

Crackdown on free expression escalates: International organisations denounce latest wave of arrests in Azerbaijan

International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) and the other undersigned organisations condemn the recent series of arrests of civil society activists, journalists, and human rights defenders carried out by the Azerbaijani authorities against individuals associated with the non-governmental organisation the **Institute for Democratic Initiatives (IDI)**, online media outlet **Toplum TV**, and newly created political platform **Third Republic**. All of the individuals targeted face charges brought under Article 206.3.2 ('Smuggling committed by a group of persons who conspired in advance') of the Criminal Code of Azerbaijan, threatening prison sentences of up to eight years should they be convicted. We believe these individuals were targeted in direct retaliation for Toplum TV's independent investigative reporting and IDI's work on human rights and democracy. We therefore call on the Azerbaijani authorities to immediately release all of the individuals targeted and after that allow them to carry on their legitimate human rights, media, and political activities without obstruction.

On Wednesday 6 March 2024, police raided the shared office of Toplum TV and IDI. Toplum TV is an independent news site founded in 2016, whose editor-in-chief is the well-known Azerbaijani investigative journalist Khadija Ismail. The same day as the raid, Toplum TV's YouTube and Instagram accounts were hacked and large amounts of content deleted. IDI, meanwhile, is an independent nonprofit organisation established in 2013 to promote democratic values and human rights in Azerbaijan. During the raid, police seized the mobile phones of all staff in Toplum TV's editorial office. The police ultimately detained 14 individuals present at the time, including staff and interns. Once in custody, those whose phones had been seized were pressured to hand over passwords and then coerced into signing documents attesting that they had handed over their devices and passwords voluntarily. While most were released from custody by midnight, three of those taken into custody during the raid (journalist **Farid Ismayilov**, video editor **Mushfig Jabbarov**, and social media manager **Elmir Abbasov**) have been charged with smuggling foreign currency into the country, though Ismayilov and Abbasov have since been released under police supervision.

Separately, IDI's chairperson, **Akif Gurbanov**, was also detained the same day, also on account of alleged smuggling. The police also conducted a search of Gurbanov's home and violently removed his lawyer, Shahla Humbatova, from the entranceway to prevent her from observing the search. Following the searches of Gurbanov's home and the IDI office, police claimed to have found several tens of thousands of euros, a claim that Gurbanov and other members of IDI deny. Three other members of IDI (**Ali Zeynal**, the coordinator of IDI's journalists programme and mentor for young journalists; **Ramil Babayev**, a project coordinator; and **Ilkin Amrahov**, the office manager and group coordinator for young managers) were also detained by police on the same day. Again, the three were accused of smuggling, as were two friends of Gurbanov, Ramiz and **Shahin Maharramov**, who were also detained. Ramiz has since been released, while Shahin has been handed a 30-day administrative detention. It has been reported that those detained suffered verbal abuse by police and were put under psychological pressure. The arrests continued on the morning of 8 March, as plainclothes police detained **Ruslan Izzatli** and **Alasgar Mammadli**, the co-founder of the

Third Republic movement and the founder of Toplum TV, respectively. Third Republic is a political platform formed in December, whose main aim is to publicly expose the political nature of socioeconomic problems in Azerbaijan in order to motivate the general public to engage in political discussions. Izzatli was accompanied by another member of the Third Republic board, Araz Aliyev, at the time of his arrest. The two were physically abused by police for refusing to hand over the passwords to their phones. Aliyev was also arrested but was released the same day.

Further to the arrests, additional searches were conducted of the homes of those detained. Following these searches, the police claimed to have also found large amounts of foreign currency at the homes of most of the accused. Eight of the detainees are now being held at the Khatai District Police Station in Baku, with Babayev having begun a hunger strike in protest of the arrests. With the exception of Maharramov, all eight of the remaining detainees have been assigned a standard pre-trial detention period of four months. The prolonged detention of Izzatli and Mammadli raises particular concerns given that both men are known to be suffering from serious health issues. Mammadli is being treated for cancer and was on the way to the hospital to have a biopsy performed at the time of his arrest. Meanwhile, Izzatli's wife has stated that her husband was due to have an operation on his gallbladder. The inability of the two to receive these urgent medical interventions as a consequence of their detention presents a serious risk to their lives and wellbeing.

This new wave of arrests follows on the heels of the Azerbaijani authorities' suppression of the independent media outlets **AbsazMedia** and **Kanal13** between November 2023 and January 2024, during which time almost the entirety of the organisation's management and journalistic team were targeted by a large-scale criminal investigation on spurious charges, with those targeted complaining of procedural violations in their cases and inhuman conditions of detention. This apparent crackdown against independent organisations such as AbsazMedia, Kanal13, Toplum TV, IDI, and Third Republic has been broadly criticised by the international community, including by the Organisation for Cooperation and Security in Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

The undersigned organisations call on the Azerbaijani authorities to:

1. Immediately release all unjustly detained civil society activists, journalists, and human rights defenders;
2. Guarantee the detainees' access to lawyers of their own choice and contact with their families; and
3. Cease the use of criminal prosecution as a tool to suppress critical reporting and instead allow independent media outlets to operate without pressure in accordance with their international obligations to respect freedom of expression and the media.

We also call on international partners of Azerbaijan who have not yet done so to speak out against this unjustified and repressive crackdown against Azerbaijan's civil society and independent media landscape and to agitate forcefully for the immediate release of all those detained for their legitimate human rights, media, and political activities.

Signatories:

- Crude Accountability
- Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF)
- Freedom Now
- Human Rights House Foundation (HRRF)
- International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHHR)
- People in Need (PIN)
- Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC)
- World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)