

RUFAT SAFAROV



FACTS

Personal data:

1. Rufat Safarov (DOB: 11 October 1981) is an Azerbaijani human rights defender and former investigator in the prosecutor's office. He is publicly known as the co-founder/executive director of Defense Line (Müdafiə Xətti), a human rights organization established in 2020, and has been described by public sources as one of the few full-time human rights defenders remaining in Azerbaijan. Before that, he worked in the Zardab City Prosecutor's Office and publicly resigned in December 2015 after criticizing abuses, corruption and lawlessness in the system.
2. Safarov was detained on 3 December 2024, and his case was sent to the Baku Assize Court on charges under Articles 127.2.3, 178.3.2 and 221.1 of the Criminal Code, namely intentional infliction of less serious harm to health, fraud causing major damage, and hooliganism. The file also records that pre-trial detention was ordered by the Binagadi District Court.¹
3. Safarov's case has been widely reported as politically motivated. That assessment is reinforced by his profile as a prominent rights defender, his earlier prosecution after publicly criticizing the authorities, his 2016 nine-year sentence in that earlier case, and his release by presidential pardon in 2019. It is also significant that he was due to travel to the United States to receive the U.S. Secretary of State's 2024 Human Rights Defender Award but was arrested days before the ceremony; Amnesty International², OMCT³ and U.S. officials publicly linked the prosecution to retaliation for his human rights work.⁴

4. The allegations against R. Safarov lack credibility and are widely regarded as politically driven and part of a wider crackdown on civil society and independent media launched by the Azerbaijani authorities starting from 2022.⁵

Date of detention:

5. On 03.12.2024, Rufat Safarov was detained as a suspect by the investigative authorities, and on 04.12.2024, the Binagadi District Court ordered his placement in pre-trial detention for a period of four months, until 03.04.2025.

Legal accusations:

6. On 03.12.2024, following his detention that day, the investigating authorities treated Rufat Safarov as a suspect under Articles 178.3.2 and 221.1 of the Criminal Code; on 04.12.2024, the accusation was expanded and he was formally charged under Articles 127.2.3, 178.3.2 and 221.1. Public reporting on the case reflects the same sequence: initial fraud and hooliganism allegations on 3 December, followed on 4 December by the additional accusation under Article 127.2.3.

- intentional infliction of less serious harm to health under Article 127.2.3 of the Criminal Code;
- fraud causing major damage under Article 178.3.2 of the Criminal Code;
- hooliganism under Article 221.1 of the Criminal Code.

7. His case is a politically motivated prosecution in retaliation for his human rights work and as part of the broader December 2024 crackdown on civil society in Azerbaijan. Amnesty International stated that he was detained solely for the peaceful exercise of his rights, OMCT described the arrest as politically motivated and widely regarded as reprisal for his human rights activities, and public reporting linked the timing of the arrest to the fact that he was due to travel to the United States to receive the U.S. Secretary of State's 2024 Human Rights Defender Award.

Legal status of remand prisoner:

8. Rufat Safarov is a detainee and is not a convicted prisoner in the present case. He is an accused person who remains in detention while standing trial. His pre-trial detention was extended in March 2025 until 3 May 2025, and again at the end of May 2025 until 23 June 2025. On 10 June 2025, the case was transferred to the Baku Assize Court, where the trial began on 30 June 2025. In December 2025 and February 2026, the proceedings were still ongoing before that court and Safarov remained in custody.

9. He is currently a remand prisoner in pre-trial detention and is awaiting the trial.

Legal proceedings:

10. On 3 December 2024, Rufat Safarov was detained by law enforcement authorities. He was initially treated as a suspect under Articles 178.3.2 and 221.1 of the Criminal Code; on 4 December 2024, the accusation was expanded to include Article 127.2.3, and on the same day, the Binagadi District Court ordered his pre-trial detention for four months.
11. He remained in custody throughout the investigation. The defense sought to replace detention with house arrest, but that request was rejected on 25 February 2025, and the custodial measure was then extended repeatedly. Public reporting records extensions in March, April and again on 31 May 2025, the last one until 23 June 2025, while the preliminary investigation was reported as completed in early May. The indictment also shows that the formal accusation was drawn up on 26 May 2025 and approved for referral at the end of May 2025.
12. The case was transferred to court on 10 June 2025. The preparatory hearing took place before the Baku Assize Court on 30 June 2025. At that hearing, the defense again sought house arrest and challenged the prosecution case, but the court refused to release Safarov, sent the case for trial on the merits, and fixed the first substantive hearing for 14 July 2025.
13. As framed in the indictment, the prosecution case rested principally on the complainant's account, witness statements, confrontation and scene-verification protocols, medical expert material, disk-inspection records and other investigation documents. Safarov, by contrast, denied the accusations from the outset and maintained before the court that the case had been fabricated and that the events surrounding his arrest were a provocation. In later hearings, he also challenged the internal logic of the accusation, including the claim that a land transaction of this kind would have been carried out through an informal cash handover rather than through the ordinary notarial procedure. By September 2025 Safarov was giving evidence before the trial court; a further hearing was held on 16 February 2026, and the next hearing was scheduled for 2 March 2026. On that basis, he appears to have remained in detention throughout the proceedings so far, with the courts consistently refusing to substitute a less restrictive preventive measure.

LEGAL ANALYSIS

Reasons why Rufat Safarov should be regarded as a political prisoner:

14. Assessment of whether R. Safarov 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)⁶. The legal proceedings against and conviction of R. Safarov satisfy two criteria established by the paragraph. 3 of the Resolution for defining political prisoners ((a) and (e)):

(a) Rufat'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.

15. 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.

Rufat Safarov's public profile:

16. The circumstances indicate that Rufat Safarov is a well-known Azerbaijani human rights defender. He is a former investigator of the Zardab District Prosecutor's Office who publicly resigned in December 2015 after denouncing human rights violations, corruption and lawlessness in the system. After his release from prison in 2019, he resumed public advocacy and in 2020 co-founded Defence Line (*Müdafiə Xətti*), a civil society organization working on politically motivated arrests, rule-of-law violations and the protection of fundamental rights. International sources have described him as a prominent defender and one of the few full-time human rights defenders remaining in Azerbaijan.

17. That public profile is directly relevant to the assessment of the present case. Safarov had already come into conflict with the authorities after his 2015 public break with the prosecutorial system; he was then prosecuted on seemingly unfair or trumped-up charges, sentenced to nine years' imprisonment, and released only by presidential pardon in 2019. By late 2024, he had acquired clear international visibility: the U.S. State Department selected him for its 2024 Human Rights Defender Award, while official U.S. statements described him as a leading voice documenting politically motivated arrests and democratic backsliding in Azerbaijan. He was arrested on 3 December 2024, just after receiving a U.S. visa and days before he was due to travel for the award ceremony, and international organizations publicly treated the arrest as politically motivated retaliation for his human rights work. In that context, the proceedings against him cannot be viewed in isolation from his longstanding, visible and adversarial public role.

The sequence of events:

18. Rufat Safarov'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 suggest 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.
19. 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.
20. In December 2022, civic activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev was arrested.⁷ 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.⁸
21. In July 2023, politician and economist Gubad Ibadoglu was detained⁹. In August 2023, pro-government media organised a smear campaign against peace activists protesting military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh¹⁰. 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.¹¹
22. 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.¹² 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.

23. In April 2024, Imran Aliyev, the head of the Meclis.info portal monitoring the parliament, was detained.¹³ 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)¹⁴. 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 Abilov¹⁵, 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 Samadov¹⁶ was detained in August 2024 on treason charges similarly and later sentenced to a 15-year prison term. Both of their arrests are widely condemned as politically motivated.
24. Repression further continued against independent media through the Meydan TV case¹⁷: 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 Karimli¹⁸, 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.
25. This process was preceded by restrictive legislation: the Law on Media (2021)¹⁹ and the Law on Political Parties (2022)²⁰. 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.
26. 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:

27. The case appears to have been built in reverse: detention first, substantiation later. Rufat Safarov was detained on 3 December 2024 on fraud and hooliganism allegations, while the bodily-harm charge was added only the following day. At the remand stage, the defense stated that the investigators had not produced actual evidence of the alleged offences, but merely sought arrest; despite that, the court imposed pre-trial detention and refused to substitute house arrest.
28. The prosecution theory is weak on its own terms. It alleges that the complainant handed over AZN 60,000 for a land purchase through an informal cash arrangement, outside the ordinary notarial mechanism used for real-estate transactions. That is already an evidently fragile basis for a serious fraud charge, and the defense's attempt to probe the complainant's financial capacity and the reality of the alleged payment was reportedly resisted by the prosecution as "irrelevant", even though it went to the core of the accusation.

29. Once the evidence began to be tested in court, the prosecution's narrative did not become clearer; it became less reliable. The complainant reportedly admitted that he had not undergone a medical examination, although the file contained a medical report. His account also reportedly conflicted with defense material, and phone data was said to show contact with police before the incident. Another witness did not confirm the investigative version and stated that he, too, had been taken by masked officers to a police station and held there for two days.
30. These inconsistencies question the existence of reasonable suspicion, the credibility of the complainant, the authenticity of the injury evidence, and the possibility that the incident was staged or police-managed. A court conducting genuine adversarial scrutiny would treat defects of that kind as central. The fact that the proceedings continued the same accusatory basis, while Safarov remained in custody, strongly suggests a process directed at sustaining the prosecution's case rather than testing it impartially.

The authorities' conduct:

31. From the outset, the authorities failed to secure even the minimum safeguards of a good-faith criminal process. Safarov was seized by plain-clothes officers, brought before the court the next day, and remanded in custody, although, according to the defense, the investigators presented no actual evidence of the alleged offences beyond the request for arrest. The remand court relied on abstract risks such as absconding and obstruction, without pointing to concrete facts, and refused a non-custodial alternative. Given also the timing of the arrest, hours after Safarov collected his U.S. visa for the human rights award ceremony he was due to attend, the authorities' conduct is more consistent with retaliatory use of criminal proceedings than with a neutral and properly safeguarded investigation.

Additional considerations:

32. Finally, international human rights observers such as Human Rights Watch have denounced the charges against R. Safarov as politically motivated.

CONCLUSION

33. The personal factors (Rufat Safarov'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 Rufat Safarov 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, Rufat Safarov should be released unconditionally and immediately. Furthermore, he should be compensated *restitutio in integrum*.



- ¹ Aziza Goyushzade and Parvana Bayramova, ‘Rights groups, Western governments urge Azerbaijan to release human rights defender’ Voice of America (5 December 2024) <https://www.voanews.com/a/global-community-calls-on-azerbaijan-to-release-human-rights-defender/7888986.html> accessed 13 March 2026.
- ² Azerbaijan: Authorities must immediately release human rights defender Rufat Safarov (4 December 2024) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/azerbaijan-authorities-must-immediately-release-human-rights-defender-rufat-safarov/>
- ³ Azerbaijan: Arbitrary detention and judicial harassment against Rufat Safarov (20 December 2024) <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/urgent-interventions/arbitrary-detention-and-judicial-harassment-against-rufat-safarov>
- ⁴ Escalating Crackdown on Azerbaijani Civil Society and Media (11 December 2024) <https://2021-2025.state.gov/escalating-crackdown-on-azerbaijani-civil-society-and-media/>
- ⁵ 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.
- ⁶ 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.
- ⁷ 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
- ⁸ 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
- ⁹ 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
- ¹⁰ 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
- ¹¹ Eurasianet, Azerbaijan authorities smash unionization efforts for gig workers <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-authorities-smash-unionization-efforts-for-gig-workers> accessed 28 August 2025
- ¹² 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
- ¹³ Council of Europe, Safety Of Journalists — FOM Alert <https://fom.coe.int/en/alerte/detail/107640886> accessed 28 August 2025
- ¹⁴ 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
- ¹⁵ Scholars at Risk, ‘Release academic Iqbal 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

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ 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)

²⁰ 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>

²¹ Human Rights Watch, 'Azerbaijan' (World Report 2023) (2023) <<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/azerbaijan>> accessed 25 January 2026.

