

ULVIYYA ALI



FACTS

Personal data:

1. Ulviyya Guliyeva (Ali), (DOB: 13.10.1993) is an Azerbaijani independent journalist and human rights activist. Between 2019 and 2025, she worked with the Azerbaijani Service of Voice of America. She is known for reporting on political trials, human rights violations, and social justice issues, and for documenting restrictions on civil liberties in Azerbaijan. She was arrested overnight on 6-7 May 2025 in Baku in connection with the criminal case publicly known as the “Meydan TV case” and charged under Article 206.3.2 (conspiracy to commit bulk cash smuggling), with authorities and pro-government narratives framing the case around alleged foreign funding. Since her arrest¹ in May 2025, Ulviyya Guliyeva has been regarded as a political prisoner by local and international observers and human rights organizations. Her arrest is part of a broader crackdown on civil society and independent media that escalated in the autumn of 2023.²

Date of detention:

2. Ulviyya Guliyeva was detained overnight on 6-7 May 2025 by the Baku Metropolitan General Police Department (BMGPD) in connection with the criminal case known publicly as the “Meydan TV case”.

Legal accusations:

3. On 7 May 2025, Ulviyya Guliyeva was charged under Article 206.3.2 of the Criminal Code (conspiracy to commit bulk cash smuggling) and remanded in custody by the Khatai District Court. Her case is being prosecuted under what has become known as the “Meydan TV case.”
4. On 28 August 2025, the investigative authorities requalified the accusations and announced the following additional charges:
 - Conspiracy to commit illegal entrepreneurship in the form of an organized criminal group and an aggravated and significant amount (Article 192.3.2 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code),

- Conspiracy to commit money laundering in the form of an organized criminal group and a substantial amount (Articles 193-1.3.1 and 193-1.3.2 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code),
- Conspiracy to commit bulk cash smuggling in the form of an organized criminal group (Article 206.4 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code),
- Conspiracy to commit tax evasion in the form of an organized criminal group (Article 213.2.1 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code),
- Forgery and the use of forged documents (Articles 320.1 and 320.2 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code).

Legal status of the remand prisoner:

5. Ulviyya Guliyeva is in pre-trial detention and a remand prisoner. Despite numerous appeals to release her during the trial period, the Court kept her in custody. At the time of writing, her case is pending before the Baku Assize Court together with other defendants in the “Meydan TV case”.

Legal proceedings:

6. On 16 January 2025, Ulviyya Guliyeva was questioned as a witness in the “Meydan TV case” and was subjected to a travel ban.
7. On the night of 6–7 May 2025, law-enforcement officers searched her apartment and detained her. Independent sources and her supporters reported physical and psychological ill-treatment during the search and arrest, as well as concerns about access to adequate medical care in detention.
8. On 7 May 2025, the Khatai District Court ordered her pre-trial detention for 1 month and 29 days.
9. On 19 June 2025, the preliminary investigation period was extended until 6 October 2025. On 24 June 2025, the Khatai District Court extended her pre-trial detention until 6 October 2025.
10. On 16 September 2025, the Khatai District Court further extended her detention until 7 December 2025.
11. On 14 December 2025, the trial in the “Meydan TV case” began at the Baku Assize Court.

LEGAL ANALYSIS

Reasons why Ulviyya Guliyeva should be regarded as a political prisoner:

12. Assessment of whether U. Guliyeva should be regarded as a political prisoner is based on the Resolution 1900 (2012) ‘The Definition of Political Prisoner’ of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the criteria established in the Resolution (paragraph 3). The legal proceedings against and conviction of U. Guliyeva satisfy two criteria established by the paragraph 3 of the Resolution for defining political prisoners ((a) and (e)):

(a) Her detention and imprisonment violate her fundamental rights under the European Convention on Human Rights, particularly freedom of expression and the right to freedom of association.

(e) The political motives (ulterior motives) were sole and predominant in pursuing and conducting unfair criminal proceedings against her, which caused preliminary detention and imprisonment.

13. The European Court of Human Rights’ jurisprudence on Article 18 of the ECHR, which prohibits restrictions on rights for improper purposes, reinforces this analysis. The following considerations based on the quadripartite test should be emphasized in this totality assessment in the general contextual evaluation of a distinct state of affairs (*mutatis mutandis*, *Ibrahimov and Mammadov v. Azerbaijan*, 2020, §§ 113-131):

- 1) The prisoner’s public profile;
- 2) The sequence of the events;
- 3) The manner in which the investigations and trial were carried out;
- 4) The authorities’ conduct.

Ulviyya Guliyeva’s public profile:

14. Ulviyya Guliyeva is a well-known independent journalist and human rights defender, recognized primarily for sustained reporting on politically sensitive issues in Azerbaijan. She is particularly known for covering human rights violations, political trials, protests, and other forms of civic mobilization, including through real-time documentation and dissemination of information on social media, with her photos and videos repeatedly relied upon by international media and advocacy reporting. She also became widely associated with this work through her professional output as a reporter for Voice of America’s Azerbaijani Service (2019–2025), producing a large volume of news pieces and field reporting.

15. From the outset and the circumstances of the criminal case, including the broader official narrative surrounding the “Meydan TV case,” the prosecution appears consistent with a pattern of targeting independent journalism by reframing media work and professional networks as alleged financial or foreign funding criminality. In this context, Ulviyya Guliyeva’s public profile provides reasonable grounds to believe she was targeted not for genuine criminal conduct, but because of her journalistic activity and visibility as a persistent documenter of rights-related abuses and politically sensitive proceedings, including after intensified pressure on independent media.

Sequence of events and contextual factors:

16. Ulviyya Guliyeva’s arrest is part of a larger, coordinated campaign against independent journalism in Azerbaijan, in which journalists and media workers have been detained on a strikingly repetitive set of financial accusations (notably currency smuggling and related offences). This uniformity, and the way charges and detention measures have been applied across different media cases, strongly suggests a state-driven strategy to criminalize independent journalism rather than a legitimate process aimed at individual wrongdoing. The relevant sequence of events should therefore be assessed synthetically, as a single wave of repression with a clear policy logic and continuity.

17. The proto-repression began in the last quarter of 2022. In December 2022, civic activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev was arrested.³ In June 2023, protests against the gold mine in the village of Soyudlu, Gadabay, and their coverage by informally networked NGOs and critical media (including Toplum TV) accelerated the process of repression. After suppressing these protests, the government imposed a blockade on the village and blamed NGOs and the media for inciting the events.⁴

18. In July 2023, politician and economist Gubad Ibadoglu was detained.⁵ In August 2023, pro-government media organized a smear campaign against peace activists protesting military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁶ In September 2023, four activists were administratively detained for one month. Around the same time, arrests were carried out against Labor Desk (İşçi Masası) activists, who sought to establish the country’s only alternative trade union organization.⁷

19. The main follow-up campaign began in November 2023. First, the pro-government media published smear articles targeting almost all NGOs and media outlets. Later, at the end of November 2023, the AbzasMedia arrests began.⁸ These arrests continued in early March 2024 with a police raid against the detainee's affiliated organization and the arrest of several individuals represented in those institutions.
20. In April 2024, Imran Aliyev, the head of the Meclis.info portal monitoring the parliament, was detained.⁹ In May 2024, Anar Mammadli, the head of Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies (EMDS), was arrested (he had also been arrested in the previous round of repression).¹⁰ These arrests demonstrate that a new wave of repression had already begun. The objective of this wave was to paralyze the activities of post-2014 informally networked NGOs and critical media. But it also expanded beyond NGOs and media into academia and peace advocacy: Igbal Abilov¹¹, a Talysh historian/ethnographer, was detained in July 2024 and later sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment in May 2025 on treason-related accusations and political scientist Bahruz Samadov¹² was detained in August 2024 on treason charges similarly and later sentenced to a 15 years' prison term. Both of their arrests are widely condemned as politically motivated.
21. Repression further continued against independent media through the Meydan TV case.¹³ Human Rights Watch reported that the investigation targeted the outlet and that its newsroom staff were held in pre-trial detention from December 2024, with subsequent arrests (including Ulviyya Guliyeva in May 2025) feeding into a consolidated trial that began in December 2025. Finally, repression widened to formal opposition politics in late 2025, when Ali Karimli¹⁴, the long-standing leader of the Popular Front Party, was detained (29 November 2025) and remanded into pre-trial custody, amid a broader escalation against the party documented by human rights monitors.
22. This process was preceded by restrictive legislation: the Law on Media (2021)¹⁵ and the Law on Political Parties (2022)¹⁶. Both laws were criticized by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe for being restrictive. Nevertheless, they remain valid and enforceable. A similar process took place during the repression of 2013–2014: restrictive laws were first adopted, and arrests followed.

23. In this regard, the persons arrested in this process, including the detainee, are victims of the political repression of 2023–2025. The main objective of this campaign of political arrests is to dismantle the informal, networked NGOs and critical media that revived and assumed a new format in the post-2014 era. Political arrests in this context serve an instrumental purpose.

Manner in which the investigation and detention measures were carried out:

24. The investigative authorities acted in bad faith in Ulviyya Guliyeva's case and systematically circumvented procedural safeguards. As reflected in the case materials, the two core foundations of her prosecution, so-called operational information and the results of the search and seizure conducted during the night-time raid on her home, display a pattern of serious procedural deficiencies and selective use of evidence, consistent with a politically driven investigation.

25. According to the indictment, the investigation relied on unspecified operational information/data allegedly indicating that Ulviyya Guliyeva and others had received and transferred large amounts of undeclared foreign currency through informal networks associated with Meydan TV. However, neither the source nor the method of obtaining this information is identified. No document in the case file establishes how the police acquired it, nor whether it originated from surveillance, witness testimony, or a third-party informant. Such vagueness contravenes both Azerbaijani procedural law and the ECHR's standards on foreseeability and challengeability of undisclosed evidence (*mutatis mutandis*, *Ibrahimov and Mammadov v Azerbaijan*, 2020, §§ 119–120). The defense was never granted access to this "operational" material, preventing any meaningful contestation of its validity or lawfulness of acquisition.

26. The subsequent investigative measures focused primarily on searches of Ulviyya Guliyeva's apartment and the seizure of money and personal devices. The indictment itself acknowledges that no customs records, surveillance data, or banking documentation link her personally to cross-border transfers of cash. The alleged bulk currency was not discovered on her, in her possession, or within premises demonstrably under her exclusive control. In similar circumstances, the European Court of Human Rights has found that delayed or police-dominated searches raise legitimate doubts about the authenticity of evidence and the possibility of planting items to support pre-determined charges (*Sakit Zahidov v Azerbaijan*, no 51164/07, § 53, 12 November 2015; *Layijov v Azerbaijan*, no 22062/07, § 69, 10 April 2014). Those concerns are heightened here by reports from her counsel that she was denied access to a lawyer during and immediately after the search and that police officers maintained exclusive control over the premises throughout the operation.

28. The case materials' evidentiary narrative further reveals that the prosecution conflated Ulviyya Guliyeva's professional communications and journalistic payments with alleged illegal entrepreneurship and money laundering. No forensic audit, transaction trail, or authenticated document demonstrates that she received, transported, or concealed criminal proceeds. Instead, the accusation is built on inference and association, linking her ordinary journalistic work for independent outlets to foreign-funded projects presented as criminal enterprises. This inversion of the burden of proof contradicts the presumption of innocence under both Azerbaijani law and Article 6 § 2 ECHR.
28. Finally, subsequent procedural conduct reinforces the inference of bad faith. Ulviyya Guliyeva's pre-trial detention was repeatedly extended on formulaic grounds of the gravity of the offence and risk of interference, without assessing her individual circumstances or the credibility of the underlying evidence. Reports of denial of access to counsel following her objections to intrusive search conditions further underscore the coercive character of the proceedings. Taken together, the investigative approach, anchored in undisclosed operational data, disputed search evidence, and speculative financial accusations, demonstrates a deliberate circumvention of procedural safeguards and supports the conclusion that the investigation was conducted not to establish guilt, but to legitimize the continued detention of an independent journalist targeted for her professional activity.

Authorities' conduct:

29. The relevant authorities, at first, denied Ulviyya Guliyeva procedural safeguards. The domestic courts failed to assess criminal procedural legislation properly. Moreover, the pro-governmental media constantly published defamatory coverage about the detainee. Investigative authorities leaked personal files obtained through investigative measures to the pro-governmental media in a selective way. That led to the misuse of the personal data obtained unlawfully from the detainees in this case and for the construction of defamatory content.

Additional considerations:

30. Finally, international human rights observers, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have denounced the charges against Ulviyya Guliyeva and others from Meydan TV as politically motivated (see cited footnotes above).

CONCLUSION

31. The personal factors (Ulviyya Guliyeva's public profile, absence of convincing evidence, and constant violation of procedural rights) and contextual factors (defamatory media campaign and new wave of political repression) cumulatively indicate reasonable grounds to believe that Ulviyya Guliyeva should be considered a political prisoner in light of Resolution 1900 (2012) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).

RECOMMENDATION

32. Based on this conclusion, Ulviyya Guliyeva should be released unconditionally and immediately and compensated *restitutio in integrum*.

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