

ASEF AHMADOV



FACTS

Personal data:

1. Asef Ahmadov is an Azerbaijani civic activist from Ganja city and the head of the Ganja Regional Community Centre, a local non-profit organization. He has no prior convictions and engaged in community-based legal-information and social-support work, including initiatives aimed at women and other vulnerable residents in western parts of Azerbaijan.
2. Ahmadov was detained on 9 April 2025 and placed in pre-trial detention by the Binagadi District Court. The indictment shows that he was initially charged under Articles 193-1.3.2, 308.2 and 313 of the Criminal Code and was later prosecuted in the separate case file under Articles 193-1.2.2, 193-1.2.3, 193-1.3.2, 308.1 and 313.¹
3. Ahmadov's prosecution is a fabricated case brought within Azerbaijan's renewed "NGO case", a reopened version of the earlier crackdown used to criminalize independent grant-funded civic activity and dismantle autonomous civil society. Human Rights Watch identifies him among the activists held in pre-trial custody on spurious charges after the authorities revived the old investigation, and the case fits the broader pattern of shrinking civic space and fabricated or politically motivated prosecutions against activists and civil society representatives.²

Date of detention:

4. On 09.04.2025, Asef Ahmadov was detained in the fabricated “NGO case”, and on the same date, the Binagadi District Court imposed a pre-trial detention measure on him. The indictment records that the detention was initially set until 13.07.2025 and was later repeatedly extended.

Legal accusations:

5. On 09 April 2025, the Investigation Department of the Prosecutor General’s Office formally charged Asef Ahmadov with the following bogus accusations:

- laundering property allegedly obtained through criminal means, in a substantial amount, under Article 193-1.3.2 of the Criminal Code;
- abuse of official authority under Article 308.2 of the Criminal Code;
- official forgery under Article 313 of the Criminal Code.
- After the case against him was severed from the umbrella NGO file on 12.09.2025, the accusation was reformulated and expanded under Articles 193-1.2.2, 193-1.2.3, 193-1.3.2, 308.1 and 313 of the Criminal Code.

6. His case forms part of the fabricated “NGO case” used to criminalize independent civic activity and grant-funded civil-society work in Azerbaijan. The same case has targeted Bashir Suleymanli and Zamin Zaki and other civil-society actors, while additional activists were placed under alternative preventive measures or in-absentia search orders. Human Rights Watch identifies this prosecution wave as a revived version of the earlier NGO crackdown machinery used to destroy independent activism.

Legal status of prisoner:

7. Asef Ahmadov is a detained convict. As of March 2026, he remained in custody in the fabricated “NGO case”, and his court proceedings were ongoing before the Baku Assize Court.

Legal proceedings:

8. On 09.04.2025, Asef Ahmadov was detained and, on the same day, the Binagadi District Court ordered pre-trial detention for 3 months and 4 days, until 13.07.2025. He remained in custody throughout the investigation and into the trial stage. His appeal against that order was dismissed on 17.04.2025. Defense applications to replace detention with house arrest were rejected on 14.05.2025 and 19.06.2025, and those refusals were upheld on appeal on 29.05.2025 and 03.07.2025. The detention order was then extended on 09.07.2025 until 13.10.2025, the appeal against that extension was dismissed on 24.07.2025, and the measure was extended again on 26.09.2025 until 13.11.2025.

9. On 12.09.2025, the prosecution severed Ahmadov's file from the wider fabricated "NGO case" and proceeded against him separately, claiming that sufficient evidence had been gathered and that his part of the investigation could be completed on its own. On the same date, the authorities reformulated and broadened the accusation: the initial charges under Articles 193-1.3.2, 308.2 and 313 were reclassified as Articles 193-1.2.2, 193-1.2.3, 193-1.3.2, 308.1 and 313. The indictment was then prepared in October 2025.
10. After the investigation was declared complete, the fabricated case was sent for trial in October 2025. Ahmadov's case had been referred to the Ganja Assize Court, and by February 2026 his family confirmed that the court proceedings were still ongoing while he remained in detention.
11. The procedural pattern shows that Ahmadov's case was handled as a detention-first prosecution, not as a genuinely adversarial criminal process. Every meaningful defense effort to secure release was rejected, appellate review operated as a rubber stamp, and the courts preserved custody at each stage instead of subjecting the prosecution's allegations to strict scrutiny. This is the standard operating method in fabricated politically sensitive cases in Azerbaijan.
12. The course of the proceedings further confirms the artificial nature of the accusation. After Ahmadov had spent months in pre-trial detention, the prosecutors split his file off from the broader NGO investigation and reworked the legal classification of the same underlying conduct, while continuing to portray ordinary grant-funded civil-society activity as criminal behavior. The proceedings were used to preserve detention and carry the fabricated case to trial, not to impartially determine criminal liability.

LEGAL ANALYSIS

Reasons why Asef Ahmadov should be regarded as a political prisoner:

13. Assessment of whether A. Ahmadov 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)³. The legal proceedings against and conviction of A. Ahmadov satisfy two criteria established by the paragraph. 3 of the Resolution for defining political prisoners ((a) and (e)):

(a) Asef's detention and imprisonment violate his fundamental rights under the European Convention on Human Rights, particularly freedom of expression and the right to freedom of association, as well as the right to a fair trial and to liberty and security.

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

14. 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 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.

Asef Ahmadov's public profile:

15. Asef Ahmadov is a regional civic activist and educator from Ganja. He is identified as the head of the Ganja Regional Community Centre, and a civic activist. The Ganja Regional Community Centre was publicly associated with social-support work for vulnerable women in the west of the country, including a project on strengthening their economic opportunities and providing free legal and psychological assistance in Ganja. Ahmadov's public profile is thus rooted in community organization, legal-awareness work and social support, not in any criminal activity.

16. From the outset, Ahmadov's prosecution has formed part of the fabricated "NGO case" used to crush independent civic life in Azerbaijan. Human Rights Watch states that the authorities reopened the old NGO investigation to destroy independent activism and specifically names Asaf Ahmadov among the activists placed in pre-trial custody on spurious charges. In Ahmadov's case, ordinary donor-supported social and legal-assistance work was recast as money laundering, abuse of office and forgery. The case is punitive in purpose and political in function: it is aimed at disabling independent regional civic organizing, intimidating activists who cooperate with international donors, and warning others that autonomous community work will be met with imprisonment.

The sequence of events:

17. Asef Ahmadov's arrest is part of a larger, coordinated pattern of repression in Azerbaijan, in which opposition-aligned individuals and government critics have been detained on a strikingly repetitive set of allegations, most commonly serious narcotics-related accusations framed as large quantity and/or intent to sell, as well as finance/tax related crimes and crimes against the state and national security. This uniformity, and the way charges and detention measures have been applied across multiple similar cases, strongly suggests a state-driven strategy to criminalize dissenting political affiliation and criticism 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.

18. Already in 2022, a discernible pattern of repression was emerging through a series of arrests that disproportionately affected persons deported/returned from abroad (notably Germany), individuals perceived as affiliated with the PFPA/AXCP, Musavat and certain minority figures. This early hunt functioned as a clear precursor to, and warning sign of, the wider crackdown that would later expand across independent media, NGOs, and other segments of civil society.
19. In December 2022, civic activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev was arrested.⁴ 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.⁵
20. In July 2023, politician and economist Gubad Ibadoglu was detained. In August 2023, pro-government media organized a smear campaign against peace activists protesting military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh. 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.
21. 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. 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.
22. In April 2024, Imran Aliyev, the head of the Meclis.info portal monitoring the parliament, was detained. 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). 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: Iqbal Abilov, 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 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.
23. Repression further continued against independent media through the Meydan TV case: 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 feeding into a consolidated trial that began in December 2025. Finally, repression widened to formal opposition politics in late 2025, when Ali Karimli, 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.

24. This process was preceded by restrictive legislation: the Law on Media (2021)¹⁶ and the Law on Political Parties (2022)¹⁷. 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.
25. 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.

The manner in which the investigations and trial were carried out:

26. The investigative authorities acted in bad faith in Asef Ahmadov's case and treated the result as predetermined from the outset. His prosecution was folded into the revived "NGO case", a politically directed umbrella investigation used to criminalize independent civil-society work by recharacterizing grant management, project implementation and organizational administration as serious economic crime. The structure of the case shows that the objective was not to establish whether Ahmadov had committed a recognizable criminal offence, but to force ordinary donor-funded civic activity into pre-selected money-laundering, abuse-of-office and forgery provisions. Human Rights Watch identifies Ahmadov's prosecution as part of the authorities' use of an old criminal case to escalate repression against independent activists.
27. According to the indictment, Ahmadov's case was investigated within criminal case no. 142006023 before being split off on 12 September 2025 into a separate file, no. 252006083. The severance decision itself exposes the artificial nature of the proceedings: it states, in substance, that enough evidence had already been gathered and that separate completion of the investigation had become possible, while also invoking the need to protect the rights of a detained person. In other words, once Ahmadov had already been put in custody inside the larger NGO file, the prosecution reorganized the case around that detention posture and carried it forward in a stand-alone format. On the same date, the accusation was not narrowed but reworked and expanded, moving from Articles 193-1.3.2, 308.2 and 313 to Articles 193-1.2.2, 193-1.2.3, 193-1.3.2, 308.1 and 313. That sequence is characteristic of a fabricated prosecution: the legal theory was adjusted to preserve the case, not because newly discovered facts required a good-faith correction.

28. The investigative machinery was entirely state-controlled. The indictment describes a large joint investigation team involving the Prosecutor General's Office and the tax authorities' investigative structures, assembled within the umbrella NGO case and then redeployed in Ahmadov's separated file. That institutional design matters here. It meant that the evidence, legal characterization and procedural decisions all came from the same centrally managed prosecutorial framework that had already targeted multiple civil-society actors. The prosecution narrative was built through internal state documents, financial reclassification exercises and investigator-driven interpretations of NGO activity, rather than through any genuinely adversarial process capable of distinguishing lawful grant-funded work from criminal conduct. HRW records that the authorities questioned around 50 people in this revived NGO case and put several civic leaders, including Ahmadov, into pre-trial detention.
29. The handling of detention further confirms procedural bad faith. Ahmadov was detained on 9 April 2025, remanded in custody the same day until 13 July 2025, lost his appeal on 17 April, saw defense requests for house arrest rejected on 14 May and 19 June, and lost the related appeals on 29 May and 3 July. His detention was then extended on 9 July until 13 October 2025; that extension was upheld on 24 July, and on 26 September, it was extended again until 13 November 2025. The pattern is obvious: custody was maintained as the default position and every defense attempt to displace it failed. There is nothing in the procedural chronology that suggests a rigorous, individualized judicial assessment of necessity, proportionality or evidential weakness. The courts functioned as ratifiers of the prosecution's detention strategy.
30. The substance of the accusation is equally revealing. Ahmadov is not alleged to have committed an ordinary violent, predatory or corruption offence in any conventional sense. Instead, the case reframes civic and organizational activity as a criminal enterprise by treating funds linked to NGO work as so-called criminally obtained property and by converting administrative conduct into abuse of office and official forgery. That is the core mechanism of the fabricated NGO case. The authorities did not investigate Ahmadov because independent evidence pointed to genuine laundering or falsification; they first decided to criminalize autonomous civic activity and then mapped criminal-code provisions onto it. The subsequent transfer of the case to trial while he remained in detention completed that process. By March 2026, Ahmadov was still in custody and still being prosecuted before the Baku Assize Court.

The authorities' conduct:

31. The relevant authorities failed to provide the minimum safeguards of a fair and impartial process in Ahmadov's case. The Prosecutor General's Office ran the case inside a politically charged umbrella investigation directed at independent NGOs; the courts approved detention at every key stage; the defense was unable to secure even house arrest; and the prosecution altered and expanded the legal classification midstream while keeping Ahmadov in custody. The case was used as a tool of repression to silence Ahmadov and shut down his independent civic activity.

Additional considerations:

32. Finally, international human rights observers have denounced the charges against A. Ahmadov as politically motivated.

CONCLUSION

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

RECOMMENDATION

34. Based on this conclusion, Asef Ahmadov should be released unconditionally and immediately. Furthermore, he should be compensated *restitutio in integrum*.

- ¹ Arzu Geybulla, ‘Azerbaijan Uses Old Criminal Case to Ramp Up Repression’ Human Rights Watch (29 April 2025) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/04/29/azerbaijan-uses-old-criminal-case-ramp-repression> accessed 14 March 2026.
- ² European Parliament, ‘Resolution on the crackdown on independent media in Azerbaijan, notably the case of Abzas Media’ (2024) P9_TA(2024)0074 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2024-0074_EN.html accessed 29 May 2025.
- ³ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), ‘Resolution 1900 (2012): The definition of political prisoner’ (3 October 2012) <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=19150> accessed 29 May 2025.
- ⁴ Eurasianet, Prominent activist detained following U.S. sanctions on Azerbaijani official <https://eurasianet.org/prominent-activist-detained-following-us-sanctions-on-azerbaijani-official> accessed 28 August 2025
- ⁵ Reporters Without Borders, Police prevent coverage of protests about environmental scandal in Azerbaijan <https://rsf.org/en/police-prevent-coverage-protests-about-environmental-scandal-azerbaijan> accessed 28 August 2025
- ⁶ Human Rights Watch, Azerbaijan: Free Academic Facing Bogus Charges <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/07/23/azerbaijan-free-academic-facing-bogus-charges> accessed 28 August 2025
- ⁷ Musavat, “No-Warçılarının dosyesi: onlar harada və necə yetişiblər” https://musavat.com/news/no-war-cilarin-dosyesi-onlar-harada-ve-necə-yetisibler_1001622.html accessed 28 August 2025
- ⁸ Eurasianet, Azerbaijan authorities smash unionization efforts for gig workers <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-authorities-smash-unionization-efforts-for-gig-workers> accessed 28 August 2025
- ⁹ Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: Seven journalists sentenced in latest shocking crackdown on free speech <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/06/azerbaijan-seven-journalists-sentenced-in-latest-shocking-crackdown-on-free-speech/> accessed 28 August 2025
- ¹⁰ Council of Europe, Safety Of Journalists — FOM Alert <https://fom.coe.int/en/alerte/detail/107640886> accessed 28 August 2025
- ¹¹ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Azerbaijan: authorities should release imprisoned human rights defenders, journalists and civil society activists <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/azerbaijan-authorities-should-release-imprisoned-human-rights-defenders-journalists-and-civil-society-activists> accessed 28 August 2025

¹² Scholars at Risk, 'Release academic Igbal Abilov, wrongfully imprisoned for one year' (22 July 2025) <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/2025/07/release-academic-igbal-abilov-wrongfully-imprisoned-for-one-year/> accessed 7 January 2026

¹³ Human Rights Watch, 'Azerbaijan: Escalating Crackdown on Critics' (30 August 2024) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/08/30/azerbaijan-escalating-crackdown-critics> accessed 7 January 2026.

¹⁴ Arzu Geybulla, 'Another Courageous Journalist Jailed in Azerbaijan' (Human Rights Watch, 16 May 2025) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/16/another-courageous-journalist-jailed-azerbaijan> accessed 7 January 2026.

¹⁵ Amnesty International, 'Azerbaijan: Arrest of opposition leader is further evidence of consolidation of authoritarian practices' (1 December 2025) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/12/azerbaijan-arrest-of-opposition-leader-is-further-evidence-of-consolidation-of-authoritarian-practices/> accessed 7 January 2026.

¹⁶ Venice Commission. 'Opinion on On The Law On Media in Azerbaijan.' Council of Europe, Opinion No. 1078/2022, 2022, available at [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2022\)009-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2022)009-e)

¹⁷ Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR. Joint Opinion On The Law On Political Parties, 2023 available at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/4/543922.pdf>

