

Four opposition party members ([Ramil Eynaliyev](#), [Asgar Aghasoy](#), [Alikram Khurshidov](#) and [Alisahib Karimov](#)) were arrested on administrative offences.

#### February 2025

In February 2025, politically motivated repression intensified with growing pressure on media outlets and rising number of political prisoners from 331 on 10 December 2024 [to 357 on 12 February 2025](#).

During February of 2025, 4 more journalists were arrested in relation to [Meydan TV](#) (Shamshad Aghayev, Fatima Movlamli, Nurlan Gahramanli) and [Toplum TV](#) cases ([Shahnaz Baylargizi](#)).

On 25 February 2025, Trade Union activists [Mohyaddin Orujov](#) was sentenced to 3 years in prison on dubious drug charges.

Trials continued in cases of [Abzas Media](#) and [Tofiq Yagublu](#), with courts unanimously rejecting defense motion despite allegations on mistreatment, planted evidence and procedural violations. Pre-trial hearings were held in cases of two PhD students [Bahruz Samadov](#) and [Iqbal Abilov](#) charged with treason.

Courts also extended pre-trial detention in cases of prominent civil society leaders Anar Mammadli and Imran Aliyev on 15 February 2025, and activist Elgiz Gahraman also charged in this case on 28 February.

Several independent media outlets, including Turan Information Agency, Voice of America and BBC Azerbaijani Service suspended operations amid smear campaigns and accreditation cancellations.

### March 2025

Opposition leader Tofiq Yagublu was sentenced to nine years on dubious fraud and forgery charges on 11 March 2025.

In early February, following the Trump administration's executive order freezing USAID funds, Azerbaijani authorities resumed a long-standing criminal case initially opened in 2014 under charges like illegal entrepreneurship and tax evasion. Within the course of new investigation measures, dozens of civil society members were interrogated and well-known election experts and civil society leaders Mammad Mammadzada and Bashir Suleymanli were arrested under money-laundering, abuse-of-power and forgery charges on 14 March 2025.

Meanwhile, authorities also placed another election expert Hafiz Hasanov under house arrest, GMF advisor Mehriban Rahimli under police supervision, and a preventive arrest warrant issued for civil society leader Subhan Hasanli.

Pre-trial detention period extended in cases of Meydan TV and human rights defender Rufat Safarov.

On March 13, 2025, Azerbaijani academic Fazil Gasimov was sentenced to 9 years in prison in a politically motivated case, following his extradition from Turkey and amid reports of torture, due process violations, and prolonged mistreatment in custody.

At least 8 international organization and programs, including 4 offices of the UN, were reportedly ordered to suspend operations amid smear campaigns by state-controlled media outlets.

### April 2025

In April 2024, arrests continued in the NGO case targeting USAID and local partners. Civil society organizations' leaders Asaf Ahmadov, Zamin Zakiyev and Ahmad Mammadzada were arrested, with 2 others Galib Toghrul and Nargiz Mukhtarova put under police supervision and search warrant was issued for Aytaj Aghazada in absentia.

Trials started in *Toplum TV* and continued in *Abzas Media* cases, marked by courts' repeated rejections to defense motions despite allegations of planted evidence, torture and inhuman detention.

Opposition politician Tofiq Yagublu marked 30 days of hunger strike ahead of his appeal.

Emin Ibrahimov, activist, government critic received seven years on hooliganism charges on 11 April 2025.

Prominent civil society leader Anar Mammadli faced 6 new charges as activist Anar Abdulla was involved as an accused in this case on 8 April 2025.

April saw a continuation of repressive measures targeting opposition figures as well. Popular Front Party members faced administrative arrests and one received a five-year sentence on dubious drug charges, while a PFPA-backed protest was disallowed.

Reports also surfaced of political prisoners denied medical care and subjected to dangerous transport conditions, underscoring a broader trend of judicial complicity, smear campaigns and shrinking civic space.

## Four months observations

During 4 months of 2025, the number of political prisoners has reached to 357, 26 more from lately reported 331 in December 2024 as recorded by the Institute for Peace and Democracy on 12 February 2025 not considering 7 new arrests until end of April 2025.<sup>112</sup>

Overall, 18 people were charged in politically motivated criminal charges<sup>113</sup>, with 9 arrested for pre-trial period<sup>114</sup>, 5 put under police supervision<sup>115</sup>, 2 under house arrest<sup>116</sup> and 2 search warrants were issued in absentia<sup>117</sup> between 1 January 2025 and 30 April 2025.

There has been a report of numerous CSO and media professionals with at least 2 persons confirmed were put under politically motivated travel bans<sup>118</sup> during this period. Reportedly, more than dozens of civil-society and media professionals remain under politically motivated travel bans with very few of them publicizing about their cases for fear of risks of persecution.

Furthermore, local courts sentenced 8 people<sup>119</sup> to jail ranging from 3 to 10 years of prison time. Meanwhile, courts extended pre-trial detention periods in 5 instances<sup>120</sup> from 2 to 4 months in this period.

In addition to criminal charges, the authorities have continued using administrative detention as a tool of intimidation whereas 6 members<sup>121</sup> of opposition Parties or their supporters, were subjected to short-term detentions ranging from 10 to 30 days under administrative charges of petty hooliganism and disobeying police.

At least 14 smear campaigns<sup>122</sup> were organized by pro-government media, targeting arrested CSO members, journalists, media outlets and international organizations, aiming at discrediting them.

Between January and April 2025, Azerbaijan's already dire human rights situation have further deteriorated. Politically motivated court rulings, the resuming of a criminal case from 2014 against NGOs, and intensified pressure on independent media and opposition party members have further deepened an already repressive environment.

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<sup>112</sup> Institute for Peace and Democracy, 'Political Prisoners, 12 February 2025', (February 2025), <https://www.ipd-az.org/political-prisoners-for-12-february-2025/>;

Institute for Peace and Democracy, 'Political Prisoners, 10 December 2024', (February 2025), <https://www.ipd-az.org/ru/political-prisoners-for-10-december2024/>

<sup>113</sup> NGO; 1. Anar Abdullayev, 2. Elgiz Gahraman, 3. Mammad Mammadzada, 4. Bashir Suleymanli, 5. Asaf Ahmadov, 6. Zamin Zakiyev, 7. Ahmad Mammadzada, 8. Galib Toghrul, 9. Hafiz Hasanov, 10. Subhan Hasanli, 11. Aytaj Aghazada, 12. Nargiz Mukhtarova, 13. Mehriban Rahimli (Representative of the German Marshall Fund); Media; 14. Shahnaz Baylargini, 15. Shamshad Aghayev, 16. Nurlan Gahramanli, 17. Fatima Movlamli; Farid Ismayilov

<sup>114</sup> Media; 1. Farid Ismayilov, 2. Shamshad Aghayev, 3. Nurlan Gahramanli, 4. Fatima Movlamli, 5. Shahnaz Baylargini (was later placed under house arrest)

NGO; 6. Mammad Mammadzada, 7. Bashir Suleymanli, 8. Zamin Zakiyev, 9. Asaf Ahmadov, 10. Ahmad Mammadzada

<sup>115</sup> 1. Anar Abdulla, 2. Elgiz Gahraman, 3. Nargiz Mukhtarova, 4. Mehriban Rahimli, 5. Galib Toghrul

<sup>116</sup> 1. Shahnaz Baylargini (Media), 2. Hafiz Hasanov (NGO)

<sup>117</sup> 1. Subhan Hasanli (NGO), 2. Aytaj Aghazada (NGO)

<sup>118</sup> Meydan TV; 1. Ulviyya Guliyeva, 2. Khanim Mustafayeva

<sup>119</sup> 1. Bakhtiyar Hajiyev – 10 years, 2. Rail Abbasov – 6 years 6 months, 3. Afizaddin Mammadov – 8 years, 4. Tofiq Yagublu – 9 years, 5. Emin Ibrahimov – 7 years, 6. Mehman Aliyev – 5 years, 7. Mohyaddin Orujov – 3 years, Fazil Gasimov – 9 years.

<sup>120</sup> 1. Meydan TV (8 people) – 3 months, 2. Imran Aliyev – 3 months, 3. Anar Mammadli – 3 months, 4. Azar Gasimli – 2 months, 5. Rufat Safarov – 2 months

<sup>121</sup> Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan; 1. Alisahib Karimov, 2. Asgar Aghasoy, 3. Ramil Eynaliyev, 4. Elnur Guliyev, 5. Zaur Rzali – 30 days Musavat Party; 1. Alikram Khurshidov – 10 days

<sup>122</sup> See Footnotes No. 2, 30, 36, 54, 56, 59, 62, 67, 83 for details



The government has continued a routine wave of arrests and interrogations—accompanied by smear campaigns, travel bans, and the denial of medical care to detainees and have further deepened intolerance toward criticism and pluralism in society. Civic activism and democratic oversight have been effectively shut down, leaving virtually no safe space for independent voices in Azerbaijan.