

NURLAN LIBRE



FACTS

Personal data:

1. Nurlan Gahramanli (Libre), (DOB: 05.03.1997) is an Azerbaijani independent journalist, the founder of Portağal Media and a freelance reporter for Meydan TV, with a public profile linked to field reporting and coverage of politically sensitive issues. Since his detention¹ in February 2025 within the framework of the criminal case known publicly as the “Meydan TV case,” Nurlan Gahramanli has been characterized by press-freedom organizations and observers as detained on retaliatory charges and treated as a political prisoner in the broader crackdown on independent media. His 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. Nurlan Gahramanli was detained on 20 February 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 20 February 2025, Nurlan Gahramanli 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. His case is being prosecuted under what has become known as the “Meydan TV case.”

4. On 29 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. Nurlan Gahramanli 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. Nurlan Gahramanli was detained on 20 February 2025 by law-enforcement authorities in connection with the Meydan TV case. The indictment treats him as one of the defendants in the consolidated proceedings.
7. Public reporting indicates that, following his detention, law-enforcement authorities conducted investigative measures typical of the case pattern (custody-based questioning and seizure-focused measures). It was also reported that the court hearing on the remand measure took place without his lawyer present, raising immediate concerns about effective access to defense at the initial stage.
8. On 21 February 2025, the Khatai District Court ordered pre-trial detention.
9. On 15 March 2025, the Khatai District Court extended Nurlan Gahramanli’s pre-trial detention by three months.
10. On 24 June 2025, courts extended the detention periods of journalists arrested in the Meydan TV investigation by a further three months, a measure reported as applying across the detained group. On 16 September 2025, the Khatai District Court again extended detention periods for journalists held in the Meydan TV case.
11. On 12 December 2025, a preparatory hearing was held and the consolidated case was taken forward for trial before the Baku Assize Court, marking the start of trial-phase proceedings in the “Meydan TV case.”

LEGAL ANALYSIS

Reasons why Nurlan Gahramanli should be regarded as a political prisoner:

12. Assessment of whether Nurlan Gahramanli 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 Nurlan Gahramanli 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.

Nurlan Gahramanli’s public profile:

14. Nurlan Gahramanli is a well-known independent journalist and media actor in Azerbaijan, recognized primarily for his work in online journalism and independent media initiatives. He is the founder of Portugal Media and a freelance journalist collaborating with Meydan TV, placing him within the professional environment of independent reporting that has come under intensified state pressure.

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 so-called financial or foreign-funding criminality. In this context, Nurlan Gahramanli’s public profile provides reasonable grounds to believe that he was targeted not for genuine criminal conduct, but because of his role as an independent journalist and his proximity, real or imputed, to the independent media sphere that the authorities have sought to neutralize through detention and fabricated expansive financial charges.

Sequence of events and contextual factors:

16. Nurlan Gahramanli’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 organised 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 Nurlan Gahramanli in February 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 Nurlan Gahramanli's case and, from the outset, relied on investigative 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 then used as a platform to detain and charge a widening circle of media workers, including persons arrested later such as Nurlan Gahramanli.
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, neither the source nor the method of acquisition of that operational information is disclosed in a way that allows meaningful scrutiny: the indictment does not identify whether the information derived from surveillance, a witness, an informant, or other means, nor does it set out reliability indicators. This opacity is legally consequential because it prevents the defense from effectively challenging the origin and credibility of the material that precipitated 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 then records that, after the December 2024 arrests, the authorities continued to expand the case through subsequent detentions, including Nurlan Gahramanli's detention on 20 February 2025. In substantive terms, the evidentiary structure therefore appears to extend liability outward from a seizure attributed to a different person into an associative group narrative, without demonstrating individualized conduct by each later-arrested defendant that satisfies the constituent elements of bulk-cash smuggling.

28. Public reporting further raises concerns about the integrity and fairness of early-stage measures in Nurlan Gahramanli's case. It was reported that his court hearing on pre-trial detention took place without his lawyer present, undermining effective access to defense at the critical initial stage. In analogous contexts, the European Court of Human Rights has emphasized that police-dominated evidence generation and deficiencies surrounding procedural safeguards may raise legitimate concerns about evidentiary integrity and fairness (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. Following his arrest in February 2025, courts repeatedly extended Nurlan Gahramanli's detention (including an extension in March 2025 and further extensions in June and September 2025, as reported in relation to Meydan TV defendants), while the investigation later escalated the case into a broad suite of alleged financial and document-related charges across the group.
30. Taken together, (i) reliance on non-transparent operational inputs, (ii) the use of an initiating airport seizure attributed to another person as the platform for a widening prosecution, and (iii) reported early-stage obstacles to legal defense, there are serious grounds to question the good faith of the investigative authorities and the sufficiency and individualization of reasonable suspicion applied to Nurlan Gahramanli.

Authorities' conduct:

31. The relevant authorities, at first, denied Nurlan Gahramanli 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 Nurlan Gahramanli and others from Meydan TV as politically motivated (see cited footnotes above).

CONCLUSION

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

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