

AYTAJ TAPDIG



FACTS

Personal data:

1. Aytaj Ahmadova (Tapdig) (DOB: 18.07.1993) is an Azerbaijani independent journalist and a reporter for Meydan TV. She was detained on 6 December 2024 in Baku in the context of the criminal case publicly known as the “Meydan TV case”. Since her arrest¹, she 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 as a political prisoner by observers monitoring the case. 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. Aytaj Ahmadova was detained on 06 December 2024 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 06 December 2024, Aytaj Ahmadova 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:

1. Committee to Protect Journalists, ‘Azerbaijani authorities detain at least 6 journalists on currency smuggling charges’ (Committee to Protect Journalists, 7 December 2024) <https://cpj.org/2024/12/azerbaijani-authorities-detain-at-least-6-journalists-on-currency-smuggling-charges/> accessed 7 January 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.

- 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. Aytaj Ahmadova 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, Aytaj Ahmadova 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 carried out searches and seized property connected to detained journalists, and that the detainees were taken to police custody in the framework of the Baku Metropolitan General Police Department operation.
8. On 8 December 2024, the Khatai District Court ordered four months’ pre-trial detention for Aytaj Ahmadova and other detained Meydan TV journalists on the initial charge under Article 206.3.2.
9. On 2 April 2025, courts extended the pre-trial detention of defendants in the Meydan TV case (including Aytaj Ahmadova), as reflected in reporting by monitoring bodies tracking the case.
10. On 24 June 2025, the Khatai District Court further extended pre-trial detention for defendants in the Meydan TV case by three months, and on 16 September 2025 the court again extended detention periods, as reported in relation to the same group of defendants.

11. On 12 December 2025, trial-phase proceedings in the consolidated “Meydan TV case” began before the Baku Assize Court, with Aytaj Ahmadova listed among the defendants.

LEGAL ANALYSIS

Reasons why Aytaj Tapdig should be regarded as a political prisoner:

12. Assessment of whether Aytaj Ahmadova 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 Aytaj Ahmadova 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.

Aytaj Tapdig’s public profile:

14. The circumstances reveal that Aytaj Ahmadova is an independent journalist recognized primarily for her work as a reporter for Meydan TV, a platform known for publishing reporting on politically sensitive issues in Azerbaijan. As a member of this independent media environment, her professional profile is linked to reporting that frequently addresses governance, rights, and social issues that are commonly treated as politically sensitive in the country.

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 financial or foreign-funding criminality. In this context, Aytaj Ahmadova’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 media outlet that has been subjected to intensified pressure since 2023.

Sequence of events and contextual factors:

16. Aytaj Ahmadova’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 paralyse 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 authorities' investigation was directed at the outlet and that its staff were placed in pre-trial detention beginning in December 2024 (Aytaj Ahmadova 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 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 Aytaj Ahmadova's case and systematically circumvented procedural safeguards. As reflected in the indictment and corroborated by contemporaneous reporting, the case against her is built on two core pillars: (i) vaguely framed operational-search information/data used to justify the initiation of the proceedings and the arrests, and (ii) search-and-seizure measures carried out in the immediate aftermath of the December 2024 operation, including searches of journalists' homes and the seizure of work-related equipment and devices.
25. According to the indictment, 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 material in a manner that enables meaningful scrutiny: it does not identify whether it derived from surveillance, witnesses, informants, or other means, nor does it provide reliability indicators, or a clear account of how the information was obtained and verified. This opacity is legally consequential because it deprives the defence of an effective opportunity to contest the origin and credibility of the material that precipitated arrest and detention (*mutatis mutandis*, *Ibrahimov and Mammadov v Azerbaijan* (2020) §§ 119–120).
26. The indictment locates the initiating tangible evidentiary episode in a police-controlled operation 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. Public reporting confirms that, on the same day, a group of Meydan TV journalists, including Aytaj Ahmadova, were detained and that a criminal case was opened under Article 206.3.2. In substantive terms, this structure raises concerns that the prosecution extends liability outward from a single initiating seizure event into an associative group narrative, without publicly demonstrating individualized conduct by each defendant sufficient to establish bulk-cash smuggling.
27. Public reporting concerning the investigative measures applied to Aytaj Ahmadova reinforces concerns about procedural safeguards. A legal-support profile states that her apartment was searched and that her mobile phone, computer, and video camera were seized. Such seizure-heavy measures, particularly when directed at journalists, have an inherent chilling effect, as they capture professional communications and potentially source-related material, and they place the evidentiary narrative under near-exclusive police control.

In analogous contexts, the European Court of Human Rights has emphasized that deficiencies surrounding police-dominated search-and-seizure operations can raise legitimate concerns 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).

28. Finally, the procedural trajectory reinforces the inference of a detention-driven approach. Public reporting and monitoring indicate that the courts repeatedly extended pre-trial detention in the Meydan TV case, including decisions maintaining Aytaj Ahmadova in custody and rejecting requests to replace detention with house arrest. In August 2025, the authorities escalated the accusations into a broad package of additional alleged financial and document-related offences applied across the defendant group. This sequencing, initial smuggling allegations followed by charge expansion, mirrors a recurring prosecutorial pattern in Azerbaijan whereby independent journalism is reframed as a financial crimes scheme.

29. Taken together, (i) reliance on non-transparent operational-search premises, (ii) a case architecture built around an initiating seizure attributed to another person, (iii) intrusive searches and seizure of journalistic equipment, and (iv) allegations of coercive treatment alongside repeated detention extensions, there are serious grounds to question the good faith of the investigation and the sufficiency and individualization of “reasonable suspicion” as applied to Aytaj Ahmadova within the “Meydan TV case.”

Authorities’ conduct:

30. The relevant authorities, at first, denied Aytaj Ahmadova 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:

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

CONCLUSION

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

RECOMMENDATION

33. Based on this conclusion, Aytaj Ahmadova should be released unconditionally and should be compensated *restitutio in integrum*.

1. Committee to Protect Journalists, 'Azerbaijani authorities detain at least 6 journalists on currency smuggling charges' (Committee to Protect Journalists, 7 December 2024) <https://cpj.org/2024/12/azerbaijani-authorities-detain-at-least-6-journalists-on-currency-smuggling-charges/> accessed 7 January 2026.
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4. 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
5. 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
6. Musavat, "No-Warçılarin 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
7. Eurasianet, Azerbaijan authorities smash unionization efforts for gig workers <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-authorities-smash-unionization-efforts-for-gig-workers> accessed 28 August 2025
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11. 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
12. 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.
13. 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.
14. 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.
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