

SILENCED FOR THE TRUTH

The Politically Motivated Imprisonment of Nine Women Journalists in Azerbaijan



**24
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2025**

Prepared for
Abzas Media

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Executive Summary

Between November 2023 and October 2025, the government of Azerbaijan executed a devastating and coordinated assault on independent media and civil society. This campaign has effectively dismantled the country's free press through a coordinated strategy of mass arrests, fabricated charges, torture, and systematic imprisonment. The timing—accelerating after Azerbaijan's September 2023 recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh and intensifying before hosting the COP29 climate conference—reveals a calculated effort to silence all critical voices before international scrutiny.

The human cost is staggering: As of October 2025, over 392 political prisoners languish in Azerbaijani detention facilities, with at least 25 journalists among them. This represents the most severe wave of repression in over a decade.

9 women journalists imprisoned



392 total political prisoners



25 journalists behind bar



3 major independent media outlets destroyed



250 km distance to Lankaran prison



9 years longest sentence



Executive Summary

This report analyzes a central element of this strategy: the targeted arrest and imprisonment of nine prominent women journalists. These individuals—Sevinc Vagifgizi, Nargiz Absalamova, Elnara Gasimova, Aynur Elgunash, Aytaj Ahmadova (Tapdig), Aysel Umudova, Khayala Aghayeva, Fatima Movlanli, and Ulviyya Guliyeva (Ali)—affiliated primarily with Abzas Media and Meydan TV, have been persecuted for their investigative work exposing high-level corruption and human rights abuses.



A group of journalists gathered in front of the Azerbaijan Parliament in the capital Baku to protest the controversial new media law, which will have grave consequences for media freedom and independence. 2021© Azadliq Radiosu/RFER

Key Findings

Systematic Legal Weaponization

Authorities deploy identical fabricated charges across all cases —"smuggling by prior conspiracy" escalating to money laundering, tax evasion, and illegal entrepreneurship. This standardized template, carrying sentences up to 12 years, criminalizes the receipt of foreign funding essential for independent journalism's survival.

Gender-Based Torture and Abuse

Women journalists face brutal and systematic torture specifically designed to terrorize and silence them. Ulviyya Ali endured repeated beatings, hair pulling, and threats of sexual assault to force her to surrender her phone. Nargiz Absalamova was beaten by prison officials. All Abzas Media women were subjected to punitive isolation in filthy cells without ventilation, sanitation, or showers during scorching summer heat.

Strategic Isolation in Remote Prisons

Three sentenced journalists were transferred to Lankaran Prison, 250 kilometers from Baku, deliberately placing them beyond reach of families, lawyers, and international observers. This geographical isolation serves as additional punishment and aims to break their spirit.

Key Findings

Medical Torture Through Neglect

Authorities weaponize basic necessities—denying Aynur Elgunash specialized medical care for her disabilities, offering Sevinc Vagifgizi a fan only if she deletes her prison reports, providing undrinkable chlorinated water. This deliberate neglect constitutes cruel and inhuman treatment.

Journalism behind Bars

Despite facing 8-9 year sentences and brutal conditions, these women refuse silence. They continue exposing prison abuses, choosing truth-telling over comfort, demonstrating that Azerbaijan's campaign to silence them has fundamentally failed.

Muted International Response

Despite condemnation from human rights organizations, the EU's pursuit of Azerbaijani energy deals has diluted meaningful political pressure, signaling that strategic interests trump human rights concerns.

CONTEXT OF REPRESSION

A Decade's Worth of Repression in Two Years

The scale and speed of Azerbaijan's 2023-2025 crackdown is unprecedented in recent history. Within just 24 months, the government arrested over 25 journalists, dismantled three major independent media outlets (Abzas Media, Toplum TV, Meydan TV), and more than tripled the number of political prisoners from approximately 120 in early 2023 to 392 by October 2025. This represents the most severe assault on civil society since the 2014-2015 NGO crackdown.

Strategic Timing: Silencing Critics Before Global Spotlight

The crackdown's timing reveals deliberate calculation. It accelerated immediately following Azerbaijan's September 2023 military recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh—a moment when the regime anticipated international criticism of its actions. The campaign then intensified throughout 2024 as Azerbaijan prepared to host the November 2024 COP29 climate conference. By pre-emptively imprisoning journalists and activists who could expose corruption in reconstruction projects or human rights abuses to the international audience attending COP29, authorities ensured only state-approved narratives would reach global media.

The first arrests began on November 20-21, 2023, targeting Abzas Media—exactly one year before COP29. This was no coincidence.

The Reactivated NGO Case: A Ghost from the Past

In a particularly cynical maneuver, authorities in early 2025 reactivated a dormant, decade-old criminal investigation first launched in 2014 against dozens of local and foreign NGOs. That original case led to the imprisonment of Azerbaijan's most prominent human rights defenders. By reviving this case file, the Prosecutor General's Office bypassed the need for new pretexts and immediately targeted a new generation of activists under an existing, broad investigation. This strategy created a narrative of a single, sprawling criminal conspiracy, linking disparate individuals and organizations together.

Timeline of Repression: How the Campaign Unfolded

- **September 2023:** Azerbaijan militarily recaptures Nagorno-Karabakh, anticipating international criticism
- **November 20-21, 2023:** First wave begins—Abzas Media raided, €40,000 allegedly "discovered," key journalists arrested (Hasanli, Vagifgizi, Kekalov)
- **November-December 2023:** Campaign expands—more Abzas journalists arrested (Absalamova, Babali); Kanal 13 targeted (Orujov arrested Nov 27)
- **December 6, 2023:** Mass arrest of 6 Meydan TV journalists in coordinated operation
- **March 6, 2024:** Second major outlet destroyed—Toplum TV raided, 8+ journalists and activists arrested including founder Alasgar Mammadli
- **April-May 2024:** Expansion phase—Anar Mammadli arrested (Apr 29), Farid Mehralizade added to Abzas case (May 30), Ulviyya Ali arrested and tortured (May 7)
- **August 2024:** Escalation—New charges added to Abzas case, increasing sentences to 9 years
- **November 2024:** COP29 conference proceeds with independent media completely silenced
- **January 2025:** Further escalation—7 new charges added to Toplum TV case (Jan 17), maximum sentences now 12 years
- **March-April 2025:** 2014 NGO case reactivated—new wave of civil society leaders arrested
- **June 20, 2025:** Abzas journalists sentenced to 8-9 years; women transferred to remote Lankaran Prison
- **August-September 2025:** Meydan TV journalists face 7 additional charges; sentences upheld on appeal despite courtroom protests
- **October 2025:** Total political prisoners reaches 392, including at least 25 journalists

The Two-Stage Legal Trap

Stage 1 - Swift Imprisonment (Day 1)

Arrest on "**smuggling by prior conspiracy**" (Article 206.3.2)—often based on "discovered" cash during raids. **Maximum sentence: 8 years.** Provides immediate justification for pre-trial detention, isolating journalists from their newsrooms and preventing them from reporting.

Stage 2 - Escalation for Maximum Sentences (Months Later)

Addition of **seven severe economic crimes** including:

- Illegal Entrepreneurship (Article 192.3.2)
- Large-Scale Money Laundering (Articles 193-1.3.1, 193-1.3.2)
- Tax Evasion by Organized Group (Article 213.2.1)
- Document Forgery (Articles 313, 320.1, 320.2)

Result: Maximum potential sentence **increases to 12 years**, justifying extended pre-trial detention and enabling draconian sentences.

The Kafkaesque Reality

Azerbaijani law requires NGOs and media to register foreign grants with authorities. However, the state systematically refuses to register independent organizations, creating manufactured illegality that becomes the basis for criminal prosecution. This deliberate administrative obstruction transforms legitimate journalism funding into "criminal" activity.

Identical Charges Across All Cases

The same template has been applied to **Abzas Media (7 journalists)**, **Toplum TV (8+ journalists)**, and **Meydan TV (10+ journalists)**—proving this is centralized state policy, not individual criminal investigations.

PROFILES IN PERSECUTION

Behind the statistics there are nine women whose courage and commitment to truth have cost them years of their lives. Each profile reveals not just individual persecution, but a systematic pattern: fabricated charges, brutal torture, strategic isolation, and the weaponization of detention conditions to break their spirit. Yet across all nine cases, one reality stands clear—these women refuse to be silenced.

What they exposed: Corruption within President Aliyev's inner circle. State embezzlement of public funds. Human rights abuses. The reality of Azerbaijan's authoritarian system. This is why they sit in prison today.

The Abzas Media Investigative Team

Abzas Media earned its reputation through fearless investigative reporting on high-level corruption. The outlet's exposés on President Ilham Aliyev's family wealth and inner circle made it target number one. The state's message was clear: investigate corruption at the top, and you will be destroyed. Within weeks of the November 2023 raid, Abzas Media ceased to exist as a functioning newsroom—its leadership imprisoned, its offices sealed, its journalists scattered into exile or detention.



Journalists arrested in the “Abzas Media case”. Photo-collage: Abzas media

Abzas Media Journalists

Sevinj Vagifqizi

Editor-in-Chief at Abzas Media



- **Arrested:** November 21, 2023
- **Status:** Sentenced to 9 years in prison; transferred to Lankaran Prison
- **Background:** Led exposés on corruption within President Ilham Aliyev's inner circle. Following a trial marred by procedural irregularities, she was sentenced to nine years.
- **Prison Conditions:** Held in cells with no working ventilation or cooling systems, making them unbearably hot in summer. When she requested a fan to cope with suffocating heat, the detention center head offered to allow it only if she deleted her published reports on prison conditions—weaponizing basic human needs as leverage.
- **Retaliation:** Authorities retaliated against her participation in a solidarity hunger strike by placing her in punitive isolation. Later transferred to remote Lankaran Prison, far from family support.
- **Journalism from Prison:** Despite conditions, continued to document and report on prison abuses, refusing to be silenced even behind bars.

Abzas Media Journalists

Nargiz Absalamova

Reporter at Abzas Media



- **Arrested:** November 30, 2023
- **Status:** Sentenced to 8 years in prison; transferred to Lankaran Prison
- **Prison Torture:** After joining a hunger strike to protest prison conditions, she was moved to an isolated cell lacking ventilation or sanitary facilities. A senior prison official subjected her to physical pressure—beating and intimidation designed to break her resistance.
- **Inhuman Conditions:** Held in cells described as unbearably hot with undrinkable, chlorine-heavy water. Isolation cells lacked basic shower facilities, constituting deliberate cruel treatment.
- **Transfer to Lankaran:** Moved to remote Lankaran Prison as additional punishment, placing her far from legal counsel and family visits—a tactic to isolate and silence.

Abzas Media Journalists

Elnara Gasimova

Reporter at Abzas Media



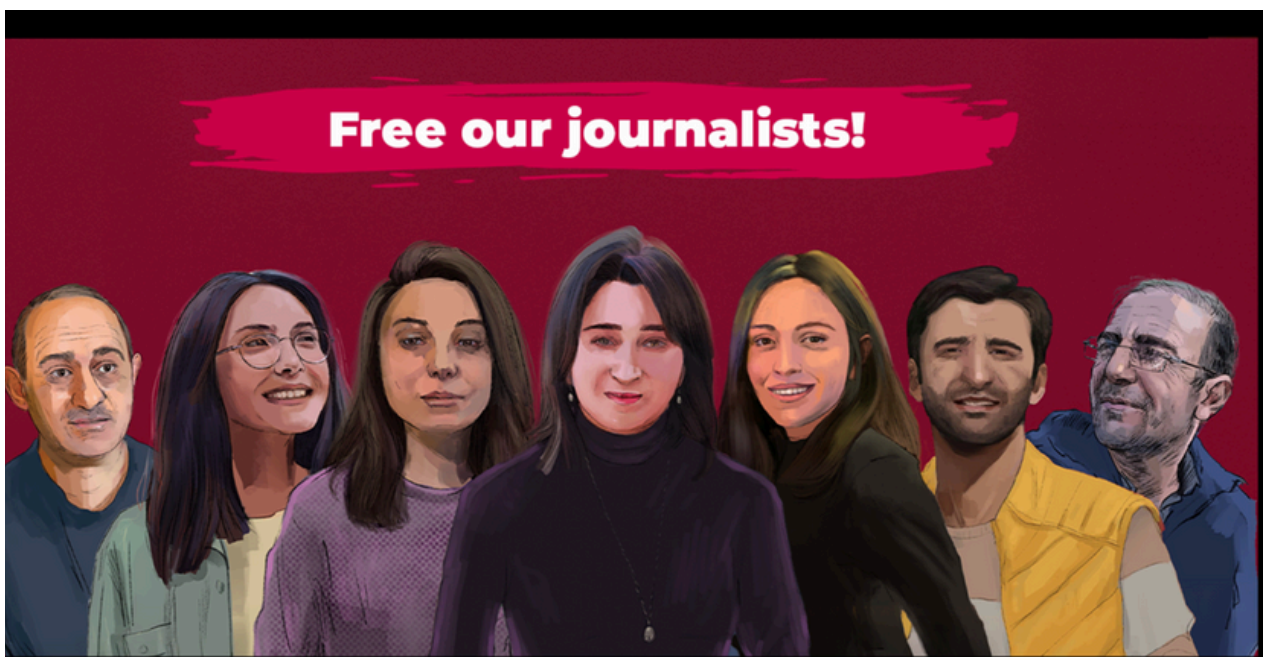
- **Arrested:** January 13, 2024
- **Status:** Sentenced to 8 years in prison; transferred to Lankaran Prison
- **Punitive Isolation:** After participating in hunger strike, transferred to what she described as a "filthy" isolation cell—deliberate retaliation for exercising her right to protest inhumane conditions.
- **Lankaran Prison Transfer:** Along with other Abzas Media women, moved to remote Lankaran Prison, approximately 250km from Baku.
- **This transfer serves multiple purposes:** isolating journalists from their legal teams, making family visits nearly impossible, and removing them from international observers' immediate access.
- **Continued Advocacy:** Despite harsh conditions, she and fellow journalists continue to expose prison abuses through limited communication channels available to them.

PROFILES IN PERSECUTION

The Meydan TV Network

Meydan TV, headquartered in Berlin to escape Azerbaijani censorship, maintained a network of brave correspondents inside Azerbaijan who risked everything to report truth. On December 6, 2023, authorities executed a coordinated mass arrest operation—six journalists detained simultaneously in what can only be described as a planned raid on the outlet's domestic network. This wasn't law enforcement; it was the dismantling of an institution. The message: working for independent media, even those based abroad, will result in imprisonment.

The arrests continued in waves throughout 2024-2025, eventually ensnaring 10+ journalists associated with Meydan TV. Each arrest followed the same pattern: smuggling charges, escalation to financial crimes, pre-trial detention stretching into years. By August 2025, when authorities added seven additional charges carrying 12- year sentences, the intent was unmistakable—ensure these women spend the next decade behind bars.



Journalists arrested in the “Meydan TV case”. Illustration: Courtesy of Meydan TV;

Meydan TV Journalists

Aynur Elgunesh

Editor-in-Chief at Meydan TV



- **Arrested:** December 6, 2023
- **Status:** Pre-trial Detention
- **Background:** Aged 50, suffers from multiple serious medical conditions and is physically disabled.
- **Abuse:** Authorities have denied her access to specialized medical care, constituting cruel and inhuman treatment that weaponizes her health vulnerabilities.

Aytaj Ahmadova (Tapdiq)

Reporter at Meydan TV



- **Arrested:** December 6, 2023
- **Status:** Pre-trial Detention
- **Background:** Long-time reporter and women's rights activist.
- **Defiance:** During a hearing, she challenged the legitimacy of the proceedings: "the true smugglers are those who exploit and steal the country's resources."

Meydan TV Journalists

Aysel Umudova

Reporter at Meydan TV



- **Arrested:** December 6, 2023
- **Status:** Pre-trial Detention
- **Legal Pressure:** Initially charged with smuggling, now faces seven additional financial crime charges added months later—a tactic to escalate legal pressure and ensure maximum sentencing.

Khayala Aghayeva

Reporter at Meydan TV

- **Arrested:** December 6, 2023
- **Status:** Pre-trial Detention
- **Background:** Arrest explicitly linked to effort to criminalize receipt of Western donor funding, equating legitimate international support for journalism with illicit financial activity.



PROFILES IN PERSECUTION

Targetted Independent Voices

The government's campaign cast its net wide, ensuring that even freelance journalists operating independently faced the same fate as those affiliated with major outlets. The message was absolute: all independent journalism is criminal, regardless of institutional affiliation. If you report truth in Azerbaijan, you will be imprisoned.

Fatima Movlamli

Freelance



- **Arrested:** February 28, 2024
 - **Status:** Pre-trial Detention
 - **Background:** Charged in connection with Meydan TV case. Has long history of state targeting, including online harassment with leaked intimate videos and infection with Pegasus spyware.
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Targetted Independent Voices

Ulviyya Ali

Reporter at Voice of America



- **Arrested:** May 7, 2024
- **Status:** Pre-trial Detention
- **Extreme Torture Case:** Ulviyya Ali's case represents one of the most severe documented instances of torture against women journalists in this crackdown.
- **Brutal Physical Assault:** According to witness accounts, police repeatedly struck her on the head during interrogation, causing severe pain and potential lasting injury. Officers violently pulled her hair as a form of intimidation and physical abuse.
- **Sexual Violence Threats:** In a deliberate attempt to break her will, police officers threatened her with sexual assault—a form of psychological torture that meets the threshold for torture under international law. These threats were made specifically to coerce her into surrendering her mobile device password.
- **Purpose of Torture:** The violence was instrumental—designed to force her to give up access to her phone, likely containing sources, contacts, and evidence of her journalistic work. She resisted despite the brutal treatment.
- **Denial of Affiliation:** Authorities claim she is part of the Meydan TV case, which she vehemently denies, suggesting this is a pretext to prosecute her for her independent work with Voice of America.
- **International Concern:** Her case has drawn particular attention from international press freedom organizations due to the severity and documented nature of the torture she endured.

Defiance in the Courtroom: Refusing to Accept Injustice

September 9, 2025 - Appeals Hearing: When the Baku Court of Appeal upheld the harsh sentences against **Abzas Media** journalists, **Sevinc Vagifgizi**, **Nargiz Absalamova**, and their **colleagues** made a final stand. Despite knowing the outcome was predetermined, they held up placards declaring:

"Corruption is a crime, journalism is not!"

"Aliyev, declare your income!"

Prison guards violently silenced them, forcibly removing the signs. But the message had been delivered. Images circulated internationally. In that moment, these imprisoned journalists demonstrated what Azerbaijan's government most fears—they cannot be broken, they will not be silent, and the truth will not die with their imprisonment.

Aytaj Tapdig's Courtroom Declaration:

During her hearing, journalist Aytaj Tapdig (Ahmadova) boldly challenged the legitimacy of the entire prosecution, telling the court: **"The true smugglers are those who exploit and steal the country's resources."** Her words cut to the heart of the matter—the real criminals sit in power, while journalists who expose them sit in cages.

JOURNALISM BEHIND BARS: Resistance Through Reporting

The Lankaran Prison Strategy

In a calculated move to further isolate and punish imprisoned Abzas Media journalists, authorities transferred Sevinc Vagifgizi, Nargiz Absalamova, and Elnara Gasimova to Lankaran Prison, located approximately 250 kilometers south of Baku near the Iranian border.

Strategic Isolation

This remote location serves multiple repressive purposes:

- Makes regular family visits financially and logistically impossible for most relatives;
- Removes journalists from easy access by legal counsel based in Baku;
- Distances them from international observers and diplomatic missions;
- Creates additional psychological pressure through isolation from support networks;
- Sends a message to other journalists about the consequences of critical reporting;

JOURNALISM BEHIND BARS: Resistance Through Reporting

Reporting from Prison: Refusing to Be Silenced

Despite facing sentences of 8-9 years and enduring brutal prison conditions, these women journalists have demonstrated extraordinary courage by continuing their journalistic mission from behind bars. They have transformed themselves from reporters of injustice to living witnesses and documentarians of the Azerbaijani prison system.

Documentation of Systematic Abuse

The imprisoned journalists have managed to expose:

- Detailed accounts of torture and ill-treatment within detention facilities;
- The weaponization of basic necessities (fans, water, medical care) as tools of control;
- Corruption within the prison system itself;
- The orchestrated nature of violence against political prisoners;
- Deliberate medical neglect as a form of punishment.

JOURNALISM BEHIND BARS: Resistance Through Reporting

When prison authorities demanded that Sevinc Vagifgizi delete her reports on prison conditions in exchange for a fan during scorching summer heat, **she refused—choosing journalistic integrity over basic comfort.** This single act encapsulates the unwavering commitment these women have to truth-telling, even when it costs them dearly.

Their continued reporting from prison has:

- Provided crucial evidence for international human rights organizations;
- Exposed the conditions faced by hundreds of other political prisoners;
- Maintained public awareness of the ongoing crackdown;
- Inspired other imprisoned journalists to document their experiences;
- Demonstrated that Azerbaijan's attempt to silence them has failed.

This work comes at tremendous personal cost—retaliation through isolation, denial of privileges, and additional charges. Yet these women persist, understanding that their imprisonment itself has become a story that must be told, and they are uniquely positioned to tell it.

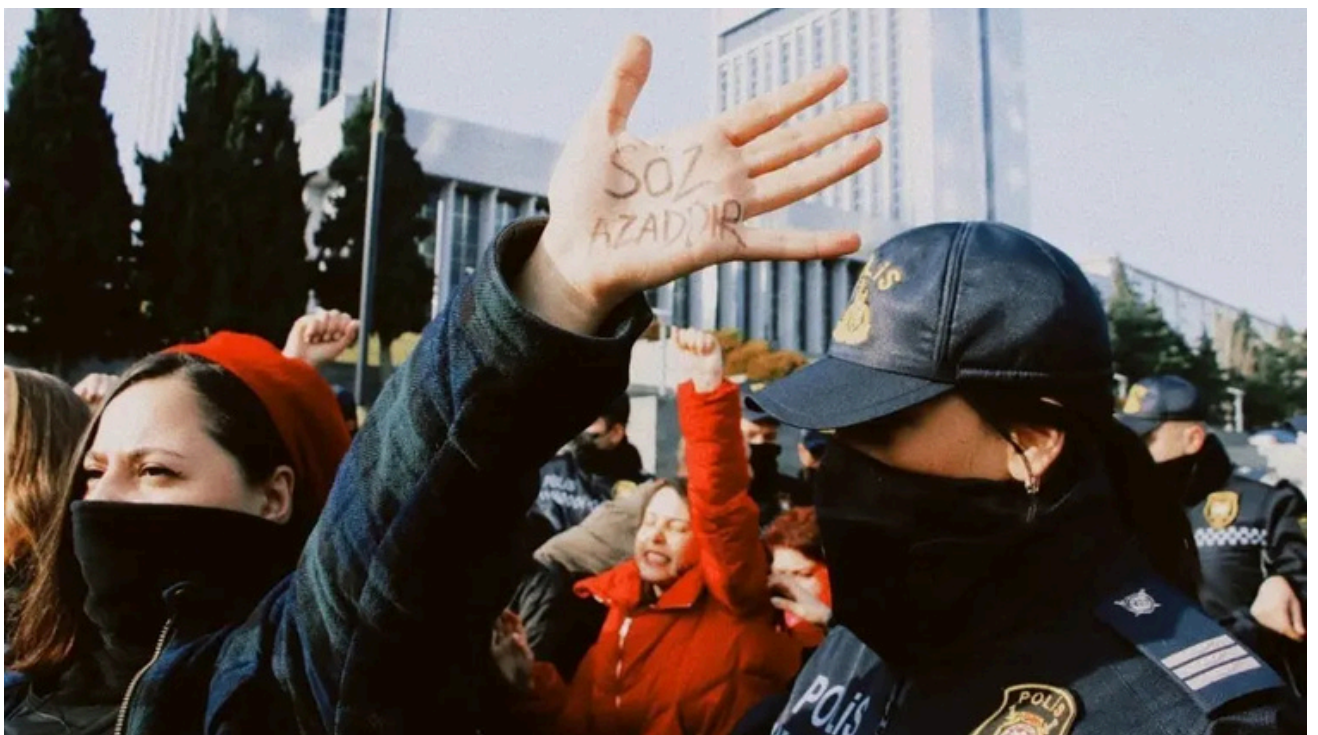
SYSTEMIC VIOLATIONS

Violation of Due Process

The trials and pre-trial procedures have systematically violated fundamental standards of justice. Proceedings against Abzas Media journalists were characterized by numerous procedural irregularities, lack of credible evidence, and pressure on defendants and witnesses. The extremely lengthy sentences for non-violent, fabricated economic crimes confirm the predetermined political nature of the verdicts.

Ill-Treatment and Torture in Detention

- Allegations concerning Ulviyya Guliyeva (Ali)—repeated blows to the head and threats of sexual violence—meet the threshold for torture under the UN Convention Against Torture
- Systematic use of punitive measures for retaliation, including transfer to "filthy" isolation cells following hunger strikes
- Deliberate denial of specialized medical care to disabled journalist Aynur Elgunash constitutes cruel and inhuman treatment



Ulviyya Ali protests a media bill outside the Azerbaijani Parliament on December 28, 2021, with “a word is free” written on her hand. © 2021 Ulviyya Ali

SYSTEMATIC TORTURE AND MEDICAL NEGLECT

Torture as State Policy

Credible and widespread allegations of torture have emerged as a central component of the state's repressive apparatus. The abuse targeting women journalists is systematically employed to punish, extract false confessions, and terrorize those who expose corruption.

Documented Torture Against Women Journalists:

- **Severe Physical Beatings:** Ulviyya Ali was repeatedly struck on the head during interrogation, causing severe pain and potential lasting injury. Officers violently pulled her hair as a form of intimidation and physical assault.
- **Gender-Based Torture - Threats of Sexual Violence:** Ulviyya Ali was threatened with sexual assault during interrogation—a form of gender-based torture specifically designed to terrorize and break women journalists. This meets the threshold for torture under international law.
- **Physical Assault by Prison Officials:** Nargiz Absalamova was subjected to physical pressure and beatings by a senior prison official in retaliation for participating in hunger strikes protesting inhumane conditions.
- **Punitive Isolation as Torture:** After participating in solidarity hunger strikes, Sevinc Vagifgizi, Nargiz Absalamova, and Elnara Gasimova were transferred to isolation cells described as "filthy," lacking basic ventilation, sanitation, and shower facilities—constituting inhuman and degrading treatment.
- **Psychological Torture:** The systematic denial of basic necessities (fans, water, medical care) unless journalists delete their reporting constitutes psychological torture designed to force self-censorship.

SYSTEMATIC TORTURE AND MEDICAL NEGLECT

Medical Neglect as Punishment

The authorities have weaponized detention conditions, employing medical neglect as an additional form of punishment. This has created a severe health crisis among women political prisoners.

- **The Abzas Media Women's Experience:** Female journalists from Abzas Media—Sevinc Vagifgizi, Nargiz Absalamova, and Elnara Gasimova—reported being held in cells with no working ventilation or cooling systems, making them unbearably hot during scorching summer months. They described undrinkable water that was so heavily chlorinated it posed health risks. When placed in punitive isolation cells, they were denied access to showers—a deliberate act of humiliation and degradation.
- **Weaponizing Basic Necessities:** In one particularly egregious example, when Sevinc Vagifgizi requested a simple fan to cope with the suffocating heat, the detention center head made a chilling offer: she could have the fan, but only if she agreed to delete all her published reports documenting prison abuses. Vagifgizi refused, choosing journalistic integrity and the protection of other prisoners' stories over her own physical comfort. This episode demonstrates how authorities systematically use basic human needs as leverage to force journalists into silence.
- **Aynur Elgunash's Medical Crisis:** At age 50, Aynur Elgunash suffers from multiple serious medical conditions and is physically disabled. Despite her critical health needs, authorities have systematically denied her access to specialized medical care. This deliberate neglect constitutes cruel and inhuman treatment that weaponizes her health vulnerabilities, potentially causing irreversible harm or even death.

SYSTEMATIC TORTURE AND MEDICAL NEGLECT

Prison Conditions Faced by Women Journalists:

- Cells without ventilation in extreme summer heat (temperatures regularly exceed 35°C/95°F);
- Chlorine-contaminated, undrinkable water causing health issues;
- Isolation cells without shower facilities for extended periods;
- Denial of basic cooling equipment unless they censor their reporting;
- Transfer to remote Lankaran Prison to isolate from family and legal support;
- Retaliation through isolation for participating in hunger strikes;
- Denial of specialized medical care for disabled journalists with chronic conditions.

The torture of these women journalists is not random violence but a calculated state policy with clear objectives: to punish them for their investigative work, to prevent future reporting, to obtain access to their sources and materials, and to terrorize other women who might consider engaging in critical journalism.

International Condemnation: In July 2024, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) took the "exceptional" step of issuing a public statement condemning Azerbaijan's "outright refusal to cooperate." The CPT's report detailed "numerous allegations of severe physical ill-treatment/torture" used primarily to coerce confessions.

GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The Chilling Effect

The systematic arrests have successfully paralyzed domestic investigative journalism. By targeting entire newsrooms, authorities have decimated the infrastructure for critical reporting within the country, forcing independent media to operate almost entirely from exile. International Condemnation vs. Geopolitical Priorities: Leading international organizations (HRW, Amnesty International, CPJ, IFJ) have unequivocally condemned the crackdown, labeling charges as bogus. However, this contrasts sharply with the muted response from key international actors.

EU Energy Interests: The European Union's pursuit of energy deals with Azerbaijan has been identified as a key factor diluting political pressure, signaling that human rights abuses will not jeopardize critical economic relationships.

Council of Europe Response: The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) decided in January 2024 not to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation due to the country's failure to meet statutory obligations.

Defiance of International Commitments

The imprisonment of these journalists represents a direct violation of Azerbaijan's commitments as a member of the Council of Europe. Despite binding judgments from the European Court of Human Rights ruling that previous imprisonments were unlawful and aimed at "silencing and punishing" activists, the government has continued its repressive campaign with impunity.

Conclusion

The evidence is irrefutable: the imprisonment of these nine women journalists represents a calculated campaign to eliminate independent journalism in Azerbaijan through systematic torture, fabricated legal charges, and deliberate cruelty.

The numbers tell the story: Within **24 months**, Azerbaijan arrested **25+ journalists**, dismantled three major independent outlets, and imprisoned **392 political prisoners**. Nine women journalists now face sentences ranging from **8 to 9 years** for the "crime" of investigative reporting.

The methods reveal state policy: Identical fabricated charges applied across all cases. Systematic torture including beatings, threats of sexual violence, and punitive isolation. Strategic transfer to remote prisons 250km from family support. Weaponization of basic necessities—fans, water, medical care—to force self-censorship.

Yet they refuse to be silenced: Even behind bars, these women continue their journalistic mission. Sevinc Vagifgizi rejected physical comfort to protect her prison reports. Nargiz Absalamova endured beatings rather than cease documenting abuses. Ulviyya Ali withstood torture rather than surrender her sources. Their courage exposes the fundamental failure of Azerbaijan's campaign—you cannot silence truth-tellers by imprisoning them; you only prove their reporting was accurate.

Conclusion

This is not criminal justice. This is political retaliation dressed in legal procedure. These charges are pretexts. These trials are theater. These women are prisoners of conscience, and their freedom is not just a matter of individual justice—it is essential to the survival of truth itself in Azerbaijan.

The international community must recognize a stark reality: Azerbaijan has effectively closed civic space, criminalized journalism, and institutionalized torture. Words of concern without meaningful action enable this repression. The time for statements has passed. These women need concrete international pressure that makes their continued imprisonment politically unsustainable for the Azerbaijani government.



Art by Mahir Sijamija in the report of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Azerbaijani service. March 15 2025

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the geopolitical realities and strategic interests at play, meaningful change requires pragmatic pressure that balances human rights concerns with international relationships.

To the European Union and its Member States:

- **Establish Human Rights Benchmarks:** Create measurable human rights criteria for deeper energy partnership, including specific requirements for improvement in treatment of detained journalists;
- **Public Reporting Mechanism:** Require quarterly public reports on the condition and treatment of political prisoners as a precondition for maintaining current partnership levels;
- **Diplomatic Consistency:** Ensure all bilateral meetings at ministerial level include specific discussion of individual cases with written follow-up shared publicly;
- **Support for Families:** Provide emergency visas and financial support for family members of imprisoned journalists who face retaliation;
- **Legal Support Fund:** Establish dedicated funding for legal defense teams and international legal advocacy for imprisoned journalists.

To the Council of Europe:

- **Enhanced Monitoring:** Deploy permanent Council of Europe monitors to detention facilities holding political prisoners, with regular reporting obligations;
- **Conditional Re-engagement:** Tie restoration of full PACE credentials to verified release of journalists and access to independent medical care for all detainees;

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Council of Europe:

- **Public Accountability:** Publish detailed reports on Azerbaijan's compliance with ECtHR judgments at every PACE session;
- **CPT Follow-up:** Mandate immediate follow-up visits by the Committee for Prevention of Torture with consequences for continued non-cooperation.

To the United States Government:

- **Regular High-Level Engagement:** Require U.S. ambassadors and visiting officials to meet with families of imprisoned journalists and report findings publicly;
- **Visa Restrictions:** Implement visa restrictions for officials directly involved in prosecuting journalists and managing detention facilities;
- **Emergency Support:** Expand emergency grants for independent media operating in exile and provide secure communication tools;
- **Congressional Briefings:** Ensure regular briefings to relevant Congressional committees on specific cases to maintain political attention.

To International Media and Press Freedom Organizations:

- **Sustained Coverage:** Maintain regular reporting on conditions and treatment of imprisoned journalists to prevent international attention from fading;
- **Family Support Networks:** Create support networks for families of imprisoned journalists, including legal aid and security assistance;

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To International Media and Press Freedom Organizations:

- **Documentation Project:** Continue systematic documentation of abuses for future accountability mechanisms;
- **Platform Exile Media:** Amplify and provide resources for Azerbaijani independent media operating from exile.

To the Government of Azerbaijan:

While recognizing the current government is unlikely to voluntarily implement reforms, the following steps represent the minimum necessary to begin addressing the crisis:

- **Immediate Medical Access:** Provide independent medical examinations and necessary treatment for all detained journalists, particularly those with chronic conditions;
- **Independent Investigations:** Allow international observers to investigate torture allegations, starting with documented cases;
- **Humanitarian Releases:** Consider humanitarian releases for journalists with serious health conditions as confidence-building measures;
- **Transparent Judicial Process:** Allow international trial observers and ensure defense attorneys can operate without intimidation.

These nine women have proven their courage. Now the international community must prove it values truth over energy deals and human rights over strategic convenience.

ABZAS 