

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/azerbaijan-reporters-without-borders-15-05-2015,47896.html>

Europe/Ex-USSR - Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan

## Reporters Without Borders: Azerbaijan should release imprisoned journalists ahead of the European Games

15 May 2015

**13.05.2015 – Reporters Without Borders urges Azerbaijan to release all imprisoned journalists and bloggers immediately. 30 days before the beginning of the European Games RSF also calls on the European Olympic Committees to speak out against the repressions against media representatives in the host country of the sporting event.**

*"It's an unbearable nation that President **Ilham Aliyev** should be allowed to present himself as the host of a major sporting event while at the same time his regime incarcerates journalists for critical investigations and comments,"* said RSF Germany's executive director Christian Mihr. *"The European Olympic Committees should not make themselves Aliyev's accomplices, but should expressly condemn the repression of press freedom in the run-up to and during the Games. For decisions about the hosting of future sporting events of this importance, the human rights situation in the applicant countries has to be given much more weight."* Azerbaijan is presently holding at least eight journalists and bloggers in prison because of their work. Arrests, crackdowns and economic pressure have seriously disrupted the work of many independent or opposition media. Non-governmental organizations in support of media freedom have also been among the victims of the latest surge of repression that began last summer. Azerbaijani human rights defendants currently put the total number of [prisoners of conscience in their country at 80](#).

PRETRAIL DETENTION AND SENTENCES FOR WELL-KNOWN CRITICAL JOURNALISTS.

Last week a court extended until September 19 the pre-trial detention of **Rauf Mirkadirov** [who has already been detained for over a year](#). A foreign correspondent of the weekly paper *Zerkalo* – and a well-known critic of the governments of Azerbaijan as well as Turkey and Russia –, Mirkadirov was deported from Turkey in April 2004 and arrested at the airport on arrival in Azerbaijan. He is charged with treason and espionage for Armenia. The main "evidence" brought forward against him is a video that shows the journalist signing papers during his attendance of an international seminar in the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi.

Azerbaijan's most prominent investigative journalist **Khadija Ismayilova** has by now been in detention for over five months. She was originally accused of having driven a freelance journalist into an attempted suicide, even though the said journalist has since admitted being pressured by security authorities into make these allegations. In February, authorities [added embezzlement, tax fraud and other criminal offences to the charges against Ismayilova](#).

Ismayilova is best known for her investigations into the assets and businesses of highest government circles including the family of the president himself. She has been the target of harassment by state authorities and of anonymous threats for years, and notably of repeated smear campaigns including the posting of videos on the internet that allegedly showed her while having sex.

In January, journalist **Seymur Hazi** [was sentenced to five years in prison for aggravated hooliganism](#). He is a reporter for the opposition daily *Azadlig* and one of the presenters of "Azerbaycan Saati," a TV programme critical of the government that is broadcast from abroad. His sentencing relates to an incident last August when he defended himself against a sudden physical assault by complete stranger.

CRITICAL MEDIA IN DIRE STRAITS.

Many of the few critical media outlets left in Azerbaijan have become victims of the surge of repression since last summer. The office of *Radio Azadliq*, the Azerbaijani service of the US broadcaster *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, has [remained closed since a police raid in late December](#). Independent newspaper *Zerkalo* [had to cease its print issue because it could no longer cover its running expenses after due to the interference of state authorities into the classified ads market and into the distribution network](#). The main opposition newspaper *Azadliq* is at the brink of ruin. The paper had to temporarily cease its print issue several times because the public distribution company withheld payments. Heavy fines and increasing limitations of the channels of distribution by the state have also added to the pressure on *Azadliq*. TV and radio broadcasters are already controlled by the state.

#### PROSECUTION OF MEDIA NGOS, TIGHTENING OF MEDIA LAWS.

The targets of state repression also include non-governmental organizations supporting media freedom. On August 5, the bank accounts of *the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS)*, the Azerbaijan section of US organization *IREX* and *the Media Rights Institute (MRI)* [were frozen, as were the personal bank accounts of the directors of IRFS and MRI](#). *IRFS* director **Emin Huseynov** has held out in the Swiss Embassy in Baku since August 2014. After the offices of the organization were searched and he was prevented from leaving the country, Huseynov fears his imminent arrest [should he leave the embassy](#). Past week the European Court of Human Rights awarded 15.000 euros of compensation to Huseynov for being arbitrarily arrested by Azerbaijani authorities in 2008 and abused in police custody. [The judges also found that there had been no credible investigation of his complaint](#)].

At the beginning of February, two further restrictions of the media law took effect. A media outlet can now be shut down if it is found to receive financial support from abroad – which affects especially independent media that are often reliant on international support because of governmental control of ad markets. Additionally, media outlets can now also be shut down [if they are convicted of defamation twice within a year](#).

Azerbaijan is ranked 160th out of 180 countries in the [2015 RSF's World Press Freedom Index](#).

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