

# AYSEL UMUDOVA

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## FACTS

### Personal data:

1. Aysel Umudova (DOB: 01.08.1992) is an Azerbaijani independent journalist and a reporter for Meydan TV. She was arrested on 6 December 2024 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 arrest<sup>1</sup>, Aysel Umudova has been treated by international press-freedom and human-rights organizations as part of a politically motivated crackdown on independent media and is widely regarded by observers monitoring the case as a political prisoner. Her arrest is part of a broader crackdown on civil society and independent media that escalated in the autumn of 2023.<sup>2</sup>

### Date of detention:

2. Aysel Umudova was detained on 6 December 2024 by the Baku Metropolitan General Police Department (BMGPD).

### Legal accusations:

3. On 06 December 2024, Aysel Umudova 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. Aysel Umudova 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 6 December 2024, Aysel Umudova was detained by law-enforcement authorities in Baku in connection with the criminal case publicly known as the “Meydan TV case.”
7. Public reporting indicates that, during the initial operation, law-enforcement officers conducted searches of journalists’ apartments, seized personal and work-related items, and transferred detainees to police custody within the framework of an operation led by the Baku Metropolitan General Police Department.
8. On 8 December 2024, the Khatai District Court ordered four months’ pre-trial detention for Aysel Umudova on the initial charge under Article 206.3.2 of the Criminal Code.
9. On 2 April 2025, the Khatai District Court extended Aysel Umudova’s pre-trial detention, together with that of other defendants in the Meydan TV case.
10. On 24 June 2025, the Khatai District Court further extended pre-trial detention for the Meydan TV defendants by three months, and on 16 September 2025, the court again extended detention periods for the same group, including Aysel Umudova.
11. On 12 December 2025, trial proceedings in the consolidated “Meydan TV case” commenced before the Baku Assize Court, with Aysel Umudova listed among the defendants.

## LEGAL ANALYSIS

### Reasons why Aysel Umudova should be regarded as a political prisoner:

12. Assessment of whether A. Umudova 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 the conviction of A. Umudova satisfy two criteria established by 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.

### Aysel Umudova’s public profile:

14. The circumstances reveal that Aysel Umudova is an independent journalist in Azerbaijan, recognized primarily for her work as a reporter for Meydan TV, an outlet known for publishing reports on politically sensitive issues, including governance, civic freedoms, and rights-related matters. As a member of this independent media environment, her professional profile is situated within a sector that has been subjected to sustained state pressure and recurrent accusations of acting as a conduit for foreign influence.

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, Aysel Umudova’s public profile provides reasonable grounds to believe she was targeted not for genuine criminal conduct, but because of her journalistic activity within an independent outlet that has come under intensified pressure since 2023.

#### **Sequence of events and contextual factors:**

16. Aysel Umudova’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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

18. In July 2023, politician and economist Gubad Ibadoglu was detained.<sup>5</sup> In August 2023, pro-government media organized a smear campaign against peace activists protesting military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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).<sup>10</sup> 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 Abilov<sup>11</sup>, 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 Samadov<sup>12</sup> 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:<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch reported that the authorities' investigation was directed at the outlet and that its staff were placed in pre-trial detention beginning in December 2024 (Aysel Umudova was among the first individuals arrested), with later arrests incorporated into the same proceedings, culminating in a consolidated trial that opened in December 2025. Finally, repression widened to formal opposition politics in late 2025, when Ali Karimli<sup>14</sup>, 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)<sup>15</sup> and the Law on Political Parties (2022)<sup>16</sup>. 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 Aysel Umudova's case and systematically circumvented procedural safeguards. As reflected in the indictment, the prosecution rests on broadly framed operational-search assertions and police-controlled investigative measures deployed during the initial December 2024 operation against Meydan TV-linked journalists.

25. Taken together with reporting about searches, seizures, and barriers to effective defense access in the Meydan TV case, the overall investigative method appears oriented toward custodial control and selective evidentiary framing rather than adversarially testable proof.

26. According to the indictment, the investigation relied on unspecified operational information/data allegedly indicating that persons linked (in the authorities' framing) to Meydan TV received and transferred undeclared foreign currency through informal networks.

27. However, neither the source nor the method of obtaining this operational material is identified in a way that permits meaningful scrutiny: the indictment does not clarify whether it derived from surveillance, witness testimony, an informant, or other means, nor does it provide reliability indicators.

28. Such vagueness is legally consequential because it deprives the defense of an effective opportunity to contest the origin, lawfulness, and credibility of the material precipitating detention and prosecution (*mutatis mutandis*, *Ibrahimov and Mammadov v Azerbaijan* (2020) §§ 119–120).

29. The indictment locates the initiating material evidentiary episode in a police-controlled operational interception on 6 December 2024 at Heydar Aliyev International Airport, where 38,000 EUR was allegedly discovered in the luggage of another defendant (Ramin Jabrayilzade/Deko) immediately after border entry.

30. Public reporting confirms that, on the same date, a group of Meydan TV journalists, including Aysel Umudova, were detained and that a criminal case was opened under Article 206.3.2. In substantive terms, the case structure raises the concern that liability is extended outward from a single initiating seizure event into an associative group narrative, without publicly demonstrated individualized conduct by each journalist sufficient to establish bulk-cash smuggling.

31. The subsequent investigative measures further reinforce concerns about procedural safeguards. Apartments of detained journalists were searched, and phones, computers, and other work-related devices were seized. These are measures that, in press cases, inherently capture professional communications and potentially source-related material, while placing the evidentiary narrative under near-exclusive police control. In analogous contexts, the European Court of Human Rights has found that deficiencies surrounding police-dominated search-and-seizure operations can raise legitimate doubts about evidentiary integrity and the risk of evidence being used to support a pre-determined accusation (*Sakit Zahidov v Azerbaijan* (2015) § 53; *Layijov v Azerbaijan* (2014) § 69).
32. Finally, subsequent procedural conduct reinforces the inference of bad faith. Aysel Umudova's pre-trial detention was maintained through repeated extensions applied across the defendant group, with judicial decisions typically relying on standardized formulations rather than a demonstrated individualized assessment of the credibility of evidence and necessity of continued detention. The later escalation of the case into a broad package of additional alleged financial and document-related charges across the group further supports the appearance of a detention-driven consolidated prosecution strategy rather than a narrowly tailored inquiry into individual criminal responsibility.

**Authorities' conduct:**

33. The relevant authorities, at first, denied Aysel Umudova 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:**

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

## CONCLUSION

35. The personal factors (Aysel Umudova'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 Aysel Umudova should be considered a political prisoner in light of Resolution 1900 (2012) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).

## RECOMMENDATION

35. Based on this conclusion, Aysel Umudova should be released unconditionally and immediately and compensated *restitutio in integrum*.

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