

Architecture of Repression

The Case of Azerbaijan

Political Imprisonment and the Dismantling of Civic Space

This report was prepared and published by legal experts from the **Free Voices Collective e.V.**, an EU-based non-profit and non-governmental organisation established by South Caucasus human rights defenders, journalists and lawyers in exile.

Our mission is to foster a democratic environment in the South Caucasus by advocating for the rights and protections of journalists, activists and NGOs, ensuring a society where civil freedoms are upheld and civil society can thrive without fear of persecution.

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1 Introduction & Methodology

INTRODUCTION

This report examines the situation of civil society in Azerbaijan, including political parties, non-governmental organisations, academia, media, independent civic initiatives and grassroots activism, in the context of an increasingly restrictive political environment. It focuses on how the civic space for independent public activity has been systematically dismantled and nearly eradicated.

The situation of political prisoners is examined using a list of sixty-five cases prepared by Free Voices Collective e.V.¹ The list was compiled based on Council of Europe standards and recommendations concerning political prisoners, including the criteria reflected in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) Resolution 1900 (2012) on the definition of political prisoners.² Under these standards, a person deprived of their personal liberty may be considered a political prisoner where their detention violates fundamental rights protected by the European Convention on Human Rights; is imposed for political reasons, without connection to any offence; is clearly disproportionate to the alleged offence in its duration or conditions; is, for political motives, discriminatory as compared with the detention of other persons; or results from clearly unfair proceedings that appear to be connected with the political motives of the authorities.

The report uses these cases not only to present individual instances of politically motivated imprisonment, but also to examine how repression is organised across different sectors of Azerbaijani society. It follows a grouping similar to the structure used in the political prisoners list prepared by the Union for the Freedom for Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan.³

Political imprisonment is only one visible element of a broader architecture of control in Azerbaijan. This system actively targets any activity advancing democracy through a wider system of legal, administrative, digital, and financial restrictions.

Therefore, the report goes beyond listing prisoners and examines the architecture of repression, specifically how different peaceful groups are constructed, categorised, criminalised, and connected to one another through specific legal mechanisms and political narratives. In many cases, the charges formally used by the authorities appear ordinary and non-political, including

1 Free Voices Collective, 'Political Prisoners List' <https://freevoicescollective.org/political-prisoners-list/> accessed 15 June 2026.

2 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 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 9 June 2026.

3 Union for the Freedom for Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan, List of Political Prisoners: On 15 January 2026 (15 January 2026) <https://www.ipd-az.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/15jan2026ENG.pdf> accessed 15 June 2026. The report identifies twelve categories of political prisoners, including: journalists and bloggers; human rights defenders; members of opposition parties and civil society; national minority activists; anti-war activists; and persons arrested in connection with the Soyudlu case; persons arrested in connection with the Imishli case; political emigrants deported from Europe; believers; persons convicted in the Tartar case; persons convicted in the Ganja case; life-term prisoners.

smuggling, illegal entrepreneurship, money laundering, tax evasion, drug possession, hooliganism, treason, or other criminal-law provisions. The charges have no direct link to the individual's activities. However, when examined in context, these charges reveal a recognisable pattern. For instance, people with higher public visibility, professional status, or institutional links are often framed through white-collar or financial crimes, while grassroots activists and socially more vulnerable defendants are more often associated with stigmatising accusations such as drug possession, hooliganism, or public disorder. Well-known opposition figures are frequently portrayed not simply as political opponents, but as fraudulent, deceptive, or morally compromised actors, sometimes through the use of false witnesses and politically motivated complainants. These recurring patterns suggest that the aim is not only to punish individuals but also to undermine their credibility, distance them from their communities, and recast legitimate criticism or activism as a form of wrongdoing in the public eye.

The report does not claim that all people imprisoned in Azerbaijan on politically motivated grounds are necessarily included in the present list. Political imprisonment is difficult to document in a closed and repressive environment, especially where families fear retaliation, lawyers face pressure, trials are not fully public and official information is limited or unreliable. The list should therefore be understood as a documented and legally assessed body of cases that demonstrates the scale and structure of politically motivated imprisonment, rather than as an exhaustive final count.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used to compile and assess the list is legal, case-based and contextual. Each case was reviewed according to the Council of Europe criteria for political imprisonment, with attention to the person's public activity, the timing and circumstances of arrest, the nature and proportionality of the charges, the conduct of the investigation and the broader political context. The assessment also considers whether the case forms part of a recurring pattern of politically selective prosecution, rather than treating the formal criminal charge as sufficient evidence of ordinary criminal liability.

The report also draws on publicly available information from international human rights organisations, media freedom groups, Council of Europe institutions, election-monitoring bodies and Azerbaijani civil society sources. These materials are used to verify and contextualise individual cases and situate them within wider developments, including the post-2020 consolidation of authoritarian rule, restrictive legislation affecting the media, political parties, and civil society and the deterioration of judicial independence and fair-trial guarantees.

The period covered by this report is shaped by the political developments that followed the 2020 Second Karabakh War and intensified after 2022. The report pays particular attention to the renewed wave of arrests from 2023 onward, and compares it to the earlier crackdown of 2013–2014. That comparison is important because many of the current legal tools and methods, such as the criminalisation of NGO work, the use of economic charges against activists, pressure on lawyers, politically selective investigations and the portrayal of independent civil society as foreign-controlled or illegal, were already in use a decade ago. What distinguishes the current period is the broader post-war political climate, the near-total securitisation of dissent and the expansion of

repression into almost all remaining spaces of independent public life.

The central argument of this report is that the current political prisoner cases are not isolated abuses, but symptoms of a deliberate system of authoritarian control. Through criminal prosecution, smear campaigns, and pressure on families and lawyers, the authorities have sought to weaken civil society, neutralise political opposition and prevent public criticism. The cases reviewed in this report show how the criminal justice system functions both as a tool of authoritarian control and as a mechanism for producing political meanings: who is presented as corrupt, who is presented as dangerous, who is presented as socially deviant and who is presented as an enemy of the state.

The report is structured as follows. Following this introduction and methodology section, it examines the broader political context in which the current crackdown has unfolded. It then analyses the legal patterns and judicial mechanisms used against civil society actors and other critics. Subsequent sections assess the impact of these policies on civil society and independent media, including the closure of organisations, self-censorship, forced exile and the broader chilling effect on public participation. The report then reviews international responses and concludes with an assessment of the implications of these developments for human rights, democratic governance and the rule of law in Azerbaijan. Finally, recommendations are presented.

2 Political Context

Azerbaijan has been an authoritarian state for many years, but the period after the 2020 Second Karabakh War marked a new phase in the relationship between state power and repression. The government's military victory in 2020, followed by the 2023 takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh, allowed the authorities to present themselves domestically as restorers of the country's territorial integrity and made public loyalty to the state increasingly inseparable from loyalty to the government itself.

This post-war environment made dissent more vulnerable to securitised framing. Criticism of the government, calls for peace, anti-war speech, independent research, grassroots activism and co-operation with international organisations became easier to portray as disloyalty, foreign interference or support for hostile forces. The 2020 war also fragmented civil society from within. While large parts of society, including parts of the civic sector, aligned themselves with the national war consensus, liberal, leftist, feminist and anti-war actors became increasingly stigmatised as so-called traitors by both the wider society and the state authorities.⁴ This social stigmatisation later developed into more direct forms of coercion, such as smear campaigns, police pressure, travel restrictions, criminal prosecution and long prison sentences.

⁴ Bahruz Samadov, 'To Stand for Peace, in Spite of Everything' (Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa, 5 October 2020) https://www.balcani-caucaso.org/en/cp_article/to-stand-for-peace-in-spite-of-everything/ accessed 9 June 2026.

The state used this context to consolidate power politically. In February 2024, President Ilham Aliyev secured a fifth presidential term in a snap election, officially receiving more than 92 per cent of the vote.⁵ The election took place after the restoration of Azerbaijani control over Nagorno-Karabakh and was presented domestically as the first presidential election held across the country's entire internationally recognised territory. However, the election lacked genuine political competition, took place in a restrictive environment and was boycotted by major opposition forces.⁶ The 2024 parliamentary election, later in the same year, followed the same pattern: formally regular electoral procedures existed, but there were no genuine political alternatives and no conditions for meaningful public contestation.⁷

This electoral environment is important for understanding the current political prisoner cases. Repression in Azerbaijan is not only directed at visible protest, electoral mobilisation or immediate threats to the regime; it is also preventive. The authorities target actors whose work could contribute to democratic accountability and an open society. In this sense, the aim is not only to suppress existing dissent but also to prevent the emergence of any social, political or institutional capacity that could advance democratic change.

The post-2020 consolidation also took place in a changing international environment. Azerbaijan's internal repression escalated at a moment when the liberal international order was visibly weakening, when geopolitical and energy-security calculations increasingly overshadowed democracy and human rights and when authoritarian leaders were no longer widely regarded as political pariahs in international affairs, as they often had been in the earlier post-Cold War period. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 strengthened Azerbaijan's importance as an energy and connectivity partner for Europe. At the same time, the regional weakening of Russia, the EU's search for non-Russian gas trade partners, the normalisation agenda between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the growing importance of east-west transport routes all increased Baku's leverage.⁸ In this context, Aliyev was not treated internationally as an exceptional authoritarian outlier, but increasingly as a pragmatic strategic partner.

This international permissiveness matters because it shaped the regime's sense of impunity. Hosting the United Nations climate change conference (COP29) in 2024 gave Azerbaijan a major global platform at the very moment when the authorities were arresting journalists, civil society actors, election monitors, and political critics. At the same time, Azerbaijan continued to portray itself internationally as a constructive partner in areas such as climate policy and regional cooperation, even as restrictions on independent voices and political freedoms were increasing domestically. Subsequent cooperation with the EU, including energy dialogue in 2025 and high-level political engagement in 2026, as well as cooperation with the United States, showed that international

5 OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Azerbaijan 2024 Early Presidential and Early Parliamentary Elections: ODIHR Observation Missions Final Reports (5 March 2025) <https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/586800> accessed 9 June 2026.

6 *ibid* (n. 5)

7 *ibid* (n. 5)

8 European Commission, 'EU and Azerbaijan Enhance Bilateral Relations, Including Energy Cooperation' (18 July 2022) https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-and-azerbaijan-enhance-bilateral-relations-including-energy-cooperation-2022-07-18_en accessed 9 June 2026; Council of the European Union, 'Azerbaijan' <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/azerbaijan/> accessed 9 June 2026.

criticism did not fundamentally alter Azerbaijan's external standing.⁹ Although international organisations, human rights groups, and some political actors continued to criticise the crackdown and call for the release of political prisoners, these concerns rarely translated into sustained political consequences for the Azerbaijani government.¹⁰ The broader international response and its limitations are examined in more detail in section five of this report. For the purposes of the political context, the key point is that domestic repression unfolded not despite Azerbaijan's international relevance, but partly under the protection of that relevance.

Taken together, the post-war nationalist consensus, the preventive character of repression, and the government's growing international leverage created the conditions for a more comprehensive closure of public space. The developments examined in this report should therefore be understood not as isolated prosecutions, but as part of a broader effort to dismantle the remaining infrastructure of independent public life and prevent its regeneration.

3 Legal architecture of political persecution

This section examines the legal and judicial mechanisms through which the Azerbaijani authorities have increasingly restricted independent media, civil society and human rights work. The pattern is not limited to individual arrests or isolated criminal cases. Rather, it reflects a broader system in which criminal law, detention procedures, searches, surveillance, financial investigations, and weak judicial oversight are used to lend repression the appearance of legality. Across successive waves of crackdown, the authorities have relied on similar methods: economic and financial charges against journalists and civil society actors, lengthy pre-trial detention unsupported by sufficient evidence, formulaic court decisions, obstacles to an effective defence, flagrant denial of fair trial rights, pressure on lawyers, and intrusive searches and seizures affecting media premises, homes and digital devices. These practices have already been repeatedly criticised by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in cases concerning Azerbaijan. Yet the persistence of similar violations in recent cases against Abzas Media, Toplum TV, Meydan TV and other independent actors demonstrates that these are not merely historical concerns, but continuing structural features of the criminal justice system. The situation is further exacerbated by the Azerbaijani government's recent decision to stop implementing ECtHR judgments. The section, therefore, analyses how legal procedures are used not as safeguards against abuse, but as tools for silencing dissent, weakening independent institutions and shrinking civic space.

9 European Commission, 'Cooperation on Gas, Clean Energy Transition Focus of EU-Azerbaijan Energy Dialogue in Brussels Today' (13 June 2025) https://energy.ec.europa.eu/news/cooperation-gas-clean-energy-transition-focus-eu-azerbaijan-energy-dialogue-brussels-today-2025-06-13_en accessed 9 June 2026; Council of the European Union, 'Joint Press Statement by President of the European Council António Costa and President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev' (11 March 2026) <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/03/11/joint-press-statement-by-president-of-the-european-council-antonio-costa-and-president-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-ilham-aliyev/> accessed 9 June 2026; NATO, 'Relations with Azerbaijan' (27 May 2024) <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/relations-with-azerbaijan> accessed 9 June 2026; Reuters, 'US and Azerbaijan Sign Strategic Partnership during Vance Visit' (10 February 2026) <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-azerbaijan-sign-strategic-partnership-character-during-vance-visit-2026-02-10/> accessed 9 June 2026.

10 See European Commission, 'EU and Azerbaijan Enhance Bilateral Relations' (n 5); European Commission, 'Cooperation on Gas' (n 6); Reuters, 'US Plans Energy Investments in Azerbaijan' (n 6).

3.1 RESTRICTIVE LEGAL FRAMEWORK GOVERNING CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA

The criminal prosecutions examined in this report have developed within a legal environment in which the space for independent civil society, media and political activity has progressively narrowed.¹¹ This process predates the major crackdown of 2013–2014.¹² From the late 2000s onwards, successive amendments to legislation governing non-governmental organisations (NGOs), registration, grants and administrative liability increased state oversight over the establishment, funding and day-to-day operation of independent organisations.¹³ The process accelerated in 2013–2014, when further restrictions were introduced on NGO registration, foreign funding and the registration and use of grants.¹⁴

These changes were significant not simply because they imposed additional administrative requirements, but because they created multiple points at which legitimate civil society activity could become vulnerable to state intervention. Registration difficulties, failure to register grants or service agreements, financial reporting requirements and restrictions on access to foreign funding could lead to inspections, fines, blocked financial transactions and, in a number of cases, allegations of criminal financial wrongdoing. In its December 2014 opinion on Azerbaijan's NGO legislation, the Venice Commission called for the registration procedure to be simplified, restrictions on foreign funding to be revised and provisions allowing unwarranted state interference in the internal functioning of NGOs to be removed.¹⁵

The connection between this regulatory framework and politically sensitive prosecutions has subsequently been examined by the ECtHR. In *Mammadli v. Azerbaijan*, concerning the detention of an election-monitoring activist prosecuted for offences including illegal entrepreneurship and tax evasion, the Court found that alleged failures to comply with administrative formalities governing NGO activity were insufficient to establish reasonable suspicion that the criminal offences had been committed.¹⁶ It also found a violation of Article 18 of the European Convention on Human Rights, concluding that the arrest and detention formed part of a broader campaign against human rights defenders in 2014.¹⁷ More broadly, the Court has identified the increasingly restrictive regulation of NGOs and their funding as part of the relevant context in a series of Azerbaijani Article 18 cases in which measures against activists, lawyers and journalists were found to

11 Parliamentary Assembly, Resolution 2663 (2026) dated 24 June 2026, "The silencing of critical voices in Azerbaijan" <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/36229>

12 Human Rights Watch Report, dated September 1, 2013, "Tightening the Screws: Azerbaijan's Crackdown on Civil Society and Dissent", pages 56-66: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/01/tightening-screws/azerbaijans-crackdown-civil-society-and-dissent>

13 International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, "Analysis of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan On Making Changes and Amendments to Some Legislative Acts of the Republic of Azerbaijan" Page 1-8. Published on September 8, 2009.

14 Human Rights Watch Report, dated September 1, 2013, "Tightening the Screws: Azerbaijan's Crackdown on Civil Society and Dissent", pages 56-66: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/01/tightening-screws/azerbaijans-crackdown-civil-society-and-dissent>

15 EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH LAW (VENICE COMMISSION) OPINION ON THE LAW ON NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS (PUBLIC ASSOCIATIONS AND FUNDS) AS AMENDED OF THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN Adopted by the Venice Commission at its 101st Plenary Session (Venice, 12-13 December 2014), see Conclusion of the Opinion.

16 ECtHR, *Mammadli v. Azerbaijan*, no. 47145/14 Par. 99, 19 April 2018.

17 ECtHR, *Mammadli v. Azerbaijan*, no. 47145/14 Par. 105, 19 April 2018.

pursue the ulterior purpose of silencing or punishing their activities.¹⁸

The regulatory approach was subsequently extended to other areas of public life. The 2021 Law on Media, which entered into force in 2022, introduced extensive regulation of media organisations and journalists, including the establishment of a Media Register.¹⁹ The Venice Commission and the Council of Europe's Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law concluded that, in an already highly restricted environment for independent journalism, the law risked producing a further "chilling effect" and was excessively focused on restricting media activity rather than enabling the media to perform its public watchdog function.²⁰ Similarly, the Law on Political Parties, adopted in December 2022 and signed in January 2023, introduced substantially stricter rules on party establishment, registration, membership, state supervision, and dissolution. The Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR identified several provisions as highly problematic, including the increase of the minimum membership requirement from 1,000 to 5,000, compulsory re-registration of existing parties and extensive Ministry of Justice oversight, warning of further chilling effects on political pluralism.²¹

Access to legal representation has also been affected. Legislative amendments adopted in 2017 restricted court representation to members of the Azerbaijan Bar Association.²² The International Commission of Jurists warned at the time that, in the context of concerns regarding the independence of the Bar and the limited number of practising lawyers, the reform risked restricting access to legal assistance and a fair hearing.²³ These concerns are particularly relevant where journalists, activists and political figures facing criminal proceedings require lawyers willing and able to act in politically sensitive cases.

The regulatory framework has continued to develop during the current period. Amendments adopted in 2025 further restricted financial operations under foreign-funded service contracts that have not been registered with the authorities, extending the system of state control beyond grants to other forms of foreign-supported NGO activity.²⁴

Taken together, these developments are relevant to the subject of this report not because every regulatory measure necessarily constitutes political persecution, but because they have progressively expanded the authorities' ability to control the legal status, financing and operation of independent organisations, media and political actors. They have also created administrative and financial grounds capable of being invoked in criminal proceedings. As the cases discussed in the

18 ECtHR, *Mammadli v. Azerbaijan*, no. 47145/14 Par. 99-105, 19 April 2018.

19 Committee to Protect Journalists, "New Azerbaijan media law increases restrictions on the press", published February 10, 2022, <https://cpj.org/2022/02/new-azerbaijan-media-law-increases-restrictions-on-the-press/>

20 Council of Europe, Human Rights, Democracy and Rule of Law: "Azerbaijan media law: overregulation in an already restrictive environment", published 22 June 2022, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/azerbaijan-media-law-overregulation-in-an-already-restrictive-environment>

21 EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH LAW (VENICE COMMISSION) OSCE OFFICE FOR DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS (OSCE/ODIHR) AZERBAIJAN JOINT OPINION ON THE LAW ON POLITICAL PARTIES, published 13 March 2023, pages 15-16

22 ICJ, Azerbaijan: Briefing paper on new legislation restricting court representation by lawyers, published 2017, <https://www.icj.org/resource/azerbaijan-briefing-paper-on-new-legislation-restricting-court-representation-by-lawyers/>

23 ICJ, Azerbaijan: Briefing paper on new legislation restricting court representation by lawyers, published 2017, <https://www.icj.org/resource/azerbaijan-briefing-paper-on-new-legislation-restricting-court-representation-by-lawyers/>

24 Free Voices Collective, "Azerbaijan Introduces New Restrictions on NGOs and Foreign Media", published on 2025.

following sections demonstrate, the ECtHR has on several occasions found that powers formally exercised for law-enforcement purposes in Azerbaijan were instead used to silence or punish government critics and civil society actors. Against this background, the domestic legal framework is important for understanding both the 2013–2014 crackdown and the present wave of politically sensitive prosecutions.

3.2 CRIMINALISATION THROUGH FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHARGES

A defining characteristic of the current wave of repression in Azerbaijan is the increasing use of financial and economic crimes to target journalists, independent media outlets, civil society actors, and human rights defenders. Rather than openly criminalising criticism of the government, the authorities have increasingly resorted to ostensibly ordinary criminal offences, not directly linked to defendants' professional activities. This allows politically motivated prosecutions to be presented as regular, legitimate law-enforcement measures.

This approach is not entirely new. Previous waves of repression often relied on charges such as hooliganism, drug possession, illegal possession of weapons, incitement, or abuse of office. However, since the large-scale crackdown on civil society organisations (CSOs) in 2013–2014²⁵ and particularly during the current wave of arrests targeting independent media, authorities have increasingly relied on allegations of financial misconduct, including smuggling, illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion, money laundering, document forgery, abuse of authority, and violations of grant registration requirements.

The use of such charges serves several functions. First, it allows authorities to avoid direct accusations of suppressing freedom of expression or association by portraying prosecutions as ordinary criminal investigations. Second, financial charges provide a legal basis for intrusive investigative measures, including searches of homes and offices, confiscation of equipment, freezing of bank accounts, seizure of documents and restrictions on access to funding. Third, such allegations may undermine public trust in targeted organisations by framing journalists and civil society actors as financial offenders rather than victims of political persecution.

The pattern became particularly visible during the 2013–2014 crackdown against CSOs. Prominent human rights defenders, including Rasul Jafarov²⁶, Intigam Aliyev²⁷, Leyla Yunus and Arif Yunus²⁸, were prosecuted on charges including illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion, abuse of authority and grant-related offences. In many cases, the authorities argued that the individuals had violated technical requirements governing the registration of grants and foreign funding. However, domestic and international observers consistently argued that the prosecutions were political-

25 *Khadija Ismayilova v. Azerbaijan* (No. 2), no. 30778/15, § 66, 27 February 2020, European Court of Human Rights. <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22%3A%22001-201340%22%7D>

26 ECtHR, *Rasul Jafarov v. Azerbaijan*, no. 69981/14, 17 March 2016.

27 ECtHR, *Aliyev v. Azerbaijan*, nos. 68762/14 and 71200/14, 20 September 2018.

28 Front Line Defenders, *Case History: Leyla Yunus*, last updated 19 April 2016.

ly motivated and aimed at silencing independent advocacy.

The ECtHR subsequently found multiple violations of the Convention in these cases. In *Rasul Jafarov v. Azerbaijan*, the Court concluded that the applicant's detention lacked a reasonable suspicion of criminal conduct and pursued an ulterior purpose contrary to Article 18 of the Convention, namely the punishment and silencing of a human rights defender for his legitimate activities.²⁹ Similarly, in *Aliyev v. Azerbaijan*, concerning the prominent human rights lawyer Intigam Aliyev, the Court found that the criminal proceedings formed part of a broader pattern of retaliatory measures against civil society actors critical of the authorities.³⁰

The current crackdown against independent media outlets reflects a continuation of these practices. Journalists associated with Abzas Media³¹, Toplum TV³², Meydan TV³³ and other independent outlets have been accused primarily of financial crimes, including smuggling and related economic offences. Although the specific allegations differ across cases, the recurrence of nearly identical charges against multiple independent media organisations suggests a coordinated pattern rather than isolated instances of wrongdoing.

The reliance on economic offences is particularly significant because such charges often enable authorities to disrupt the functioning of organisations before any judicial determination of guilt. Searches, confiscation of computers and mobile phones, freezing of assets, restrictions on financial transactions, and lengthy pre-trial detention can effectively incapacitate media outlets and CSOs regardless of the eventual outcome of proceedings.

3.3 PRE-TRIAL DETENTION AS A PUNITIVE TOOL

Pre-trial detention has become a recurring feature of criminal proceedings against government critics, journalists and civil society actors in Azerbaijan. Its significance goes beyond the question of whether detention is formally justified in an individual criminal case. Once a person is arrested and remanded in custody, they can be removed from public life for months before their guilt has been determined: journalists are prevented from reporting, activists from organising, organisations lose key staff, and defendants must conduct their defence from detention. The ECtHR has documented this problem over many years. In cases including *Ilgar Mammadov v. Azerbaijan*, *Rasul Jafarov v. Azerbaijan*, *Mammadli v. Azerbaijan*, *Rashad Hasanov and Others v. Azerbaijan*, *Aliyev v. Azerbaijan*, and *Ibrahimov and Mammadov v. Azerbaijan*, the Court found that critics or civil society actors had been detained without an adequate factual basis and, in several of these cases, that detention had served an ulterior purpose connected to their public activities.³⁴ In *Ilgar Mam-*

29 ECtHR, *Rasul Jafarov v. Azerbaijan*, no. 69981/14, §§ 153–163, 17 March 2016.

30 ECtHR, *Aliyev v. Azerbaijan*, nos. 68762/14 and 71200/14, § 226, 20 September 2018.

31 Committee to Protect Journalists, *Azerbaijan Supreme Court rejects appeal of 7 Abzas Media, RFE/RL imprisoned journalists*, 8 April 2026.

32 Committee to Protect Journalists, *Azerbaijani authorities bring new charges against Toplum TV, arrest another journalist*, 21 January 2025.

33 Committee to Protect Journalists, *Trial of 12 journalists begins in Azerbaijan's case against Meydan TV*, 12 December 2025.

34 ECtHR, *Ilgar Mammadov v. Azerbaijan*, no. 15172/13, 22 May 2014; *Rasul Jafarov v. Azerbaijan*, no. 69981/14, 17 March 2016; *Rashad Hasanov and Others v. Azerbaijan*, nos. 48653/13 and three others, 7 June 2018; *Mammadli v. Azerbaijan*, no. 47145/14, 19 April 2018; *Aliyev v. Azerbaijan*, nos. 68762/14 and 71200/14, 20 September 2018; *Natig Jafarov v. Azerbaijan*, no. 64581/16, 7 November 2019; *Ibrahimov and Mammadov v. Azerbaijan*, nos.

madov, for example, the Court concluded that the measures were intended to “**silence or punish the applicant for criticising the Government.**”³⁵ The Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers has subsequently described this body of judgments as revealing a “**troubling pattern of arbitrary arrests and detention**” of government critics, civil society activists and human rights defenders through retaliatory prosecutions and misuse of criminal law.³⁶ Violations of Article 5 (the right to liberty and security) are also among those the Court most frequently finds against Azerbaijan.³⁷

Recent prosecutions of independent media demonstrate the continuing practical importance of these concerns. Beginning in November 2023, journalists associated with **Abzas Media** were placed in pre-trial detention and had their detention repeatedly extended; in June 2024 alone, courts extended the detention of six Abzas Media journalists by periods of between one and three months.³⁸ Following the March 2024 raid on **Toplum TV**, Alasgar Mammadli and Mushfig Jabbar were also remanded in custody, with courts subsequently extending their detention and rejecting requests for less restrictive measures.³⁹ From December 2024 onwards, journalists associated with **Meydan TV** were similarly arrested and placed in pre-trial detention, with further arrests and extensions continuing during 2025.⁴⁰ The authorities have pursued these cases on charges including currency smuggling and, subsequently, in some proceedings, tax, money-laundering and other economic offences. The defendants and international press-freedom and human rights organisations have challenged the basis and motivation of these prosecutions.⁴¹ Whatever the eventual outcome of the proceedings, lengthy pre-trial detention has an immediate effect: it removes journalists and other public actors from their work well before a final judgment and can disrupt the institutions around them. This is why the use of detention at the outset of politically sensitive criminal proceedings is important to understanding the wider architecture examined in this report.

The ECtHR’s jurisprudence further demonstrates that arbitrary detention in Azerbaijan cannot be viewed solely as a procedural deficiency. In several cases, including *Ilgar Mammadov v. Azerbaijan* and *Rasul Jafarov v. Azerbaijan*, the Court found violations of Article 18 of the Convention in conjunction with Article 5, concluding that detention was used for purposes other than those prescribed by the Convention. These judgments indicate that deprivation of liberty has been employed as a tool to silence critics, discourage civic engagement and suppress independent voices.

63571/16 and five others, 13 February 2020. The Court has subsequently referred to these cases as forming part of a broader pattern.

35 ECtHR, *Ilgar Mammadov v. Azerbaijan*, no. 15172/13, § 143, 22 May 2014.

36 Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, *Mammadli group v. Azerbaijan*, CM/Del/Dec(2025)1531/H46-6, 12 June 2025, para. 1. The Committee recalled the Article 18 taken together with Article 5 findings and the pattern identified by the Court.

37 European Court of Human Rights, Violations by Article and by State: the cumulative 1959–2022 table records 96 findings concerning the right to liberty and security for Azerbaijan. The Court’s annual tables record a further 8 in 2023, 4 in 2024 and 15 in 2025.

38 Committee to Protect Journalists, “Azerbaijan extends pre-trial detention of 6 journalists accused of receiving Western funding,” 12 June 2024; see also CPJ, “Azerbaijan courts extend pre-trial detention of 6 Abzas Media journalists,” 15 March 2024.

39 Committee to Protect Journalists, “Azerbaijani police raid Toplum TV, detain journalists over alleged currency smuggling,” 11 March 2024; CPJ, “Azerbaijan extends pretrial detentions of journalists facing currency smuggling charges,” 2024.

40 Amnesty International, *The State of the World’s Human Rights: Azerbaijan* (covering 2025), noting repeated extensions of pre-trial detention in the Meydan TV case; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2026: Azerbaijan*.

41 For developments in the Meydan TV proceedings and additional economic charges brought in 2025, see Committee to Protect Journalists, “Azerbaijan brings new charges against Meydan TV, arrests another journalist,” September 2025; Amnesty International, “Jailed journalists in dire health,” 26 January 2026.

The current prosecutions against journalists and civil society actors display many of the same characteristics identified by the Court in its earlier case-law. The repeated use of lengthy pre-trial detention, coupled with insufficient, if any, evidentiary foundations and formulaic judicial reasoning, strongly suggests that detention continues to be used not only to secure criminal proceedings but also to intimidate, punish, and neutralise individuals engaged in legitimate journalistic and civic activities.

The Abzas Media case provides a particularly illustrative example.⁴² Beginning in November 2023, several journalists associated with the investigative outlet, including Ulvi Hasanli, Sevinj Vagifgizi, Hafiz Babali, Nargiz Absalamova and Elnara Gasimova, were arrested on allegations of currency smuggling and held in pre-trial detention for extended periods. International press freedom organisations reported repeated extensions of detention and the routine rejection of requests to replace detention with less restrictive measures, such as house arrest.⁴³

A similar pattern emerged in the Toplum TV case.⁴⁴ Following police raids in March 2024, Toplum TV staff members, including co-founder Akif Gurbanov and media expert Alasgar Mammadli, were detained and subsequently placed in pre-trial detention on smuggling-related charges. Courts authorised four-month detention orders, and searches of offices and private residences resulted in the seizure of documents, electronic devices and cash allegedly discovered by investigators. Those detained consistently rejected the accusations as politically motivated.

The Meydan TV prosecutions further demonstrate the continued use of detention as a central feature of criminal proceedings against independent journalists.⁴⁵ In December 2024, at least six journalists associated with Meydan TV were detained on allegations of currency smuggling. Searches were conducted at their homes and equipment was confiscated. Throughout 2025, additional journalists were arrested in connection with the same investigation, bringing the number of detainees into double digits. Several of those detained were placed in pre-trial detention despite the non-violent nature of the alleged offences.

The practical consequences of prolonged detention extend beyond the individuals concerned. By removing journalists from public life, disrupting newsroom operations, restricting access to professional equipment, and imposing significant psychological and financial burdens, pre-trial detention functions as a powerful mechanism for suppressing independent reporting. Even before a trial takes place, the detention itself can achieve many of the objectives that politically motivated prosecutions seek to accomplish: silencing criticism, weakening independent institutions, and discouraging others from engaging in investigative journalism or civic activism.

⁴² Committee to Protect Journalists, [Azerbaijan courts extend pre-trial detention of 6 Abzas Media journalists](#), 15 March 2024., Clooney Foundation for Justice, TrialWatch, Fairness Report: Abzas Media, 23 July 2026, available at: cfj.org/reports/fairness-report-abzas-media

⁴³ *ibid* (n. 28)

⁴⁴ Reuters, [Azerbaijani court puts TV staff in pre-trial detention](#), 8 March 2024.

⁴⁵ Committee to Protect Journalists, [Azerbaijani authorities detain at least 6 journalists on currency smuggling charges](#), 6 December 2024.

3.4 PROCEDURAL IRREGULARITIES, DENIAL OF FAIR TRIAL AND PRESSURE ON DEFENCE LAWYERS

The cases documented in this report reveal persistent procedural deficiencies that undermine the right to a fair trial and weaken the role of the judiciary as an independent safeguard against arbitrary prosecution. In politically sensitive cases involving journalists, civil society actors and human rights defenders, criminal proceedings frequently display recurring patterns: limited access to case materials, restrictions on confidential lawyer-client communication, insufficient judicial scrutiny of prosecutorial claims, the inability to challenge the prosecution's evidence or to introduce evidence in one's defence, and the use of standardised reasoning in detention-related decisions.

These practices suggest a failure to meet the requirements of Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees the right to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, as well as the minimum rights of the defence, including adequate time and facilities to prepare a defence and legal assistance of one's own choosing. They also engage Article 5 § 4 of the Convention, which requires effective judicial review of detention, and Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which protects equality before courts, the right to adequate time and facilities for the preparation of the defence, and the right to communicate with counsel.

These guarantees are also reflected in Azerbaijani domestic law. The constitution protects access to judicial remedies and legal assistance, the presumption of innocence, judicial independence, equality of arms and the right to defence.⁴⁶ (Constitution of Azerbaijan, Arts. 60–61, 63 and 127).

Despite these formal guarantees, the defence is frequently placed at a structural disadvantage in politically motivated prosecutions. Defence lawyers have reported difficulties in accessing relevant case files, obtaining copies of procedural documents, reviewing search protocols, challenging expert reports and effectively contesting the evidentiary basis of the charges.⁴⁷ In cases involving allegations of smuggling, illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion or other financial offences, access to financial documents and investigative materials is essential. Where such access is delayed, restricted or selectively provided, the defence cannot meaningfully challenge the prosecution's case.

Court hearings concerning arrest, pre-trial detention and extensions of detention are often conducted in a summary manner. Courts routinely rely on the prosecution's submissions without adequately examining whether the factual basis for detention has been established. Defence arguments challenging the absence of reasonable suspicion, the lack of evidence,⁴⁸ procedural violations during searches, or the availability of less restrictive preventive measures are often dismissed without detailed reasoning. This practice reduces judicial review to a formal exercise

⁴⁶ Constitution of Azerbaijan, Arts. 60–61, 63 and 127

⁴⁷ Voice of America, [Blinken calls on Azerbaijan to release Meydan TV journalists](#), 13 December 2024

⁴⁸ Reporters Without Borders, [Azerbaijan: the unjust trial of Sevinj Vagifgizi and journalists of Abzas Media](#), 20 January 2025

rather than a genuine assessment of legality, necessity and proportionality.

A recurring problem is the use of formulaic and standardised judicial reasoning. Decisions authorising arrest, extending detention or rejecting alternative measures often refer in abstract terms to the risk of absconding, interference with the investigation, pressure on witnesses or reoffending. However, these risks are frequently invoked without specific reference to the applicant's personal circumstances, professional background, family situation, health, conduct during the investigation, or willingness to cooperate with the authorities. Such reasoning falls short of the requirement that restrictions on liberty be based on concrete and individualised grounds and may indicate a lack of effective judicial scrutiny, with courts appearing to endorse prosecutorial requests rather than independently assessing whether continued detention is necessary and justified.

The ECtHR has repeatedly criticised this practice in cases against Azerbaijan. In cases such as *Ilgar Mammadov v. Azerbaijan*, *Rasul Jafarov v. Azerbaijan*, *Mammadli v. Azerbaijan* and *Aliyev v. Azerbaijan*, the Court found that domestic courts failed to verify the existence of a reasonable suspicion, failed to conduct meaningful judicial review and relied on inadequate reasoning when authorising or extending detention. These judgments demonstrate that the deficiencies are not isolated errors but form part of a broader pattern in politically sensitive proceedings.

The current media crackdown reflects similar concerns. In the Abzas Media proceedings, defendants have denied the charges⁴⁹ and alleged that the money reportedly found in the outlet's office was planted during the search.⁵⁰ Ulvi Hasanli reportedly stated in court that the €40,000 presented by the prosecution as having been discovered during the search of the Abzas Media office had, in fact, been planted by the police. According to Hasanli, a masked, unidentified officer placed the cash in the office before another officer "discovered" it; he further alleged that officers attempted to make him touch the money, which he refused to do. The defence maintained that office security camera footage could have corroborated this account, but that the police confiscated the camera and did not provide the footage. Hasanli also requested a forensic examination of the banknotes to determine whether his fingerprints were present, but the request was refused. These allegations illustrate why effective access to evidence, independent forensic examination, adversarial proceedings and meaningful judicial scrutiny are particularly important in politically sensitive cases. Where courts fail to examine potentially exculpatory evidence or meaningfully engage with such defence arguments, the proceedings risk becoming a procedural façade for predetermined outcomes.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Reuters, [Azerbaijan, accused of stifling press, puts 7 news staff on trial](#), 21 January 2025.

⁵⁰ Abzas Media, [The next court hearing in the "Abzas Media case" has been held, with Ulvi Hasanli delivering his testimony](#), 21 January 2025.

⁵¹ Clooney Foundation for Justice, TrialWatch, Fairness Report: Abzas Media, July 2026, pp. 9, 49

PRESSURE ON LAWYERS

A further concern is the pressure exerted on defence lawyers. In Azerbaijan, lawyers representing political prisoners, journalists, opposition figures and human rights defenders have themselves faced disciplinary proceedings, disbarment, criminal prosecution, intimidation and obstruction. This has a direct impact on fair trial rights. When lawyers fear retaliation for taking politically sensitive cases, raising allegations of torture, speaking to the media, challenging prosecutorial misconduct or filing applications before the ECtHR, the ability of defendants to receive effective legal assistance is seriously weakened.

The pressure on lawyers has also been documented by the ECtHR. The Court has found that Azerbaijan unlawfully or disproportionately suspended or disbarred lawyers, including lawyers involved in politically sensitive and human rights cases, for statements made in the course of their professional work or concerning the treatment of their clients.⁵² In the cases of *Khalid Bagirov v. Azerbaijan* and *Yalchin Imanov v. Azerbaijan*, the Court found that disciplinary sanctions culminating in disbarment unjustifiably interfered with the lawyers' professional activities and freedom to speak about matters arising from their work.⁵³ The Court also found that the inspection of a lawyer's documents during a prison visit, without adequate safeguards protecting lawyer-client confidentiality, violated the Convention.⁵⁴ These judgments demonstrate that pressure on the legal profession can affect not only individual lawyers, but also the ability of defendants in politically sensitive proceedings to obtain independent and confidential legal assistance.⁵⁵

The right to a fair trial cannot be separated from the independence and security of the legal profession. The UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers require states to ensure that lawyers are able to perform their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference; that they are not identified with their clients or their clients' causes; and that lawyer-client communications remain confidential.⁵⁶ The Council of Europe's standards similarly require states to protect lawyers from pressure, threats and sanctions arising from the lawful exercise of their professional duties.⁵⁷

Recent reports indicate that these pressures continue. Human rights lawyer Elchin Sadigov has

⁵² ECtHR, *Bagirov v. Azerbaijan*, nos. 81024/12 and 28198/15, 25 June 2020; *Farhad Mehdiyev v. Azerbaijan*, no. 36057/18, 18 March 2025; *Imanov v. Azerbaijan*, no. 62/20, 7 October 2025. In *Bagirov*, the Court found that the suspension and subsequent disbarment of human-rights lawyer Khalid Bagirov violated the Convention and stressed the particularly severe professional consequences of disbarment.

⁵³ ECtHR, *Bagirov v. Azerbaijan*, nos. 81024/12 and 28198/15, 25 June 2020. Bagirov had represented, among others, opposition politician Ilgar Mammadov and prominent human-rights defenders; the Court found that the reasons for his disbarment were insufficient and the sanction disproportionate. [HUDOC](#). See also ECtHR, *Imanov v. Azerbaijan*, no. 62/20, 7 October 2025, concerning Yalchin Imanov's disbarment following statements to the press about his client's alleged ill-treatment in prison; the Court found the sanction disproportionate.

⁵⁴ ECtHR, *Namazli v. Azerbaijan*, no. 8826/20, 20 June 2024. The Court found a violation of the Convention arising from prison staff's inspection of lawyer Fariz Namazli's documents before and after a meeting with his client, finding that the applicable framework did not provide adequate safeguards for the confidentiality of lawyer-client communications.

⁵⁵ See also ECtHR, *Farhad Mehdiyev v. Azerbaijan*, no. 36057/18, 18 March 2025, in which the Court found that the termination of the applicant lawyer's right to practise, only days after his readmission to the Bar, was not in accordance with domestic law and violated the Convention.

⁵⁶ OHCHR, *Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers*, adopted by the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, Havana, 27 August–7 September 1990.

⁵⁷ Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, *Recommendation No. R(2000)21 to member States on the freedom of exercise of the profession of lawyer*, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 25 October 2000, Principle I(1) and Principle I(4).

faced disciplinary and criminal proceedings and, in 2025, reportedly complained that he was obstructed from meeting several detained clients despite having the necessary documentation. The arbitrary detention of lawyer Fariz Namazli in 2024 was also criticised by international legal organisations as part of broader pressure on independent lawyers and human rights defenders.⁵⁸

The cumulative effect of these measures is not limited to individual lawyers. Pressure on the legal profession produces a chilling effect across the defence community. Lawyers may avoid politically sensitive cases, refrain from publicly raising allegations of ill-treatment, or limit their procedural challenges in order to avoid retaliation. This weakens the right of defendants to effective legal assistance and undermines the adversarial nature of criminal proceedings.

Taken together, these patterns show that fair trial concerns in Azerbaijan are not limited to the final outcome of criminal cases. The process itself—arrest, search, access to evidence, detention hearings, lawyer-client communication, judicial review and pressure on defence lawyers—often functions as part of the punishment. In politically sensitive cases, procedural guarantees are formally present but substantively weakened, allowing the criminal justice system to operate as a mechanism for legitimising repression rather than protecting rights.

3.5 SEARCHES, SEIZURES AND SURVEILLANCE

Searches of homes, offices, media premises and personal devices constitute another component of the crackdown against journalists, civil society actors and independent media outlets in Azerbaijan. These measures are often presented as ordinary investigative acts. However, in politically motivated cases, they have a much broader impact: they disrupt journalistic work, expose confidential sources, interfere with private life, and create a climate of intimidation around independent civic activity.

Under international human rights law, searches, seizures and surveillance engage several protected rights. Articles 8 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Articles 17 and 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) protect privacy, home and correspondence, freedom of expression and access to information, including the protection of journalistic sources. These protections are also reflected in Azerbaijani law, which guarantees privacy, the confidentiality of communications, and the inviolability of the home and establishes safeguards governing searches and seizures.⁵⁹

In practice, however, searches in politically motivated cases often raise concerns regarding legality, necessity and proportionality. Law enforcement authorities have conducted searches of the homes of accused persons and/or their family members, as well as offices and media premises, resulting in the seizure of computers, telephones, hard drives, cameras, documents, financial

⁵⁸ International Commission of Jurists, [Azerbaijan: Security services ramp up attacks on independent lawyers and human rights defenders](#), 10 September 2024.

⁵⁹ Constitution of Azerbaijan, Arts. 32–33; Criminal Procedure Code

records and other professional materials. Such seizures can have an immediate operational impact. Even before any trial or conviction, the confiscation of newsroom equipment and digital devices can effectively paralyse the work of media outlets and prevent journalists from continuing investigations.

The ECtHR has repeatedly emphasised that searches and seizures affecting journalists require particularly careful scrutiny. The protection of journalistic sources is one of the basic conditions for press freedom. Measures that allow authorities to access journalists' computers, telephones, documents or digital archives may expose confidential sources and deter individuals from providing information on matters of public interest. For that reason, such measures must be accompanied by strong procedural safeguards and independent judicial oversight.

The Court has also repeatedly found that searches, seizures and other intrusive measures affecting journalists, publishing organisations and lawyers in Azerbaijan lacked adequate safeguards, were disproportionate or were otherwise unlawful.⁶⁰ Its judgments have addressed searches capable of exposing confidential journalistic sources, intrusive tax inspections of publishing premises, interference with lawyer-client confidentiality, and failures to effectively investigate serious surveillance and privacy violations against investigative journalists.⁶¹

Recent cases involving Abzas Media, Toplum TV and Meydan TV reveal a similar pattern of searches of journalists' homes and editorial offices, seizure of phones, computers and professional equipment, restricted access to premises and concerns over access to legal assistance and defence materials. In the Abzas Media case, UN Special Procedures also raised concerns about the possible exposure of journalistic sources; in the Toplum TV case, the outlet's online content was reportedly hacked and deleted; and in the Meydan TV case, lawyers alleged that search documents were not properly provided and that passwords were obtained without a court order. Taken together, these cases raise recurring concerns about the legality and proportionality of searches, protection of private data and journalistic source confidentiality.

Surveillance concerns extend beyond physical searches. Reports by investigative organisations and digital rights groups have documented the alleged targeting of Azerbaijani journalists, lawyers, activists and opposition figures with Pegasus spyware.⁶² Pegasus enables access to messages, calls, contacts, photographs, microphones, cameras and other sensitive information on a person's

⁶⁰ ECtHR, *Avaz Zeynalov v. Azerbaijan*, nos. 37816/12 and 25260/14, 22 April 2021, §§ 84–108; *Rustamkhanli v. Azerbaijan*, no. 24460/16, 4 July 2024; *Namazli v. Azerbaijan*, no. 8826/20, 20 June 2024.

⁶¹ In *Avaz Zeynalov v. Azerbaijan*, the Court found that searches and seizures at a journalist's home, workplace and vehicle were disproportionate and emphasised their potential to reveal journalistic sources and deter both journalists and sources. In *Rustamkhanli v. Azerbaijan*, it found that an unannounced tax inspection and seizure of materials at a publishing house lacked adequate safeguards and were not in accordance with the law. In *Namazli v. Azerbaijan*, the Court found that inspection of a lawyer's documents during a prison visit lacked adequate safeguards protecting lawyer-client confidentiality. See also ECtHR, *Khadija Ismayilova v. Azerbaijan*, nos. 65286/13 and 57270/14, 10 January 2019, §§ 83–166, concerning the authorities' failure to effectively investigate serious intrusions into an investigative journalist's private life and the disclosure of her private information.

⁶² Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Pegasus and similar spyware and secret state surveillance, *Doc. 15825, 2023*, paras. 43–44, noting that at least 48 journalists were potentially selected for Pegasus targeting in Azerbaijan and that the wider list included journalists, civil society activists and other public figures; see also Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2024: Azerbaijan*, citing the Pegasus Project's identification of approximately 250 potential Azerbaijani targets, the majority of whom were dissidents, activists, journalists and opposition politicians.

device. The use of such spyware against journalists and human rights defenders represents one of the most intrusive forms of surveillance and can compromise not only the direct target but also their sources, colleagues, clients and family members.

Azerbaijani law formally requires judicial supervision over intrusive search and surveillance measures. The Criminal Procedure Code⁶³ provides that interception of telephone conversations, monitoring of correspondence, extraction of information from technical communication channels, entry into private premises and observation using technical devices must be carried out by court decision. The Law on Operative-Search Activity also provides for judicial and prosecutorial supervision. However, the existence of formal safeguards is insufficient if courts fail to conduct meaningful scrutiny, if warrants are overly broad, if defence lawyers are excluded, or if affected persons cannot effectively challenge the legality of the measures.⁶⁴

Taken together, the repeated use of home and office searches, confiscation of equipment, digital seizures and surveillance against journalists and civil society actors demonstrates a pattern of interference with privacy, correspondence, freedom of expression and source protection. These practices reinforce the broader system of judicial harassment and contribute to the shrinking of civic space in Azerbaijan.

3.6 NON-IMPLEMENTATION OF ECtHR JUDGMENTS AND THE WEAKENING OF EXTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY

A further concern is Azerbaijan's effective suspension of cooperation with the Council of Europe mechanism responsible for supervising the implementation of judgments of the ECtHR. This is particularly significant because the ECtHR has repeatedly found systemic violations in cases of arbitrary detention, politically motivated prosecution, restrictions on civil society, attacks on journalists, violations of fair trial guarantees, and misuse of criminal law against government critics.

Under Article 46 § 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights, Azerbaijan is legally bound to abide by final judgments of the European Court in cases to which it is a party. This obligation includes not only the payment of just satisfaction to applicants, but also the adoption of individual measures, such as release, reopening of proceedings or restoration of rights where required, and general measures aimed at preventing similar violations in the future.⁶⁵

However, Azerbaijan's engagement with the execution process has sharply deteriorated. States are required to inform the Committee of Ministers of the measures taken or planned to implement ECtHR judgments, normally through action plans or action reports submitted during the supervision process.

⁶³ Republic of Azerbaijan, [Criminal Procedure Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan](#), adopted 14 July 2000.

⁶⁴ Republic of Azerbaijan, [Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Operative-Search Activity](#), adopted 28 October 1999.

⁶⁵ Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, [Supervision of the Execution of Judgments and Decisions of the European Court of Human Rights: 19th Annual Report of the Committee of Ministers 2025](#), March 2026.

According to the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers' 2025 Annual Report, Azerbaijan made only two submissions to the Committee in 2025, the latest dated 18 March 2025.⁶⁶ Since then, the authorities have not engaged with the Committee in relation to the execution of ECtHR judgments, placing considerable strain on the supervision mechanism.

The same Annual Report notes that, as of 31 December 2025, 397 cases pending before the Committee of Ministers concerned Azerbaijan, around 10 percent of all pending cases.

A further and particularly significant development concerns the payment of compensation awarded by the ECtHR ("just satisfaction"). Azerbaijan has long implemented judgments poorly, but it had mostly continued to pay compensation: full payment was registered in 45 cases in 2024.⁶⁷ This practice deteriorated sharply in 2025, when full payment was registered in only five cases. By the end of that year, information on payment was outstanding in 169 cases, including 112 in which the payment deadline had expired more than six months earlier.⁶⁸ This deterioration followed the Parliamentary Assembly's January 2024 decision not to ratify the credentials of Azerbaijan's delegation and represents a significant escalation in Azerbaijan's non-implementation of ECtHR judgments, affecting not only broader remedial measures but also the compensation owed directly to victims.⁶⁹

This deterioration followed the political crisis between Azerbaijan and PACE. In January 2024, PACE resolved not to ratify the credentials of Azerbaijan's parliamentary delegation, citing Azerbaijan's failure to fulfil major commitments arising from its Council of Europe membership, including concerns relating to democracy, the rule of law and human rights.⁷⁰ In April 2025, President Ilham Aliyev publicly stated that, because Azerbaijan had not participated in the election of judges to the ECtHR at PACE, the Court's decisions were "invalid" for Azerbaijan.⁷¹ This position is incompatible with Azerbaijan's obligations under the Convention. The binding force of ECtHR judgments derives from Azerbaijan's status as a High Contracting Party to the Convention, not from the participation of its parliamentary delegation in PACE.

66 Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, *Supervision of the Execution of Judgments and Decisions of the European Court of Human Rights: 19th Annual Report of the Committee of Ministers 2025*, March 2026, p. 14.

67 Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, *Supervision of the Execution of Judgments and Decisions of the European Court of Human Rights: 18th Annual Report 2024*, Azerbaijan country statistics, p. 46. The report records full payment of just satisfaction in 45 cases in 2024.

68 Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, *Supervision of the Execution of Judgments and Decisions of the European Court of Human Rights: 19th Annual Report 2025*, pp. 14, 51. The report states that information concerning payment was awaited in 169 Azerbaijani cases at the end of 2025, including 112 where payment had been overdue for more than six months; only five cases recorded full payment during 2025. It also notes that Azerbaijan had stopped engaging with the Committee on execution after its last submission of 18 March 2025.

69 *Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Resolution 2527 (2024)*, Challenge, on substantive grounds, of the still unratified credentials of the parliamentary delegation of Azerbaijan, adopted 24 January 2024. The Assembly decided not to ratify the delegation's credentials, citing Azerbaijan's failure to fulfil major Council of Europe commitments.

70 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, *PACE resolves not to ratify the credentials of Azerbaijan's parliamentary delegation, citing a failure to fulfil "major commitments"*, 24 January 2024.

71 President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *International Forum themed "Facing the New World Order" was held at ADA University with participation of Ilham Aliyev*, 9 April 2025.

The implications are serious. The refusal or failure to cooperate with the execution process weakens one of the few remaining external accountability mechanisms available to victims of politically motivated prosecution and judicial harassment. It also signals to domestic courts, prosecutors and law enforcement bodies that violations identified by the ECtHR may remain without meaningful consequences.

In the context of the current crackdown on journalists, lawyers, activists and civil society actors, non-implementation of ECtHR judgments is not merely a technical issue. It contributes to a broader climate of impunity. Where authoritative judgments finding systemic violations of the fundamental rights addressed above remain unimplemented and Azerbaijan's disengagement deepens, the structural causes of these violations persist. The result is a cycle in which the same patterns—arbitrary detention, formulaic judicial reasoning, pressure on lawyers, unlawful searches, restrictions on media and politically motivated prosecutions—repeat in new cases.

The Committee of Ministers has repeatedly encouraged Azerbaijan to renew high-level dialogue with the Secretariat and has reiterated Azerbaijan's obligation to abide fully, effectively and promptly by final ECtHR judgments. However, the prolonged lack of engagement demonstrates the limits of external supervision where a state refuses meaningful cooperation. This situation further underscores the need for stronger political pressure, coordinated international response and clear benchmarks for Azerbaijan's renewed engagement with the Council of Europe system.

4 Impact on Civil Society and Media

The legal and judicial mechanisms described in the previous sections have produced consequences far beyond the individual cases of journalists, lawyers, activists and civil society actors directly targeted by the authorities. The repeated use of criminal charges, pre-trial detention, searches, surveillance, financial restrictions and pressure on defence lawyers has severely eroded the broader ecosystem of independent public oversight in Azerbaijan. The current crackdown has therefore contributed to a deepening chilling effect across Azerbaijani society. It has discouraged investigative journalism, seriously impeded human rights monitoring, restricted access to independent legal support, and reduced opportunities for public participation. In practice, the repression of independent media and civil society has narrowed the space in which corruption, abuse of power, human rights violations and public-interest issues can be documented and openly discussed.

4.1 CHILLING EFFECT AND SELF-CENSORSHIP

The crackdown has created a wider climate of fear, signalling that criticism, independent reporting and civic engagement may trigger retaliation.⁷²

This chilling effect is reinforced by the visibility of recent cases. The prosecutions and lengthy sentences of journalists from Abzas Media⁷³, Toplum TV⁷⁴, Meydan TV⁷⁵ and other independent outlets demonstrate that reporting on corruption, public accountability, human rights violations or politically sensitive issues can carry serious personal consequences. Human Rights Watch has described Azerbaijan's recent crackdown as targeting those who play "watchdog roles" in society,⁷⁶ including journalists, human rights defenders and civic activists, through politically motivated criminal charges and arbitrary enforcement of restrictive NGO laws. Human Rights Watch has also noted that the Azerbaijani authorities have intensified their crackdown against domestic critics,⁷⁷ interfered with freedom of expression, association and assembly, and arbitrarily implemented laws that paralyse civil society.

The deterrent effect is particularly strong because the prosecutions are often framed as ordinary criminal cases involving smuggling, money laundering, tax evasion or other financial offences. This allows the authorities to avoid openly criminalising criticism while still making independent journalism and civic engagement appear legally risky. Amnesty International has described the Abzas Media convictions as part of a "shocking crackdown on free speech,"⁷⁸ while its broader report on independent journalists in Azerbaijan notes that critical journalists face arbitrary arrests, fabricated charges, unfair trials and long prison sentences.⁷⁹

The chilling effect operates even where individuals are not directly arrested or prosecuted. Journalists may avoid reporting on corruption, security issues, politically sensitive trials, police abuse, torture allegations, election irregularities or financial interests linked to public officials. Editors may decide not to publish investigations that could attract retaliation. Freelancers may avoid cooperation with foreign or exile-based media outlets. Sources may refuse to speak to journalists because they fear surveillance, interrogation or association with a criminal investigation. As a result, important matters of public interest become less visible.

CSOs are similarly affected. Groups working on human rights, election monitoring, anti-corruption, rule of law, media freedom or political accountability may refrain from publishing reports, submitting information to UN mechanisms, organising public events or engaging with foreign partners. The case of Anar Mammadli illustrates this risk. UN experts expressed concern over the continued detention of Anar Mammadli, a prominent human rights defender and election expert,

72 Human Rights Watch, *"We Try to Stay Invisible": Azerbaijan's Escalating Crackdown on Critics and Civil Society*, 8 October 2024.

73 Committee to Protect Journalists, *Azerbaijan courts extend pre-trial detention of 6 Abzas Media journalists*, 15 March 2024.

74 Amnesty International, *Azerbaijan: Campaign of intimidation against independent media continues with raid on Toplum TV*, 7 March 2024.

75 Committee to Protect Journalists, *Azerbaijani authorities detain at least 6 journalists on currency smuggling charges*, 6 December 2024.

76 Human Rights Watch, *"We Try to Stay Invisible": Azerbaijan's Escalating Crackdown on Critics and Civil Society*, 8 October 2024.

77 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2025: Azerbaijan*, 2025.

78 Amnesty International, *Azerbaijan: Seven journalists sentenced in latest shocking crackdown on free speech*, 20 June 2025.

79 Amnesty International, *Azerbaijan: From Newsroom to Cell. Persecution of Independent Journalists*, Index no. EUR 55/0128/2025, 22 July 2025.

and stated that defending human rights should never be considered a crime.⁸⁰

Lawyers also face pressure that contributes to self-censorship. Lawyers may hesitate to take politically sensitive cases, speak publicly about procedural violations, raise allegations of ill-treatment, challenge prosecutorial misconduct or bring cases before international mechanisms if doing so exposes them to disciplinary proceedings, disbarment, surveillance or criminal investigation. This has a broader impact on access to justice because defendants in politically sensitive cases may struggle to find lawyers willing and able to represent them effectively.

The chilling effect extends to the digital sphere. Online expression in Azerbaijan remains constrained by state pressure, and previous reporting has documented the blocking of websites, restrictions on critical media and prosecution of online journalists. In such an environment, ordinary citizens may avoid sharing independent media content, commenting on political developments, posting criticism on social media or participating in online discussions.⁸¹ Fear of monitoring, prosecution or informal retaliation makes silence appear safer than public engagement.

The cumulative result is a narrowing of public debate. Sensitive issues become less visible, victims of violations have fewer channels through which to make their experiences known, and independent scrutiny of state institutions is weakened. The damage is therefore not limited to individual arrests or prosecutions. Repression reshapes the behaviour of society as a whole by encouraging caution, silence and withdrawal from public life.

This form of indirect repression is particularly difficult to measure but deeply damaging. A society in which journalists avoid investigations, lawyers avoid sensitive cases, CSOs reduce public activity, and citizens avoid speaking to the media is one in which formal rights may continue to exist on paper while the practical exercise of those rights becomes increasingly dangerous. In this sense, the crackdown produces not only individual victims but also a broader civic silence, weakening public accountability and reducing the space for democratic participation.

4.2 OPERATIONAL DISRUPTION OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Independent media outlets have been among the most directly affected by the current crackdown. The impact has not been limited to the arrest of individual journalists. In practice, criminal investigations have targeted the operational infrastructure of media organisations themselves: offices, equipment, digital archives, editorial leadership, communication channels, financial resources and publishing capacity.

The scale of the crackdown is reflected in the number of journalists behind bars. As of 1 December 2025, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) recorded 24 journalists imprisoned in

⁸⁰ OHCHR, *Azerbaijan: UN experts alarmed by year-long arbitrary detention of Azerbaijani human rights defender*, 26 May 2025.

⁸¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-net/2025>

Azerbaijan, almost double the 13 recorded a year earlier.⁸² Since late 2023, at least 25 journalists and media workers from some of the country's remaining independent outlets have been jailed, including journalists associated with Abzas Media, Toplum TV and Meydan TV.⁸³

This form of pressure is particularly damaging because independent media outlets in Azerbaijan often operate with limited staff, limited resources and restricted access to domestic funding. Many rely on small editorial teams, personal devices, secure communication tools, online platforms and international support to maintain their work. When editors, directors, reporters and technical staff are detained, and when computers, mobile phones, hard drives, cameras and documents are seized, the ability of a newsroom to function is immediately undermined. Even before any final judgment is delivered, the investigative process itself can interrupt publication, delay investigations, compromise editorial planning and weaken the outlet's ability to respond to ongoing events.

The Abzas Media case illustrates how criminal proceedings can affect both individuals and institutional capacity.⁸⁴ Following the arrest of Abzas Media director Ulvi Hasanli in November 2023, police searched his apartment and the outlet's office. The prosecution subsequently expanded to other members of the outlet, including editor-in-chief Sevinj Vagifgizi and several journalists. Abzas Media became the first target of a wider crackdown on independent media in Azerbaijan, with newsroom members arrested on financial charges described by international organisations as politically motivated.⁸⁵ Abzas Media now operates from exile, relying on digital platforms, citizen contributions, and a decentralised team to bypass state censorship in Azerbaijan.

The operational consequences of such measures are severe. A newsroom cannot function normally when its leadership is imprisoned, its office is inaccessible, and its equipment is in the hands of investigators. In the Abzas Media case, UN Special Procedures reported searches of Ulvi Hasanli's home and the Abzas Media office, seizure of electronic devices and professional equipment, and the changing of office locks by the investigative authorities.⁸⁶ These measures affected not only individual journalists but the outlet's ability to access its workspace, protect materials and continue editorial operations. In cases involving investigative outlets such as Abzas Media, whose reporting has focused on corruption and public accountability, the seizure or loss of editorial materials can have a direct impact on the public's access to information.

A similar pattern is visible in the Toplum TV case.⁸⁷ In March 2024, police raided the offices of Toplum TV, the Institute of Democratic Initiatives and the Platform for the Third Republic, detained journalists and activists, and sealed the Toplum TV premises. CPJ reported that shortly after the police raid, Toplum TV's Instagram and YouTube accounts were hacked, renamed and

82 Committee to Protect Journalists, [2025 Journalist Jailings Remain Stubbornly High: Harsh Prison Conditions Pervasive](#), 21 January 2026. CPJ's annual prison census recorded 24 journalists imprisoned in Azerbaijan as of 1 December 2025, compared with 13 in 2024.

83 Committee to Protect Journalists, ["Azerbaijan arrests 2 more journalists, increasing crackdown tally to 25,"](#) 9 May 2025; see also CPJ's individual case records, which describe at least 25 journalists and media workers jailed between late 2023 and August 2025.

84 Committee to Protect Journalists, [Azerbaijan police arrest Abzas Media director Ulvi Hasanli](#), raid outlet, 21 November 2023.

85 Global Investigative Journalism Network, [Abzas Media: From Exile, Fighting for Press Freedom and Civil Space in Azerbaijan](#), 29 April 2026.

86 UN Special Procedures, [Communication to the Government of Azerbaijan](#), AL AZE 1/2024, 16 May 2024.

87 Amnesty International, [Azerbaijan: Campaign of intimidation against independent media continues with raid on Toplum TV](#), 7 March 2024.

stripped of their content.⁸⁸ Freedom Now also reported that the raid was accompanied by the hacking of Toplum TV's YouTube and Instagram accounts and the deletion of large amounts of content.⁸⁹

The deletion or disabling of digital platforms is particularly significant for independent online media. In a restrictive media environment, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram and websites often serve as primary channels for publication and distribution. When these channels are disrupted, audiences lose access to previous reporting, interviews, investigations and public-interest content. The loss of digital archives also weakens institutional memory: past investigations, video materials and documentation may become unavailable at precisely the moment when public scrutiny is most needed. The Meydan TV case further demonstrates how criminal proceedings can interfere with decentralised or exile-linked media work. In December 2024, several journalists associated with Meydan TV were detained on allegations of currency smuggling.⁹⁰ CPJ reported that the homes of some journalists were searched and that personal equipment and belongings were seized. The Associated Press noted that Meydan TV operates from Berlin and had already been blocked in Azerbaijan since 2019, illustrating the broader constraints under which exile-linked independent media operate.⁹¹

The operational impact of the Meydan TV case expanded further in 2025. Human Rights Watch reported that the arrest of journalist Ulviyya Ali made her the 25th reporter jailed in Azerbaijan on “bogus” charges during the previous 18 months, and the eleventh journalist jailed in connection with the Meydan TV investigation.⁹² CPJ later reported that the trial of 12 journalists and media workers connected to the Meydan TV case began in December 2025. This scale of prosecution directly affects an outlet's ability to maintain staffing, communication with contributors and editorial continuity.⁹³

Exile and remote work may allow some outlets to survive, but they do not fully remedy the damage. Operating from abroad can preserve publication, but it often reduces access to local events, court hearings, official documents, sources and affected communities. It also increases reliance on secure digital communication, which becomes more difficult when colleagues inside the country face surveillance, device seizures or criminal investigation. As the experience of Abzas Media's continued work from exile demonstrates, exile-based reporting may preserve independent journalism, but it often does so under conditions of severe institutional disruption.⁹⁴

The operational disruption of independent media, therefore, has consequences for the wider public. When newsrooms are raided, archives deleted, journalists detained, and equipment confiscated, the public loses access to timely and independent information. Investigations into corruption, abuse of power, public spending, elections, police conduct and human rights violations become

88 Committee to Protect Journalists, [Azerbaijani police raid Toplum TV, detain journalists over alleged currency smuggling](#), 11 March 2024.

89 Freedom Now, [Azerbaijan: Crackdown on Free Expression Escalates](#), 2024.

90 Committee to Protect Journalists, [Azerbaijani authorities detain at least 6 journalists on currency smuggling charges](#), 6 December 2024.

91 Associated Press, [6 journalists arrested on smuggling charges in Azerbaijan](#), 6 December 2024.

92 Human Rights Watch, [Another Courageous Journalist Jailed in Azerbaijan](#), 16 May 2025.

93 Committee to Protect Journalists, [Trial of 12 journalists begins in Azerbaijan's case against Meydan TV](#), 12 December 2025.

94 Global Investigative Journalism Network, [Abzas Media: From Exile, Fighting for Press Freedom and Civil Space in Azerbaijan](#), 29 April 2026.

harder to produce and harder to distribute. The damage is not only to the media organisation itself, but to the public's right to receive information on matters of public interest.

Taken together, the cases of Abzas Media, Toplum TV and Meydan TV show how criminal proceedings can function as a form of institutional incapacitation. Even where authorities present actions as investigative measures, their practical effect is to weaken or disable independent media infrastructure. This transforms criminal procedure into a tool that disrupts the production, preservation and circulation of independent information.

4.3 LOSS OF JOURNALISTIC SOURCES AND PUBLIC TRUST

A less visible but deeply consequential impact of the crackdown is the damage it causes to the relationship between journalists and their sources. Independent journalism depends not only on the ability of journalists to publish, but also on the willingness of sources, witnesses, whistleblowers, victims and insiders to communicate with them safely. Where people believe that contact with journalists may expose them to surveillance, questioning, retaliation or criminal association, the flow of information between society and the media is severely disrupted.

The protection of journalistic sources is recognised as a core condition of press freedom.⁹⁵ The ECtHR has repeatedly held that source protection is “one of the basic conditions for press freedom.”⁹⁶ The Court has emphasised that without such protection, sources may be deterred from assisting the press in informing the public on matters of public interest. This is particularly relevant in Azerbaijan, where independent media reporting often concerns corruption, abuse of power, elections, detention conditions, police conduct and politically sensitive prosecutions.

In the Azerbaijani context, this risk is particularly acute because searches and seizures often concern electronic devices and communication records. A seized phone or laptop may contain far more than published material. It may reveal encrypted conversations, contact lists, interview notes, draft investigations, unpublished testimony, photographs, location data, call logs, passwords, legal documents and information about people who never intended to become visible to the authorities. This means that the harm caused by a device seizure is not limited to the journalist whose device is taken. It may expose an entire network of sources, colleagues, victims, lawyers and civil society contacts.

⁹⁵ International standards similarly recognise that source confidentiality is not a privilege of journalists alone, but a public-interest safeguard. The UN Human Rights Committee's General Comment No. 34 states that States should recognise and respect the limited journalistic privilege not to disclose information sources. The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Recommendation No. R(2000)7 affirms the right of journalists not to disclose their sources of information, while the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has stressed that interception of correspondence, surveillance of journalists, and search and seizure of information must not be used to circumvent the protection of sources. The UNESCO study on protecting journalism sources in the digital age further underlines that digital technologies have transformed the risks facing source protection, because metadata, devices, cloud storage and communication platforms can reveal source identities even where journalists themselves refuse to disclose them.

⁹⁶ Including in *Goodwin v. the United Kingdom* ECtHR, no. 17488/90, 27 March 1996., *Financial Times Ltd and Others v. the United Kingdom and Sanoma Uitgevers B.V. v. the Netherlands* ECtHR, Sanoma Uitgevers B.V. v. the Netherlands, no. 38224/03, Grand Chamber, 14 September 2010.

This danger was explicitly raised in relation to Abzas Media. In the UN Special Procedures communication to the Government of Azerbaijan, AL AZE 1/2024, UN mandate holders expressed concern about searches of homes and offices, seizure of electronic devices and documents, and the possible exposure of information concerning journalistic sources.⁹⁷ According to the communication, police searched Ulvi Hasanli's home and reportedly seized a computer, a mobile phone, a smart watch, and a hard drive, and also searched the Abzas Media office, seizing professional equipment and changing the office locks. The source-protection concern is therefore not abstract: in investigative media cases, seized devices may contain information about individuals who provided evidence, testimony or background information on corruption and public-interest matters.

The ECtHR has treated searches aimed at identifying journalistic sources as especially serious interferences with freedom of expression. In *Nagla v. Latvia*, the Court found that a search of a journalist's home involving seizure of data storage devices raised serious source-protection concerns.⁹⁸ In *Telegraaf Media Nederland Landelijke Media B.V. and Others v. the Netherlands*, the Court held that surveillance powers used against journalists with a view to discovering their sources violated the Convention because the legal framework lacked adequate safeguards.⁹⁹ These cases are important for Azerbaijan because they show that source protection may be undermined not only by direct orders to reveal a source, but also indirectly through searches, seizures, interception or surveillance.

Digital surveillance intensifies this problem. Reports by international organisations have documented¹⁰⁰ allegations that Azerbaijani journalists, activists and public figures were targeted or selected for targeting with Pegasus spyware.¹⁰¹ Such spyware is particularly dangerous for source protection because it can allow full access to messages, calls, photographs, files, microphones, cameras and other data on a device. Even the perception that such tools may be used can change how sources behave, especially in politically sensitive contexts.¹⁰²

The experience of investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova illustrates how surveillance and privacy violations can affect journalistic work and public trust. In *Khadija Ismayilova v. Azerbaijan*, the ECtHR examined a serious invasion of the applicant's private life, including hidden-camera surveillance, blackmail and dissemination of intimate material.¹⁰³ The Court linked these violations to the State's positive obligations to protect journalistic freedom. Separately, the Pegasus Project reporting also identified Ismayilova among journalists affected by spyware-related surveillance concerns. These forms of pressure communicate to sources and journalists that private communication and personal information may be weaponised.

The consequence is a deterioration of trust, fear and self-censorship. Victims of torture or police abuse may decide not to share testimony. Families of detainees may avoid speaking to reporters

97 UN Special Procedures, [Communication to the Government of Azerbaijan](#), AL AZE 1/2024, Ref. AL AZE 1/2024, 16 May 2024.

98 ECtHR, *Nagla v. Latvia*, no. 73469/10, 16 July 2013.

99 ECtHR, *Telegraaf Media Nederland Landelijke Media B.V. and Others v. the Netherlands*, no. 39315/06, 22 November 2012.

100 OCCRP, *Life in Azerbaijan's Digital Autocracy: "They Want to be in Control of Everything."* 2021.

101 Access Now, [UPR Fact Sheet: Azerbaijan](#), 2023.

102 Council of Europe Platform for the Safety of Journalists, [Alert No. 104274511](#).

103 ECtHR, *Khadija Ismayilova v. Azerbaijan*, nos. 65286/13 and 57270/14, 10 January 2019.

about prison conditions or procedural violations. Public officials or insiders may refrain from disclosing evidence of corruption or misconduct. Lawyers and civil society actors may limit communication with journalists to protect their clients or organisations. Whistleblowers may conclude that even anonymous communication is unsafe because metadata, device searches or surveillance could reveal their identity.

Attacks on source confidentiality weaken investigative journalism by deterring individuals from sharing sensitive information and limiting journalists' ability to verify allegations, document abuses and investigate matters of public interest. Over time, searches, seizures and surveillance can erode both journalists' relationships with sources and public trust in independent media, undermining the media's broader watchdog function.

4.4 PARALYSIS OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

CSOs have also been severely affected by the combined use of restrictive legislation, financial controls, administrative burdens and criminal prosecution. Beyond arrests and prosecutions, legal and bureaucratic barriers have made independent organisations difficult to register, fund and operate.

The current wave of prosecutions reinforces this earlier administrative pressure by associating independent civic activity with financial criminality. Azerbaijani authorities have used politically motivated charges and restrictive NGO laws to push independent activists and media “at the margins of the law.” In 2025, the authorities revived an old criminal case connected to the 2014 crackdown and questioned around 50 individuals, including employees of donor organisations and civic leaders, while several activists were placed in pre-trial custody or under other restrictions. The effect of such measures is to make ordinary civil society functions appear suspicious. Applying for foreign funding, implementing a donor-supported project, signing a service contract, paying staff, transferring money or cooperating with international partners is treated not as legitimate civic activity but as potential evidence of financial misconduct. This blurs the line between lawful association and criminal suspicion, making the organisational environment unstable and legally dangerous.

Recent legislative developments have further intensified these risks. In 2025, Azerbaijan introduced new restrictions on foreign-funded service contracts, and in 2026, the authorities began to impose fines for the receipt and issuance of unregistered grants. NGOs may face fines for receiving unregistered grants, while legal entities and officials may be penalised for banking or other transactions connected to non-registered grants. These measures further restrict one of the few remaining channels through which CSOs could obtain support.¹⁰⁴

Azerbaijan's civil society sector had already been significantly weakened by the restrictive amendments adopted in the 2013–2014 period and subsequent persecution of civil society

104 OC Media / Aytan Farhadova, [Azerbaijan introduces fines for receiving unregistered grants](#), 2026.

representatives. These amendments affected the legal framework governing non-governmental organisations, grants, foreign donors, service contracts, donations, administrative liability and registration procedures. The practical consequence was the creation of a highly controlled environment in which independent organisations could not simply receive funding and carry out their activities. Instead, they became dependent on multiple layers of state approval.

A central obstacle is the regulation of grants and foreign funding. Under the Azerbaijani framework, NGOs are required to register grant agreements with the Ministry of Justice before funds can be used. Foreign donors must also obtain authorisation to provide grants in Azerbaijan. This creates a double approval system: the donor must be permitted to provide funding, and the recipient organisation must register the specific grant. This framework imposes extensive requirements on both domestic NGOs and foreign organisations, including registration of foreign NGO branches and representative offices, grant registration and additional requirements for foreign-funded activities.¹⁰⁵

These restrictions are not merely formalities. If a grant, donation or service contract is not registered, organisations may be unable to use the funds through the banking system. The rules on grant registration adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers in 2015 require registration of grant agreements before implementation, while later rules introduced additional requirements for the registration of service contracts funded from foreign sources. In practice, restrictions on funding have made it extremely difficult for independent human rights organisations to operate legally in Azerbaijan. Many such groups are denied registration or forced to operate informally, leaving them unable to open organisational bank accounts, register grants or receive funding through ordinary legal channels.¹⁰⁶ Human Rights Watch has found that these restrictions have pushed independent organisations to operate “at the margins of the law”, while Freedom House reports that nearly all organisations and networks working on human rights are forced to operate in a legal grey zone.¹⁰⁷

By contrast, registered CSOs that obtain government approval may still receive state funding or, in limited cases, approved foreign grants; however, this access does not extend equally to independent watchdog and human rights organisations.¹⁰⁸

The ECtHR has also found violations in cases concerning NGO registration and dissolution in Azerbaijan. In *Ramzanova and Others v. Azerbaijan*, the Court found that the authorities’ failure to respond properly to NGO registration applications violated Article 11 of the Convention.¹⁰⁹ The Committee of Ministers’ supervision of the Ramzanova group of cases concerns unlawful de facto refusals to register associations and unlawful dissolution of NGOs. In *Tebieti Mühafizə Cəmiyyəti and Israfilov v. Azerbaijan*, the Court found a violation of Article 11 in relation to the

105 International Center for Not-for-Profit Law and MG Consulting, *Assessment of the Legal Framework for Non-Governmental Organizations in the Republic of Azerbaijan*, Fourth Edition, July 2017.

106 Human Rights Watch, “*We Try to Stay Invisible*”: *Azerbaijan’s Escalating Crackdown on Critics and Civil Society*, 8 October 2024

107 *ibid* (n. 91)

108 CSO Meter, *Azerbaijan Country Report 2023*; see also CSO Meter, Azerbaijan country profile, noting continued restrictions on foreign funding and government grant programmes administered through the NGO Support Agency.

109 ECtHR, *Ramzanova and Others v. Azerbaijan*, no. 44363/02, 1 February 2007.

dissolution of an NGO.¹¹⁰ These cases show that restrictions on civil society are not limited to criminal prosecution; they also operate through registration and administrative control.

The practical impact is severe. Organisations working on human rights, election monitoring, anti-corruption, rule of law, media freedom, legal aid or political accountability often depend on project funding to carry out their work. Funding restrictions limit their ability to employ staff, rent offices, pay lawyers, conduct field research, monitor trials, provide assistance to victims, publish reports, organise trainings, carry out advocacy or maintain long-term programmes. Where an organisation cannot register a grant, access a bank account or lawfully implement a service contract, it may formally exist but be unable to function.

Financial restrictions also affect planning and continuity. Civil society work often requires long-term engagement: documenting patterns of abuse, building trust with victims, preparing submissions to international mechanisms, litigating cases and training local partners. When funding becomes unpredictable or subject to discretionary approval, organisations cannot reliably plan projects, retain experienced staff or maintain institutional memory. This leads to project fragmentation, staff departures and loss of expertise.

The banking dimension is especially important. Without access to lawful and predictable banking operations, organisations cannot pay salaries, rent premises, contract experts, support beneficiaries or implement projects. Even where organisations are not formally closed, the inability to move funds legally can render them effectively paralysed. This type of financial control allows the authorities to weaken organisations without necessarily banning them outright.

The result is a fragmented civil society landscape. Some organisations operate informally without registration or public visibility. Others rely on reduced networks of volunteers. Some move parts of their work abroad or function through exile-based structures. Others narrow their public profile, avoid sensitive topics or suspend activities altogether. Organisations that continue to operate domestically often do so under constant legal and financial uncertainty and fear of criminal prosecution.

This paralysis has consequences beyond the organisations themselves. Victims of human rights violations have fewer places to seek help. Lawyers and activists have fewer institutional partners. International mechanisms receive less information from inside the country. Election monitoring, trial monitoring, anti-corruption research, public-interest litigation and victim support become harder to sustain. The disappearance or weakening of CSOs therefore reduces the capacity of society to document violations, support affected communities and hold authorities accountable.

In practical terms, restrictive NGO and grant laws function as an administrative infrastructure of repression. They do not always produce immediate arrests, but they steadily erode the conditions necessary for independent civic work. By controlling registration, funding, banking and compliance, the authorities can weaken organisations before they speak, investigate, litigate or mobilise. This makes civil society paralysis one of the most significant long-term impacts of the crackdown.

¹¹⁰ ECtHR, *Tebieti Mühafizə Cəmiyyəti and İsmayılov v. Azerbaijan*, no. 37083/03, 8 October 2009.

4.5 EXILE, FRAGMENTATION AND LOSS OF DOMESTIC CAPACITY

A further consequence of the crackdown is the growing displacement of independent journalists, activists, researchers and civil society actors from Azerbaijan. For many, leaving the country is not a strategic preference but a form of survival. Exile may allow some public-interest reporting, advocacy and documentation to continue, but it also transforms the conditions under which this work is carried out. Independent actors who once worked inside Azerbaijan, maintained local networks, attended court hearings, met victims, followed regional developments and engaged directly with communities are increasingly forced to operate from abroad, often through fragmented and informal networks.

This displacement has created a structural gap inside the country. The JX Fund's profile of Azerbaijani media in exile notes that Azerbaijani media and civil society are now partly organised through informal and transnational networks, while domestic coordination remains severely constrained by legal repression, surveillance and threats of retaliation.¹¹¹ Exiled journalists collaborate from hubs such as Berlin, Tbilisi and Washington, but this model cannot fully replace the presence of journalists, lawyers and civil society actors working inside Azerbaijan.

The shift to exile changes the nature of independent work. Journalists and activists abroad may continue to publish, document and advocate, but they often face reduced access to courtrooms, detention facilities, local officials, affected communities and primary documents. Reporting on regional issues, local corruption, police abuse, environmental damage or social grievances becomes harder when journalists cannot travel freely, meet people in person or verify information on the ground.¹¹² Abzas Media's productivity was affected by staff shortages, lack of direct access to information and the impossibility of working on the ground. The loss is also institutional: when experienced journalists, lawyers and human rights defenders are imprisoned, exiled or silenced, the country loses expertise, mentorship and trusted networks that are difficult to replace.

Exile also fragments public-interest work across borders. Newsrooms, advocacy groups and civic initiatives may continue to function, but often with teams dispersed across different jurisdictions, time zones, legal systems and security environments. Abzas Media has had to rebuild its work across countries and time zones, relying on encrypted communication and a "virtual, portable newsroom."¹¹³ While such adaptation demonstrates resilience, it also requires additional resources for digital security, legal stability, organisational management and coordination.

The risks do not necessarily end at the border. Citizen Lab's research on Azerbaijan describes how Azerbaijani critics abroad have faced forms of transnational repression, including digital

¹¹¹ JX Fund – European Fund for Journalism in Exile, *Azerbaijan*, 29 July 2025.

¹¹² Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Lora Reissner, *Journalism in Exile – New Reality for Azerbaijan's Independent Media*, 28 February 2025.

¹¹³ Global Investigative Journalism Network, Global Forum for Media Development, *Abzas Media: From Exile, Fighting for Press Freedom and Civil Space in Azerbaijan*, 29 April 2026.

surveillance, threats, attacks and pressure on family members.¹¹⁴ The report notes that the ongoing crackdown has forced many civil society activists and journalists to flee the country, while the authorities have also targeted human rights defenders and journalists abroad. Such pressure reduces the safety of exile as a space for independent work and may discourage some exiled actors from remaining publicly active.

Recent developments also show the use of legal mechanisms against critics abroad. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that authorities have expanded their campaign against exiled critics through in-absentia convictions and criminal cases against journalists, bloggers and activists abroad, together with concerns about apparent cross-border abductions or forced transfers.¹¹⁵ This demonstrates that exile does not remove the risk of retaliation; rather, it may shift repression into new forms, including prosecution in absentia, extradition pressure, surveillance, online attacks or pressure on relatives.

These dynamics place exiled journalists and activists in a difficult position. On the one hand, they may be among the few remaining actors able to report, advocate and communicate internationally with fewer immediate constraints than colleagues inside Azerbaijan. On the other hand, they may face unstable legal status, financial insecurity, limited access to domestic sources, psychological pressure and ongoing concern for family members or colleagues who remain in the country. A UN expert report on journalists in exile, covered by Associated Press, warned that journalists who flee repression often continue to face physical, digital and legal threats and may eventually abandon the profession due to insecurity and lack of support.¹¹⁶

The fragmentation of independent work also affects sustainability. Exiled media and NGOs often depend on short-term donor funding, temporary legal arrangements, voluntary labour and informal networks. This makes long-term planning difficult. It may also force organisations to spend significant time on survival needs – registration, visas, relocation, security protocols, fundraising and emergency support – rather than on reporting, documentation or advocacy. As the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) analysis notes, exiled media must invest not only in journalism but also in safety, legal stability and long-term sustainability.¹¹⁷

The loss of domestic capacity weakens accountability: with fewer journalists and civil society actors inside the country, fewer people remain to document abuses, monitor trials and support victims. Exile can preserve independent voices, but it cannot replace a functioning domestic civic space. Fewer local organisations, trusted contacts, and institutions are left to sustain long-term public accountability.

114 Citizen Lab, [Azerbaijan](#), Digital Transnational Repression Country Spotlight, 11 December 2024.

115 Human Rights Watch, [Azerbaijan Expands Crackdown on Activists in Exile](#), 10 February 2026.

116 Associated Press, [Thousands of journalists have fled homelands due to repression, threats and conflict](#), UN expert says, 2024.

117 Global Investigative Journalism Network / Global Forum for Media Development, [Abzas Media: From Exile, Fighting for Press Freedom and Civil Space in Azerbaijan](#), 29 April 2026.

4.6 GENDERED AND PERSONAL CONSEQUENCES

The impact of repression is not only institutional or political; it is also deeply personal and social. Detention, prosecution, surveillance and public smear campaigns affect not only the individuals directly targeted, but also their families, colleagues, professional networks and communities. In politically sensitive cases, repression often operates through the creation of prolonged uncertainty: families must cope with repeated detention hearings, prison visits, legal costs, loss of income, public stigma and the psychological burden of having a relative serve a long sentence, with no certainty about when, or whether, they will be released.

These personal consequences are particularly severe where the detained person is a journalist, lawyer, activist or civil society worker whose professional identity is publicly criminalised. When independent reporting or human rights work is reframed as smuggling, illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion or foreign-agent activity, the authorities not only prosecute the individual but also attempt to damage their social legitimacy. Families may be exposed to pressure, surveillance or questioning. Colleagues may be discouraged from continuing the work of the detained person. The personal cost of repression, therefore, becomes part of the broader strategy of deterrence.

Women journalists and women human rights defenders face additional risks because repression is often gendered. In Azerbaijan, women who criticise the authorities, expose corruption or participate in public life have been subjected to smear campaigns, sexualised threats, reputational attacks and the weaponisation of private life. Amnesty International has documented a pattern of gender-based reprisals against women activists. These included accusations of being “bad wives” or “bad mothers”, the hacking of social media accounts, and the publication of private conversations, personal data and sexualised material. Amnesty reported at least 15 such cases in the two years preceding its 2021 briefing and warned that these methods appeared designed to punish women for exercising their rights and discourage others from public activism.¹¹⁸

These gendered tactics have a specific social function. In a context where patriarchal norms and expectations around women’s family roles, sexuality and reputation remain powerful, attacks on private life may be used to cause social shame and isolation. For women journalists and activists, the threat is therefore not limited to prosecution or imprisonment. It may also involve reputational harm, family pressure, online abuse and sexualised intimidation. Such attacks are intended to make public participation personally costly and socially dangerous.

The case of Khadija Ismayilova remains one of the clearest examples of the weaponisation of private life against an investigative journalist. The ECtHR examined the installation of hidden cameras in her home, blackmail attempts and the dissemination of intimate material. The Court found that the Azerbaijani authorities had failed to conduct an effective investigation into a serious invasion of her private life and recognised the link between the privacy violations and her journalistic activity. The case demonstrates how surveillance and sexualised blackmail can be used not only to punish an individual journalist, but also to send a wider warning to women who investigate

¹¹⁸ Amnesty International, *Azerbaijan: Stop the vicious campaign of gendered smears and reprisals against women activists*, 12 May 2021.

corruption and abuse of power.¹¹⁹

Recent cases show that women journalists remain at the centre of the crackdown. In the Abzas Media case, UN Special Procedures identified Sevinj Vagifgizi, Nargiz Absalamova and Elnara Gasimova as women human rights defenders and journalists and raised concerns about their alleged arbitrary detention and criminalisation in connection with their legitimate human rights work and freedom of expression. The communication also reported allegations that Sevinj Vagifgizi was arrested upon return from a work trip abroad and was reportedly assaulted during interrogation.¹²⁰

The scale of imprisonment of women journalists is itself significant. The Norwegian Helsinki Committee reported in March 2026 that nine women journalists were in jail in Azerbaijan, including journalists from Abzas Media and Meydan TV, and highlighted that never before in Azerbaijan's post-independence history had so many women journalists been imprisoned. Organisations also raised concerns about the health conditions of several detained women journalists, including the need for medical treatment that may be difficult to access in detention or prison.¹²¹

Reports concerning detention conditions further demonstrate the gendered and personal consequences of the crackdown. Many organisations expressed concern in 2026 about the letter of detained journalist Aysel Umudova, in which she reportedly described sexual harassment and ill-treatment by police officers during her arrest in December 2024.¹²² Additionally, Ulviyya Ali alleged that police beat and threatened her with rape after her arrest in May 2025. Writing from detention, Ali stated: "I want everyone to know: in the space of 24 hours, I was threatened with rape twice by the Azerbaijani police."¹²³

Such allegations are particularly serious because sexual harassment and sexualised violence in custody can have long-lasting physical, psychological and social consequences, and may be used to intimidate not only the detained journalist but also other women working in the media. The personal impact also extends to colleagues and professional communities. When women journalists are imprisoned, subjected to degrading treatment or targeted through sexualised smear campaigns, the effect is not confined to the individuals concerned. Other women in journalism and civil society may perceive public work as exposing them to reputational destruction, family pressure or gender-based abuse. This may influence decisions about whether to report on sensitive issues, appear publicly, use real names, travel, attend protests, speak to international mechanisms or continue investigative work.

119 ECtHR, *Khadija Ismayilova v. Azerbaijan*, nos. 65286/13 and 57270/14, 10 January 2019.

120 UN Special Procedures, *Communication to the Government of Azerbaijan*, AL AZE 1/2024, 16 May 2024.

121 Norwegian Helsinki Committee, *Nine Women Journalists in Azerbaijan in Jail over Their Reporting*, 9 March 2026.

122 OMCT/FIDH, *Azerbaijan: Unlawfully Detained Women Journalists Face Sexual Violence amidst On-going Crackdown on Civil Society*, 5 February 2026.

123 Amnesty International, *Harsh Detention Conditions and Ill-Treatment, 2025* p.6, citing Ulviyya Ali's letter from detention; see also Committee to Protect Journalists, "Ulviyya Guliyeva (Ulviyya Ali)," reporting allegations that police repeatedly struck Ali on the head and threatened sexual assault in an attempt to obtain her phone password.

Gendered repression is therefore both individual and collective. It harms the targeted woman directly, but it also communicates a warning to other women that civic engagement may lead to attacks on their dignity, privacy, family life and social standing. In this sense, sexualised smear campaigns, privacy violations and gendered intimidation operate as tools for excluding women from public life.

The broader social consequences are significant. Families of detainees may become informal advocates, forced to speak publicly, attend hearings, communicate with lawyers and international organisations, and carry the burden of keeping cases visible. At the same time, they may face stigma, fear and economic hardship. Colleagues who remain free may experience guilt, insecurity and pressure to continue work under dangerous conditions. Communities lose trusted journalists, lawyers and human rights defenders, while younger women considering public-interest work may see fewer examples of safe participation.

Taken together, the personal and gendered consequences of repression demonstrate that the crackdown is not limited to formal legal measures. It also operates through fear, shame, isolation, family pressure, health consequences and attacks on dignity. For women journalists and women human rights defenders, these harms are intensified by gender-specific forms of intimidation, including sexualised smear campaigns, threats to reputation and the weaponisation of private life. The result is a form of repression that seeks not only to punish dissent, but to make public participation emotionally, socially and physically unsustainable.

5 International Response

The international response to Azerbaijan's current crackdown has been marked by a sharp contradiction. On the one hand, international human rights organisations, some parliamentarians from member states and PACE, and Council of Europe bodies have repeatedly criticised the Azerbaijani authorities for politically motivated arrests, attacks on independent media, restrictions on civil society, and the growing number of political prisoners. Human rights organisations, media freedom groups, some members of the European Parliament, United States lawmakers, and Council of Europe actors have repeatedly called for the release of political prisoners and an end to the crackdown. Before COP29, several organisations urged states to raise Azerbaijan's human rights crisis and warned against allowing the government to use climate diplomacy to whitewash repression.¹²⁴

The strongest reaction from an EU institution so far has come from the European Parliament.

124 Amnesty International, 'EU: Raise Human Rights Crisis in Azerbaijan during COP29' (6 November 2024) <https://www.amnesty.eu/news/eu-raise-human-rights-crisis-in-azerbaijan-during-cop29/> accessed 9 June 2026; Freedom Now, 'Human Rights in Azerbaijan since the COP29 UN Climate Change Conference' (29 April 2025) <https://www.freedom-now.org/testimony-to-the-tom-lantos-human-rights-commission-human-rights-in-azerbaijan-since-the-cop-29-un-climate-change-conference/> accessed 9 June 2026.

In December 2025, it adopted a resolution condemning human rights violations in Azerbaijan, denouncing the misuse of national security provisions for judicial harassment and the criminalisation of freedom of expression, peace advocacy, and public criticism. The Parliament called for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, including Bahruz Samadov and Igbal Abilov, condemned the arbitrary sentencing of Gubad Ibadoghlu and Fazil Gasimov, and urged the use of the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime against responsible officials. It also stressed that progress on any future partnership agreement with Azerbaijan should be conditional on tangible advances in human rights, the rule of law, and respect for EU values and principles.¹²⁵ These statements are important, but they have remained politically weak when not backed by conditionality, sanctions, suspension of cooperation, or measurable benchmarks.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan's strategic value has increased significantly since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As a result, criticism of repression has rarely translated into sustained political costs. Instead, the Azerbaijani government has continued to deepen its cooperation with the European Union, the United States, Israel, UN agencies, and other international actors in the fields of energy, security, climate diplomacy, urban development, connectivity, and regional peace negotiations.

This contradiction is central to understanding the current situation. The Azerbaijani authorities did not intensify repression in a period of international isolation. They did so while being courted as an energy supplier, transport hub, climate diplomacy host, security partner, and mediator in regional infrastructure projects. The result has been a permissive international environment in which human rights concerns are formally acknowledged but structurally subordinated to geopolitical and economic priorities.

The most important shift occurred after February 2022, when Russia's invasion of Ukraine pushed European states to reduce dependence on Russian energy. Azerbaijan became more important to the EU as a source for gas and as a transit state linking the Caspian region and Central Asia to Europe. In July 2022, the European Commission and Azerbaijan signed a Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy, with the stated aim of doubling the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor and increasing deliveries of Azerbaijani gas to the EU.¹²⁶ This agreement was presented as part of Europe's energy diversification strategy, but it also gave the Azerbaijani government new diplomatic leverage at a time when repression at home was increasing.

The energy partnership did not remain limited to gas. It was gradually reframed through the language of green transition, renewable energy, hydrogen, methane reduction, and environmental cooperation. In 2025, the EU and Azerbaijan continued their High-Level Energy Dialogue in Brussels, emphasising cooperation on gas supplies, clean energy transition, renewable energy,

125 European Parliament, 'Human Rights Violations in Azerbaijan, Nigeria and Guinea Bissau' (18 December 2025) <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20251211IPR32170/human-rights-violations-in-azerbaijan-nigeria-and-guinea-bissau> accessed 9 June 2026.

126 European Commission, 'EU and Azerbaijan Enhance Bilateral Relations, Including Energy Cooperation' (18 July 2022) https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-and-azerbaijan-enhance-bilateral-relations-including-energy-cooperation-2022-07-18_en accessed 9 June 2026.

energy efficiency, hydrogen, and methane emissions.¹²⁷ This language allowed Azerbaijan to present itself not only as a fossil-fuel exporter, but also as a future green-energy hub. Projects such as the Caspian-Black Sea-Europe Green Energy Corridor and proposed electricity links from the Caspian region to Europe have reinforced this image. In practice, however, the same state that presented itself as a partner in green transition was imprisoning journalists, researchers, labour activists, election monitors, and civil society actors who could have provided independent oversight of corruption, environmental governance, public procurement, and energy politics.

COP29 became the clearest example of this contradiction. Azerbaijan hosted the UN Climate Change Conference in Baku in November 2024 at the height of the crackdown. In the months before the conference, international organisations warned that the authorities had intensified arrests of journalists, human rights defenders, independent politicians, and civil society actors. Human rights groups argued that meaningful climate negotiations require civic participation, freedom of expression, access to independent information, and the ability of activists to criticise governments without fear of retaliation.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, COP29 proceeded in Baku, giving the Azerbaijani government a major platform for international legitimacy. The event allowed the authorities to present Azerbaijan as a responsible global actor while domestic civil society was being silenced.

The host-country framework for COP29 also raised serious concerns. Human Rights Watch reported that the host-country agreement between Azerbaijan and the UNFCCC lacked adequate protections for participants' rights, including freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and protection against surveillance or retaliation.¹²⁹ These concerns were especially serious because Azerbaijani civil society actors were not operating in a normal civic environment. Many independent journalists and activists were already imprisoned, others were under travel bans or investigation, and many more were forced into self-censorship or exile. In this context, the conference did not merely take place alongside repression. It risked contributing to the normalisation of an authoritarian state as a legitimate host of global climate governance.

The same pattern continued after COP29. In May 2026, Baku hosted the thirteenth session of the World Urban Forum, co-organised by UN-Habitat and the Government of Azerbaijan.¹³⁰ Like COP29, the World Urban Forum allowed Azerbaijan to project an image of modernisation, urban transformation, sustainability, and international cooperation. This was politically significant because urban development in Azerbaijan is closely tied to questions of corruption, expropriation, elite-controlled construction, displacement, and the state's management of public space. Yet the

127 European Commission, 'Cooperation on Gas, Clean Energy Transition Focus of EU-Azerbaijan Energy Dialogue in Brussels Today' (13 June 2025) https://energy.ec.europa.eu/news/cooperation-gas-clean-energy-transition-focus-eu-azerbaijan-energy-dialogue-brussels-today-2025-06-13_en accessed 9 June 2026; European Commission, 'Press Statement of European Commissioner for Energy and Housing and Minister of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan' (4 April 2025) https://energy.ec.europa.eu/news/press-statement-european-commissioner-energy-and-housing-and-minister-energy-republic-azerbaijan-2025-04-04_en accessed 9 June 2026.

128 Amnesty International, 'The Human Rights Situation in Azerbaijan ahead of COP29' (1 November 2024) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/8703/2024/en/> accessed 9 June 2026.

129 Human Rights Watch, 'COP29 Host Country Agreement Lacks Rights Protections' (10 October 2024) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/10/cop29-host-country-agreement-lacks-rights-protections> accessed 9 June 2026.

130 UN-Habitat, 'Thirteenth Session of the World Urban Forum' <https://unhabitat.org/thirteenth-session-of-the-world-urban-forum> accessed 9 June 2026; WUF13, 'World Urban Forum 13: Baku, Azerbaijan, 17–22 May 2026' <https://wuf13.az/en> accessed 9 June 2026.

international urban-development agenda largely separated technical cooperation from the political context in which urban policy takes place. The result was another case in which Azerbaijan's participation in global governance structures helped produce reputational benefits without meaningful human rights conditionality.

The United States also expanded cooperation with Azerbaijan. In February 2026, the United States and Azerbaijan signed a Strategic Partnership Charter in Baku. The charter emphasised economic growth, regional connectivity, trade, investment, energy, digital infrastructure, and security cooperation.¹³¹ In June 2026, US officials announced plans for major energy investments in Azerbaijan, with more than \$8 billion in commercial agreements reportedly signed.¹³² This cooperation strengthened Azerbaijan's role as a regional energy and transit hub. It also showed that earlier calls by US lawmakers for the release of political prisoners before COP29 did not fundamentally alter the direction of US-Azerbaijan relations. In October 2024, nearly sixty US lawmakers had urged the State Department to press Azerbaijan to release political prisoners and improve the human rights environment ahead of COP29.¹³³ Azerbaijan rejected this criticism, and by 2026, the bilateral relationship had moved toward a strategic partnership rather than accountability.

The contrast with international reactions to developments in Georgia is striking. Georgia's democratic backsliding, including its foreign-influence legislation, attacks on civil society and decision to suspend EU accession talks until 2028, triggered a much stronger institutional response. The EU stated that Georgia's actions jeopardised its European path and led to a de facto halt of the accession process.¹³⁴

This asymmetry reveals the limits of international human rights conditionality. Georgia's relationship with the EU is structured through the accession process, which gives European institutions clear leverage and a formal language of conditionality. Azerbaijan, by contrast, is not an EU candidate country and has positioned itself as an energy, security, and connectivity partner rather than a democratising state seeking membership. This makes it easier for European actors to separate human rights concerns from strategic cooperation. In practice, Georgia's authoritarian turn has been treated as a violation of an accession pathway, while Azerbaijan's long-standing authoritarianism has been treated as a manageable feature of a strategic partnership.

Israel represents another important dimension of Azerbaijan's international protection. Azerbaijan and Israel have developed a long-standing strategic relationship involving energy, defence, intelligence, agriculture, and technology. Israel has relied on Azerbaijani oil supplies, while Azer-

131 President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 'Charter on Strategic Partnership between the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Government of the United States of America' (10 February 2026) <https://president.az/en/articles/view/71553> accessed 9 June 2026.

132 Reuters, 'US Plans Energy Investments in Azerbaijan, Says \$8 Billion in Deals Signed' (2 June 2026) <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/us-plans-energy-investments-azerbaijan-says-8-billion-deals-signed-2026-06-02/> accessed 9 June 2026.

133 Reuters, 'US Lawmakers Urge Blinken to Push Azerbaijan on Human Rights ahead of COP29' (3 October 2024) <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-lawmakers-urge-blinken-push-azerbaijan-human-rights-ahead-cop29-2024-10-03/> accessed 9 June 2026; Reuters, 'Azerbaijan Rejects "Disgusting" US Human Rights Criticism before COP29' (4 October 2024) <https://www.reuters.com/world/azerbaijan-rejects-disgusting-us-human-rights-criticism-before-cop29-2024-10-04/> accessed 9 June 2026.

134 European Commission, 'Georgia' https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/countries/georgia_en accessed 9 June 2026; European Parliament, Report on the 2023 and 2024 Commission Reports on Georgia A10-0110/2025 (12 June 2025) https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0110_EN.html accessed 9 June 2026.

zerbaijan has benefited from Israeli military technology, including drones and weapons systems that played an important role in the wars over Nagorno-Karabakh.¹³⁵ The relationship is also shaped by shared strategic concerns regarding Iran. This does not mean that Israel alone shields Azerbaijan from criticism, but it does mean that Baku occupies a valuable place in a wider security architecture involving Israel, the United States, Türkiye, and anti-Iran strategic calculations. This further raises the geopolitical cost of serious pressure on Azerbaijan.

The Council of Europe has been more critical than most other international institutions, but even there the response has been limited. PACE's refusal to ratify Azerbaijan's credentials was important because it recognised that the Azerbaijani government had failed to meet core obligations of membership. Yet Azerbaijan's political prisoner problem has existed for decades, and previous Council of Europe mechanisms were weakened by a long history of lobbying, influence-buying, and "caviar diplomacy." Investigations and reporting have documented how Azerbaijani lobbying networks cultivated European politicians, especially within PACE, to soften criticism of elections, political prisoners, and human rights violations.¹³⁶ Although reforms followed earlier corruption scandals, the legacy of these practices continues to shape mistrust around European engagement with Azerbaijan.

The overall pattern is therefore not silence but the lack of a coordinated, coherent response and, in some cases, open cooperation with and endorsement of the Azerbaijani authorities. International actors have criticised Azerbaijan's repression while simultaneously maintaining or expanding cooperation in the very areas that strengthen the regime's international standing. This reveals a broader shift in the balance between values and interests in contemporary international engagement. While the European Union has traditionally presented itself as a normative or value-based actor committed to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, its approach toward Azerbaijan increasingly demonstrates the primacy of geopolitical and strategic considerations. In practice, concerns over energy security, connectivity, regional stability, and broader geopolitical competition have often overshadowed value-based commitments. As a result, democratic rhetoric is therefore subordinated to strategic interests whenever the two conflict. Energy security, green transition, transport corridors, regional peace negotiations, anti-Iran security concerns, and global climate or urban governance have all been used to justify continued engagement. The Azerbaijani government has learned to operate within this environment. It accepts rhetorical criticism when necessary, rejects it as interference when useful, and continues to cultivate strategic partnerships that reduce the likelihood of serious consequences.

For this reason, the international response should be assessed not only by the number of statements issued, but by the political effects produced. So far, the effect has been limited. Political prisoners remain imprisoned; new arrests continue; restrictive laws remain in force; independent media and civil society have been weakened; and Azerbaijan continues to host major international events and sign strategic agreements. The gap between criticism and consequence

135 Associated Press, 'Israeli Arms Quietly Helped Azerbaijan Retake Nagorno-Karabakh, to the Dismay of Region's Armenians' (5 October 2023) <https://apnews.com/article/6814437bcd744acc1c4df0409a74406c> accessed 9 June 2026

136 JAMnews, 'Azerbaijan's Lobbying in PACE and the Munich Court Verdict' (1 August 2025) <https://jam-news.net/azerbaijans-lobbying-in-pace/> accessed 9 June 2026.

has become one of the enabling conditions of continued repression. Without stronger, coordinated, and conditional international action, the Azerbaijani authorities are likely to interpret external engagement as confirmation that political imprisonment carries no serious diplomatic cost.

6 Conclusion

The cases examined in this report demonstrate that the current wave of repression in Azerbaijan is not a series of isolated abuses, but part of a broader and deliberate system of control over public life. Political imprisonment, restrictive legislation, criminal prosecution, surveillance, pressure on lawyers, attacks on media and the weakening of civil society are interconnected elements of the same structure. Together, they have transformed the exercise of fundamental rights into a source of legal, financial and personal risk.

The post-2020 political environment has allowed the Azerbaijani authorities to deepen this system. Victory nationalism, securitised narratives, geopolitical relevance and weak international accountability have created conditions in which dissent can be portrayed as disloyalty, foreign interference or criminal activity. This has enabled the authorities to expand repression beyond traditional opposition politics and into almost every remaining area of independent public life: journalism, election monitoring, human rights work, anti-war advocacy, feminist and queer activism, labour organising, minority rights work, academic research and exile-based criticism. A central finding of this report is that repression in Azerbaijan increasingly operates through the law rather than outside it, with legislation weaponised against dissent. The authorities have relied on restrictive laws on NGOs, grants, political parties, media and legal representation to create an administrative framework in which independent activity can be obstructed, delayed, punished or criminalised. Ordinary civic acts — receiving funding, registering an organisation, publishing information, monitoring elections, representing a politically sensitive client or cooperating with international bodies — have been turned into points of vulnerability.

The criminal justice system plays a particularly important role in this architecture. Financial and economic charges such as smuggling, money laundering, illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion and forgery are used to reframe journalism, human rights work and civic engagement as ordinary criminal wrongdoing. Pre-trial detention, denial of fair trial guarantees, formulaic judicial decisions, searches, seizures and restrictions on access to evidence then reinforce this process. The result is a system in which legal procedure no longer functions primarily as a safeguard against abuse, but as a mechanism through which repression is formalised and legitimised.

The international response has so far been insufficient. Azerbaijan has continued to benefit from strategic cooperation, energy partnerships, connectivity projects and major international platforms despite the intensification of domestic repression. International criticism has often remained rhetorical and has rarely been matched by conditionality, sanctions, measurable benchmarks or sustained political consequences. This gap between criticism and consequence has contributed to the authorities' sense of impunity.

The cases documented in this report, therefore, point to an urgent need for a stronger and more coherent response. Political prisoners should be released, politically motivated prosecutions

should be dropped, restrictive laws should be amended or repealed, and the independence of courts, lawyers, media and civil society should be restored. International partners should treat the protection of civic space, implementation of ECtHR judgments and release of political prisoners as central benchmarks in their engagement with Azerbaijan, rather than as secondary issues separated from strategic cooperation.

Ultimately, the near eradication of civic space in Azerbaijan is not only a domestic human rights crisis. It is a rule-of-law crisis and a democratic accountability crisis. A society in which journalists are imprisoned, civil society is paralysed, lawyers are pressured, political parties are controlled, and citizens are discouraged from public participation cannot provide meaningful accountability or protection of rights. Reversing this trajectory requires more than the release of individual prisoners, although that remains urgent. It requires dismantling the legal, judicial, administrative and political architecture that made their imprisonment possible.

7 Recommendations

TO THE AZERBAIJANI AUTHORITIES

1. The Azerbaijani authorities should immediately and unconditionally release all persons detained or imprisoned for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association, assembly, political participation, journalistic activity, human rights work, legal defence, academic research or other legitimate civic activity. All politically motivated criminal proceedings should be discontinued, convictions quashed, criminal records cleared, and effective remedies, including compensation and rehabilitation, provided to those affected.
2. The authorities should end the use of criminal law as a tool against journalists, human rights defenders, lawyers, political activists, bloggers, researchers, labour organisers, minority-rights defenders, anti-war activists and other civic actors.
3. The authorities should end arbitrary detention, intrusive searches, seizures and digital interference targeting journalists, lawyers, civil society actors and political activists. Such measures should be lawful, necessary, proportionate and subject to independent judicial oversight.
4. Courts should independently assess the evidence, avoid formulaic approval of prosecutorial requests, consider alternatives to detention and examine allegations of planted evidence, ill-treatment and other procedural violations.

5. The Azerbaijani authorities should repeal or substantially amend restrictive legislation affecting civil society, media, political parties and the legal profession. These laws should be brought into full compliance with Azerbaijan's obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Council of Europe standards.
6. The authorities should remove excessive restrictions on NGO registration, grant registration, foreign funding, donations and service contracts. Civil society organisations should be able to register, receive funds, open and use bank accounts, employ staff, rent premises, conduct research, provide legal aid, monitor trials and cooperate with international organisations without arbitrary interference or prior political approval.
7. The authorities should protect journalistic sources and legal professional privilege. Law enforcement bodies should not access journalists' communications, notes, archives, devices or source-related materials except in exceptional circumstances, subject to strong safeguards and independent judicial authorisation. Lawyers' files, correspondence and communications with clients must be protected from search, seizure or inspection.
8. The authorities should address the gendered impact of repression. Women journalists, women human rights defenders and women activists should be protected from sexualised smear campaigns, threats to reputation, online abuse, weaponisation of private life and gender-based violence. Allegations of sexual harassment or degrading treatment in custody should be investigated independently and effectively, and survivors should receive protection, medical care and remedies.
9. The authorities should end transnational repression against Azerbaijani critics abroad. Criminal proceedings in absentia, threats, intimidation, pressure on relatives, digital surveillance and attacks against exiled journalists, bloggers, activists and political figures should cease. The government should cooperate with foreign investigations into threats or attacks against Azerbaijani exiles.
10. The Azerbaijani authorities should fully resume cooperation with the Council of Europe system for the execution of judgments of the ECtHR. They should implement all outstanding ECtHR judgments fully, promptly and effectively, including payment of just satisfaction, release or reopening of proceedings where required, restoration of rights and adoption of general measures to prevent repetition of violations.

TO THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

1. In light of Azerbaijan's growing disengagement from the execution process, the Committee of Ministers should strengthen its response to persistent non-implementation of ECtHR judgments, including the failure to provide information, implement outstanding individual measures and pay compensation awarded to applicants. In particular, the Committee should seek concrete, time-bound progress in the Mammadli group, where key individual measures have remained outstanding for years despite repeated supervision.
2. The Council of Europe should treat Azerbaijan's non-implementation of ECtHR judgments as a central political and rule-of-law issue. Dialogue with Azerbaijan should not be limited to technical exchanges, but should be tied to measurable progress, including the release of political prisoners, reopening of politically motivated cases, reform of restrictive legislation and restoration of cooperation with the execution process.
3. PACE should continue to scrutinise Azerbaijan's compliance with its Council of Europe obligations, including through monitoring procedures, hearings and public reporting. Any future restoration of full parliamentary engagement should be conditional on tangible progress in the release of political prisoners, implementation of ECtHR judgments and restoration of civic and political freedoms.
4. The Commissioner for Human Rights should continue to prioritise Azerbaijan, including the situation of political prisoners, independent media, lawyers, women human rights defenders and exiled critics. The Commissioner should request access to the country, seek meetings with detained persons and their lawyers, and publicly report on systemic violations.

TO THE EUROPEAN UNION AND EU MEMBER STATES

1. The European Union and its member states should make human rights, civic space, political prisoners and implementation of ECtHR judgments central benchmarks in relations with Azerbaijan. Energy cooperation, connectivity projects, trade, security cooperation and high-level political engagement should not proceed without clear human rights conditionality.
2. The EU should consider targeted restrictive measures against officials responsible for serious human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, politically motivated

prosecution, torture or ill-treatment, sexualised violence, unlawful surveillance and transnational repression. Such measures should include visa bans and asset freezes where appropriate.

3. EU institutions and member states should systematically raise individual political prisoner cases in bilateral and multilateral meetings with Azerbaijani officials. These cases should not be treated as symbolic issues, but as indicators of the broader state of the rule of law and civic space in Azerbaijan.
4. The EU should increase direct support to independent Azerbaijani civil society, journalists, human rights defenders, lawyers and exile-based media. Funding mechanisms should be flexible, secure and accessible to actors who cannot safely operate through formal registration or banking channels inside Azerbaijan.
5. EU member states should strengthen protection for Azerbaijani activists, journalists and critics in exile. This should include protection from surveillance and intimidation, effective investigation of threats or attacks, support for emergency visas or relocation where necessary, and safeguards against extradition or deportation to Azerbaijan where individuals face a risk of persecution.

TO THE UNITED NATIONS AND OSCE

1. UN Special Procedures should systematically follow up on their communications concerning detained journalists, human rights defenders and political activists in Azerbaijan, including the Abzas Media journalists and Anar Mammadli, and seek concrete information on releases, detention conditions, investigations into alleged ill-treatment and remedies provided. Where concerns remain unresolved, mandate holders should issue follow-up communications and seek access to Azerbaijan for country visits.
2. UN treaty bodies and the Universal Periodic Review process should use their follow-up procedures to request measurable information on the implementation of recommendations concerning arbitrary detention, restrictive NGO and media legislation and the protection of independent civil society, including data on releases and relevant legislative amendments.
3. OSCE/ODIHR should request a clear implementation roadmap for the recommendations arising from its 2024 election observation missions and publicly assess progress before future elections, particularly regarding independent election monitoring, media freedom, political pluralism and restrictions affecting civil society organisations.

