

ZAMIN

ZAKI



FACTS

Personal data:

1. Zamin Zaki (DOB: 18 August 1997) is an Azerbaijani citizen, a trained social worker, and the founder/head of the Ubuntu Social Work Association initiative. Before his arrest, Zaki was engaged in socially oriented training, mentoring, and community work, especially with students and vulnerable groups. Independent public sources also describe Ubuntu as active in socially sensitive fields, including queer social work and practice-oriented social-work education in Azerbaijan.
2. Zaki was detained in April 2025¹ and prosecuted in the wider Azerbaijani “NGO case”. According to the indictment, he was formally charged under Articles 193-1.3.2, 308.1 and 313 of the Criminal Code, following his arrest and placement in pre-trial detention on 9 April 2025. Public reporting consistently situates his prosecution within the broader crackdown on independent civil society, identifying him as a social worker detained alongside other civic actors in the NGO investigation and describing the case as part of a wider pattern of politically motivated repression.
3. The allegations against Z. Zaki lack credibility and are widely regarded as politically driven and part of a wider crackdown on civil society and independent media launched by the Azerbaijani authorities starting from 2022.²

Date of detention:

4. On 9 April 2025, Zamin Zaki was formally charged and taken into custody in the framework of the broader “NGO case”. On the same date, the Binagadi District Court ordered his pre-trial detention until 13 July 2025. His appeals against detention were rejected, including by the Baku Court of Appeal on 17 April 2025, and the detention period was later extended until 13 October 2025.

Legal accusations:

5. On 9 April 2025, the investigating authorities formally charged Zamin Zaki under the following provisions of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan:

- Article 193-1.3.2 - legalization (laundering) of property obtained by criminal means, in a large amount;
- Article 308.2 initially, later reclassified to Article 308.1 - abuse of official powers;
- Article 313 - official forgery.

6. On 2 September 2025, part of the case was dropped, and on 4 September 2025 the accusation was reformulated, leaving the final charges under Articles 193-1.3.2, 308.1 and 313.

Legal status of prisoner:

7. Zamin Zaki is now a convicted prisoner. According to public reporting, on 11 March 2026, the Baku Assize Court found him guilty and sentenced him to 7 years and 6 months' imprisonment. Reporting on earlier hearings confirms that his trial had been ongoing at least since October 2025 and that he remained in custody throughout the proceedings.

Legal proceedings:

8. On 9 April 2025, Zamin Zaki was formally charged and taken into custody in connection with the investigation commonly referred to as the "NGO case". On the same date, the Binagadi District Court ordered his pre-trial detention. His appeals against the detention order were rejected by the Baku Court of Appeal on 17 April 2025, and the custodial measure was subsequently extended. Zaki remained in pre-trial detention throughout the investigation and trial proceedings.

9. The first-instance trial was conducted before the Baku Assize Court. Court hearings were held during 2025 and early 2026, with Zaki remaining in custody for the entire duration of the proceedings. On 11 March 2026, the court found him guilty and sentenced him to 7 years and 6 months' imprisonment, ordering that the custodial measure remain in force.

At the time of writing, the defense has challenged the judgment, and appellate proceedings are expected before the Baku Court of Appeal.

10. The reasoning advanced by the prosecution and accepted by the court relied primarily on financial and administrative documents produced by the investigative authorities, together with statements from individuals connected to the project under scrutiny. The evidentiary narrative centered on the allegation that funding received in the framework of the “Collective Care: Building Stronger Communities Together” project was intentionally concealed through contractual arrangements and third-party bank accounts. These materials were treated as establishing criminal intent, despite the fact that they primarily concerned administrative compliance with grant-registration procedures.
11. Throughout the proceedings, Zaki and his defense maintained that the prosecution mischaracterized routine project-management and financial arrangements as criminal conduct. They argued that the activities attributed to him concerned ordinary civil-society work and grant administration, and that the charges reflected the broader criminalization of unregistered grant activity and foreign-funded NGO work in Azerbaijan. The courts nevertheless relied on the prosecution’s documentary record without demonstrating the level of independent scrutiny normally expected in cases where regulatory or administrative issues are transformed into serious criminal accusations.

LEGAL ANALYSIS

Reasons why Zamin Zaki should be regarded as a political prisoner:

12. Assessment of whether Z. Zaki should be regarded as a political prisoner is based on the Resolution 1900 (2012) ‘The Definition of Political Prisoner’ of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the criteria established in the Resolution (paragraph 3)³. The legal proceedings against and conviction of Z. Zaki satisfy two criteria established by the paragraph. 3 of the Resolution for defining political prisoners ((a) and (e)):

(a) Zamin’s detention and imprisonment violate his fundamental rights under the European Convention on Human Rights, particularly freedom of expression and the right to freedom of association, as well as the right to a fair trial and to liberty and security.

(e) The political motives (ulterior motives) were sole and predominant in pursuing and conducting unfair criminal proceedings against him, which caused preliminary detention and imprisonment.

13. The European Court of Human Rights’ jurisprudence on Article 18 of the ECHR, which prohibits restrictions on rights for improper purposes, reinforces this analysis. The following considerations based on quadripartite test should be emphasized in this totality assessment in the general contextual evaluation of a distinct state of affairs (*mutatis mutandis*, *Ibrahimov and Mammadov v. Azerbaijan*, 2020, §§ 113-131):

- 1) The prisoner's public profile;
- 2) The sequence of the events;
- 3) The manner in which the investigations and trial were carried out;
- 4) The authorities' conduct

.Zamin Zaki's public profile:

14. Zamin Zaki is a socially active Azerbaijani civic actor whose public engagement has been expressed through independent social-work initiatives, community training, and cooperation with international civil-society partners. He is a trained social worker and the founder and leader of the Ubuntu Social Work Association initiative. In that capacity, he organized seminars, trainings, and professional discussions focused on social services, community support, and practice-oriented social work.
15. His prosecution must also be understood within the broader environment affecting independent NGOs, grant recipients, and civil-society actors in Azerbaijan. Public reporting and human-rights documentation describe an expanding pattern in which individuals involved in foreign-funded projects, research initiatives, or civic organizations are subjected to criminal investigations centered on financial or administrative allegations related to grant funding. Within this context, Zaki's case appears consistent with a wider enforcement pattern in which ordinary civil-society activity, particularly projects supported by international donors, is reframed as serious criminal conduct through charges such as money laundering, abuse of office, or document forgery.
16. The timing and nature of the accusations reinforce this broader pattern. Zaki was detained and prosecuted in connection with his work on the "Collective Care: Building Stronger Communities Together" project, funded through the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation / German Marshall Fund framework. His defense has consistently maintained that the prosecution criminalized routine project-management and grant-administration practices, rather than genuine criminal behavior. Seen against the wider crackdown on independent NGOs and civic initiatives, the proceedings therefore support the inference that the case served a deterrent function: signaling that engagement with foreign-supported civil-society work, even in the field of social services and community development, may expose individuals to severe criminal liability.

The sequence of events:

17. Zamin Zaki's arrest is part of a larger, coordinated pattern of repression in Azerbaijan, in which opposition-aligned individuals and government critics have been detained on a strikingly repetitive set of allegations, most commonly serious narcotics-related accusations framed as large quantity and/or intent to sell, as well as finance/tax related crimes and crimes against the state and national security. This uniformity, and the way charges and detention measures have been applied across multiple similar cases, strongly suggests a state-driven strategy to criminalize dissenting political affiliation and criticism rather than a legitimate process aimed at individual wrongdoing. The relevant sequence of events should therefore be assessed synthetically, as a single wave of repression with a clear policy logic and continuity.

18. Already in 2022, a discernible pattern of repression was emerging through a series of arrests that disproportionately affected persons deported/returned from abroad (notably Germany), individuals perceived as affiliated with the PFPA/AXCP, Musavat and certain minority figures. This early hunt functioned as a clear precursor to, and warning sign of, the wider crackdown that would later expand across independent media, NGOs, and other segments of civil society.
19. In December 2022, civic activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev was arrested.⁴ In June 2023, protests against the gold mine in the village of Soyudlu, Gadabay, and their coverage by informally networked NGOs and critical media (including Toplum TV) accelerated the process of repression. After suppressing these protests, the government imposed a blockade on the village and blamed NGOs and the media for inciting the events.⁵
20. In July 2023, politician and economist Gubad Ibadoglu was detained.⁶ In August 2023, pro-government media organized a smear campaign against peace activists protesting military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁷ In September 2023, four activists were administratively detained for one month. Around the same time, arrests were carried out against Labor Desk (İşçi Masası) activists, who sought to establish the country's only alternative trade union organization.⁸
21. The main follow-up campaign began in November 2023. First, the pro-government media published smear articles targeting almost all NGOs and media outlets. Later, at the end of November 2023, the AbzasMedia arrests began.⁹ These arrests continued in early March 2024 with a police raid against the detainee's affiliated organization and the arrest of several individuals represented in those institutions.
22. In April 2024, Imran Aliyev, the head of the Meclis.info portal monitoring the parliament, was detained¹⁰. In May 2024, Anar Mammadli, the head of Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies (EMDS), was arrested (he had also been arrested in the previous round of repression).¹¹ These arrests demonstrate that a new wave of repression had already begun. The objective of this wave was to paralyze the activities of post-2014 informally networked NGOs and critical media. But it also expanded beyond NGOs and media into academia and peace advocacy: Igbal Abilov¹², a Talysh historian/ethnographer, was detained in July 2024 and later sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment in May 2025 on treason-related accusations and political scientist Bahruz Samadov¹³ was detained in August 2024 on treason charges similarly and later sentenced to a 15 years' prison term. Both of their arrests are widely condemned as politically motivated.
23. Repression further continued against independent media through the Meydan TV case:¹⁴ Human Rights Watch reported that the investigation targeted the outlet and that its newsroom staff were held in pre-trial detention from December 2024, with subsequent arrests feeding into a consolidated trial that began in December 2025. Finally, repression widened to formal opposition politics in late 2025, when Ali Karimli¹⁵, the long-standing leader of the Popular Front Party, was detained (29 November 2025) and remanded into pre-trial custody, amid a broader escalation against the party documented by human rights monitors.

24. This process was preceded by restrictive legislation: the Law on Media (2021)¹⁶ and the Law on Political Parties (2022)¹⁷. Both laws were criticized by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe for being restrictive. Nevertheless, they remain valid and enforceable. A similar process took place during the repression of 2013–2014: restrictive laws were first adopted, and arrests followed.
25. In this regard, the persons arrested in this process, including the detainee, are victims of the political repression of 2023–2025. The main objective of this campaign of political arrests is to dismantle the informal, networked NGOs and critical media that revived and assumed a new format in the post-2014 era. Political arrests in this context serve an instrumental purpose.

The manner in which the investigations and trial were carried out:

26. The investigation was conducted in a distinctly prosecution-driven manner. From the outset, the case was framed not around any concrete allegation of harm, fraud victim, or misappropriated private property, but around the proposition that a donor-funded social project had been unlawfully structured because the funding was channeled through a service contract rather than a registered grant. The indictment itself shows that the authorities treated this regulatory issue as the basis for money-laundering, abuse-of-office and forgery charges, thereby converting a compliance dispute into serious criminal liability.
27. The prosecution theory was also internally unstable. Zaki was first charged under Articles 193-1.3.2, 308.2 and 313, but in September 2025 the authorities reclassified the abuse-of-office count to Article 308.1 and discontinued parts of the case altogether because the constituent elements of other alleged offences were not established. That sequence is significant here: it shows that the accusation was not built on a clear and coherent criminal event but was adjusted midstream to preserve the case once parts of the original theory proved unsustainable.
28. The materials further indicate that the authorities relied overwhelmingly on documents and witnesses generated from within the same investigative narrative. The evidentiary core consisted of contracts, bank records, inspection protocols, witness statements and official paperwork, all interpreted through the prosecution's assumption that the funds were inherently illicit because the project had not been registered in the form required by the authorities. The case starts by treating the funding arrangement as criminal and then uses the ordinary implementation of the project as proof of that criminality.
29. Crucially, the file as reproduced in the indictment points the other way as well. Zaki denied guilt; the project donor's local representative acknowledged that the project had in fact been submitted, reviewed and supported, that Zaki was the real project lead. The case materials also record that the project money was used for rent, training, accounting, equipment, stipends, and other project expenses. Those features substantially weaken any genuine inference of concealed criminal proceeds, yet the prosecution treated them as incriminating rather than exculpatory.

30. The handling of detention reinforces the appearance of bad faith. Pre-trial detention was imposed on 9 April 2025, appeals were dismissed, a request for house arrest was rejected, and the detention was then extended. Nothing in the procedural history reproduced in the indictment suggests any serious judicial engagement with necessity, proportionality, or alternatives to custody. The overall picture is of a case in which detention functioned as a mechanism of control while the prosecution assembled a documentary case around conduct that, on its face, concerned the operation of an unregistered civic project rather than inherently criminal activity.

The authorities' conduct:

31. The authorities' conduct was marked by over-criminalization, formalism and selective treatment of the evidence. They elevated an arguable grant-registration issue into a grave criminal prosecution, preserved the case by reshaping the charges when parts of the original theory fell away, and treated routine project expenditure as evidence of laundering rather than ordinary implementation costs. In the broader context of Azerbaijan's renewed NGO crackdown, in which civil-society actors have been arrested and prosecuted over donor funding and registration issues, Zaki's case bears the hallmarks of a punitive enforcement strategy rather than a good-faith attempt to address recognizable criminal wrongdoing.

Additional considerations:

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

CONCLUSION

33. The personal factors (Zamin Zaki's public profile, absence of convincing evidence, and constant violation of procedural rights) and contextual factors (new wave of political repression) cumulatively indicate reasonable grounds to believe that Zamin Zaki should be considered a political prisoner in light of Resolution 1900 (2012) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).

RECOMMENDATION

34. Based on this conclusion, Zamin Zaki should be released unconditionally and immediately. Furthermore, he should be compensated restitutio in integrum.

- ¹ Human Rights Watch, ‘Azerbaijan Uses Old Criminal Case to Ramp Up Repression’ (29 April 2025) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/04/29/azerbaijan-uses-old-criminal-case-ramp-repression> accessed 14 March 2026.
- ² European Parliament, ‘Resolution on the crackdown on independent media in Azerbaijan, notably the case of Abzas Media’ (2024) P9_TA(2024)0074 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2024-0074_EN.html accessed 29 May 2025.
- ³ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), ‘Resolution 1900 (2012): The definition of political prisoner’ (3 October 2012) <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=19150> accessed 29 May 2025.
- ⁴ Eurasianet, Prominent activist detained following U.S. sanctions on Azerbaijani official <https://eurasianet.org/prominent-activist-detained-following-us-sanctions-on-azerbaijani-official> accessed 28 August 2025
- ⁵ Reporters Without Borders, Police prevent coverage of protests about environmental scandal in Azerbaijan <https://rsf.org/en/police-prevent-coverage-protests-about-environmental-scandal-azerbaijan> accessed 28 August 2025
- ⁶ Human Rights Watch, Azerbaijan: Free Academic Facing Bogus Charges <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/07/23/azerbaijan-free-academic-facing-bogus-charges> accessed 28 August 2025
- ⁷ Musavat, “No-Warçılarının dosyesi: onlar harada və necə yetişiblər” https://musavat.com/news/no-war-cilarin-dosyesi-onlar-harada-ve-nece-yetisibler_1001622.html accessed 28 August 2025
- ⁸ Eurasianet, Azerbaijan authorities smash unionization efforts for gig workers <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-authorities-smash-unionization-efforts-for-gig-workers> accessed 28 August 2025
- ⁹ Amnesty International, Azerbaijan: Seven journalists sentenced in latest shocking crackdown on free speech <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/06/azerbaijan-seven-journalists-sentenced-in-latest-shocking-crackdown-on-free-speech/> accessed 28 August 2025
- ¹⁰ Council of Europe, Safety Of Journalists — FOM Alert <https://fom.coe.int/en/alerte/detail/107640886> accessed 28 August 2025
- ¹¹ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Azerbaijan: authorities should release imprisoned human rights defenders, journalists and civil society activists <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/azerbaijan-authorities-should-release-imprisoned-human-rights-defenders-journalists-and-civil-society-activists> accessed 28 August 2025
- ¹² Scholars at Risk, ‘Release academic Iqbal Abilov, wrongfully imprisoned for one year’ (22 July 2025) <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/2025/07/release-academic-igbal-abilov-wrongfully-imprisoned-for-one-year/> accessed 7 January 2026
- ¹³ Human Rights Watch, ‘Azerbaijan: Escalating Crackdown on Critics’ (30 August 2024) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/08/30/azerbaijan-escalating-crackdown-critics> accessed 7 January 2026.
- ¹⁴ Arzu Geybulla, ‘Another Courageous Journalist Jailed in Azerbaijan’ (Human Rights Watch, 16 May 2025) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/16/another-courageous-journalist-jailed-azerbaijan> accessed 7 January 2026.

¹⁵ Amnesty International, 'Azerbaijan: Arrest of opposition leader is further evidence of consolidation of authoritarian practices' (1 December 2025) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/12/azerbaijan-arrest-of-opposition-leader-is-further-evidence-of-consolidation-of-authoritarian-practices/> accessed 7 January 2026.

¹⁶ Venice Commission. 'Opinion on On The Law On Media in Azerbaijan.' Council of Europe, Opinion No. 1078/2022, 2022, available at [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2022\)009-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2022)009-e)

¹⁷ Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR. Joint Opinion On The Law On Political Parties, 2023 available at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/4/543922.pdf>

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, 'Azerbaijan' (World Report 2023) (2023) <<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/azerbaijan>> accessed 25 January 2026.

