

# AHMAD MUKHTAR

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## FACTS

### Personal data:

1. Ahmad Mukhtarov (DOB: 25.06.1985) is an Azerbaijani freelance photojournalist and photography professional. He worked as a photography instructor at the Baku School of Journalism before continuing as a freelance photographer.
2. He is publicly known for field photography and conflict/social reporting, including coverage connected to the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and broader current-affairs documentation. Since his detention<sup>1</sup> in the framework of the “Meydan TV case”, he has been treated in independent reporting on the case as part of a politically charged pattern identifying journalism as alleged financial criminality through repetitive currency-smuggling accusations. His 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:

3. Ahmad Mukhtarov was detained on 26 August 2025 by the Baku Metropolitan General Police Department (BMGPD) in connection with the criminal case known publicly as the “Meydan TV case”.

### Legal accusations:

4. On 28 August 2025, the investigative authorities charged him with the following accusations:
  - 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. Ahmad Mukhtarov is in pre-trial detention and a remand prisoner. Despite numerous appeals to release him during the trial period, the Court kept him in custody. At the time of writing, his case is pending before the Baku Assize Court together with other defendants in the “Meydan TV case”.

### **Legal proceedings:**

6. On 26 August 2025, Ahmad Mukhtarov was detained in Baku in connection with the criminal case publicly known as the “Meydan TV case.”
7. Public reporting indicates that he had previously been detained during the initial December 2024 Meydan TV crackdown and served a 20-day administrative sentence on allegations unrelated to the later criminal prosecution; he was then re-arrested in August 2025 and brought into the consolidated criminal case.
8. On 28 August 2025, the Khatai District Court remanded Ahmad Mukhtarov in pre-trial detention for 40 days.
9. Following his remand, public reporting stated that the investigation integrated him into the broader indictment framework against Meydan TV-linked defendants and advanced a package of accusations aligned with those used across the case.
10. In late 2025, the proceedings were consolidated for trial together with other defendants in the “Meydan TV case,” including those detained from December 2024 onward.
11. On 12 December 2025, the consolidated trial in the “Meydan TV case” began before the Baku Assize Court, with Ahmad Mukhtarov listed among the defendants.

## LEGAL ANALYSIS

### Reasons why Ahmad Mukhtarov should be regarded as a political prisoner:

12. Assessment of whether Ahmad Mukhtarov 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 Ahmad Mukhtarov satisfy two criteria established by paragraph 3 of the Resolution for defining political prisoners ((a) and (e)):

(a) His 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.

(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.

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.

### Ahmad Mukhtarov’s public profile:

14. The circumstances reveal that Ahmad Mukhtarov is a well-known freelance photojournalist in Azerbaijan, recognized primarily for field photography and visual documentation of socially and politically significant events. He is trained in journalism at Baku State University, and professionally active as a photographer, including work as a photography instructor at the Baku Journalism School before continuing as a freelance photojournalist. His public profile is therefore situated within the independent media ecosystem, particularly in the domain of visual reporting and journalism training.

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 media environments by reframing journalism and journalistic networks as financial or foreign-funding criminality. In this context, Ahmad Mukhtarov’s public profile provides reasonable grounds to believe that he was targeted not for genuine criminal conduct, but because of his role as a freelance photojournalist and his proximity, real or imputed, to the independent media sphere that has come under intensified pressure since 2023.

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

16. Ahmad Mukhtarov’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, with later arrests incorporated into the same proceedings (including Ahmad Mukhtarov in August 2025), 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.

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 Ahmad Mukhtarov’s case and relied on techniques that structurally weaken procedural safeguards. As reflected in the indictment, the “Meydan TV case” was triggered and operationalized through (i) broadly framed operational-search inputs and (ii) a police-controlled operational episode on 6 December 2024 at Heydar Aliyev International Airport, which the prosecution used as the foundation for a widening set of arrests and charges.
25. According to the indictment’s narrative, law-enforcement bodies acted on unspecified operational information/data suggesting that persons linked (in the authorities’ framing) to Meydan TV were involved in transporting undeclared foreign currency into Azerbaijan and coordinating its handling. However, the indictment does not disclose the provenance of that operational information in a manner that allows meaningful scrutiny: it does not identify whether the information came from surveillance, witnesses, informants, or other means, nor does it present reliability indicators. This opacity is legally consequential because it prevents the defense from effectively challenging the origin and credibility of the material precipitating detention and prosecution (*mutatis mutandis*, *Ibrahimov and Mammadov v Azerbaijan* (2020) §§ 119–120).
26. The indictment locates the initiating so-called material evidentiary moment in the airport interception immediately after border entry, where 38,000 EUR is described as having been discovered in the luggage of another defendant (Ramin Jabrayilzade/Deko).
27. Public reporting indicates that, after the initial December 2024 arrests, the authorities continued to broaden the case through subsequent detentions, including Ahmad Mukhtarov’s arrest on 27 August 2025 and his remand the next day. In substantive terms, this sequencing supports the concern that the evidentiary logic of the case operates as an associative group narrative, expanding beyond the initiating seizure event into a consolidated prosecution, without public demonstration of individualized conduct by each later-arrested defendant sufficient to establish bulk-cash smuggling.

28. Public reporting about Ahmad Mukhtarov's August 2025 detention raises additional procedural-fairness concerns. It was reported that he would be represented by a state-appointed lawyer, a circumstance that, in politically sensitive cases, can undermine confidence in the effectiveness and independence of defense at the earliest stage. More broadly, public sources on the Meydan TV case describe a pattern of home searches, seizures of devices, and custody-driven investigative steps that place evidence generation under near-exclusive police control. In analogous contexts, the European Court of Human Rights has emphasized that police-dominated evidence generation and deficiencies surrounding searches can raise legitimate concerns about evidentiary integrity and potential fabrication (see *Sakit Zahidov v Azerbaijan* (2015) § 53; *Layijov v Azerbaijan* (2014) § 69).
29. Finally, the subsequent procedural trajectory reinforces the inference of a detention-driven approach. Ahmad Mukhtarov was remanded for 40 days in August 2025, and his case was then integrated into the consolidated indictment framework and trial process together with defendants detained from December 2024 onward.
30. Taken together, (i) reliance on non-transparent operational inputs, (ii) the use of the December 2024 airport seizure attributed to another person as the platform for a widening prosecution, and (iii) reported deficiencies affecting early defense arrangements, there are serious grounds to question the good faith of the investigative authorities and the sufficiency and individualization of reasonable suspicion applied to Ahmad Mukhtarov within the "Meydan TV case."

#### **Authorities' conduct:**

31. The relevant authorities, at first, denied Ahmad Mukhtarov 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 misuse of the personal data obtained unlawfully from the detainees in this case and for the construction of defamatory content.

#### **Additional considerations:**

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

## CONCLUSION

33. The personal factors (Ahmad Mukhtarov'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 Ahmad Mukhtarov 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, Ahmad Mukhtarov should be released unconditionally and should be compensated restitutio in integrum.

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