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<http://www.rsf.org/azerbaijan-azerbaijan-s-detained-journalists-10-01-2013,43893.html>

Europe/Ex-USSR - Azerbaijan

Travesty of justice

Azerbaijan's detained journalists must be released

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Four journalists wrongly held in prison for many months appeared in court in Baku yesterday in three separate cases. The trial of [Hilal Mammadov](#), held in custody since June last year, opened before the serious crimes court in the Azeri capital. In addition, new hearings were held in the cases of *Khayal TV* journalists [Vugar Gonagov and Zaur Guliyev](#), behind bars since March last year, and of [Avaz Zeynalli](#), editor of the daily *Khural* who has been in prison since October 2011. Reporters Without Borders once again calls for the immediate release of all four and for the charges against them to be dropped.

"In the case of Hilal Mammadov, the Baku authorities are once again targeting activism and the defence of human rights," said Reporters Without Borders secretary general, Christophe Deloire.

"The *Khayal TV* journalists have been made scapegoats in local political battles. Zaur Guliyev is still paying the price for his criticism of the government, although the instigator of the charges against him is herself being prosecuted by the police.

"There is no justification for remanding our four colleagues in custody. Despite the time they have spent behind bars, the justice system has still not gathered enough proof to support the absurd and contradictory allegations against them. These journalists are being prosecuted simply for having done their job. They should be released immediately."

Hilal Mammadov held in a cage in court

The first hearing in the trial of Hilal Mammadov took place yesterday in the Baku serious crimes court. Prosecutor Tural Yusifov rejected defence requests that the journalist should not be forced to appear in a metal cage, that he be allowed to sit close to his lawyers and that the trial be filmed in order to ensure the proceedings were impartial.

Mammadov's lawyers argued that the evidence was flimsy and called for further investigations. They also requested that he be released from custody and placed under house arrest.

Mammadov, the editor of the newspaper *Tolishi Sado* (Voice of the Talysh), a human rights campaigner and the head of the Talysh Cultural Centre, has been held [in appalling conditions](#) since his arrest in June last year on a trumped-up charge of drug trafficking. Two weeks later, new charges were made against him including high treason, incitement to hatred and spying on behalf of Iran. He could face a 15-year prison sentence and the seizure of all his possessions if found guilty.

His case is highly reminiscent of that of **Novruzali Mamedov** (no relation), his predecessor as editor of *Tolishi Sado*, who was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment in 2008 for espionage and incitement to ethnic hatred. He [died in Baku prison hospital](#) the following year after being denied medical attention.

Tolishi Sado is a newspaper in the language of the Talysh people and campaigns for the rights of the minority who live mainly in the south of Azerbaijan. Hilal Mammadov is the author of [a](#)

[popular online rap video](#) that became the anthem of protest movements in several former Soviet republics. The song, entitled "Who do you think you are? Come on, goodbye", was adopted by the Russian opposition to call for the resignation of Vladimir Putin.

Khayal TV journalists used as scapegoats

Vugar Gonagov and Zaur Guliyev, respectively executive director and editor of *Khayal TV*, appeared yesterday before the Khachmaz district court in the north-east of the country. They were accused, with two co-defendants, of organizing or participating in disturbances of the peace (section 233 of the criminal code) and of abuse of power (section 309.2).

They are accused of [posting a video online that led to protests in the northern town of Quba on 1 March last year](#). The video, posted on YouTube, shows the district governor, Rauf Habibov, making derogatory remarks about residents at a team meeting.

Thousands of demonstrators gathered to demand Habibov's resignation. Clashes broke out as the protesters were being dispersed, [during which several journalists were beaten up](#).

Khayal TV filmed the entire meeting but the recordings were swiftly destroyed on the orders of the local government. Gonagov and Guliyev deny any responsibility for the video's appearance on YouTube.

"It is shocking that the courts believe *Khayal TV* to be responsible for the disturbances for simply having done its job," Deloire said. "Like Hilal Mammadov and Avaz Zeynalli, Vugar Gonagov and Zaur Guliyev should be released as soon as possible and they should also receive compensation for the time they have spent in custody and for [the ill-treatment they have endured](#), which should be investigated fully and impartially.

"We reiterate our deep concern over the conditions in which the four journalists are held and hold the prison administration responsible for their fate."

Avaz Zeynalli still in prison despite everything

The 35th hearing in the trial of Avaz Zeynalli, editor of the daily *Khural*, was held yesterday before the Baku serious crimes court. The case, which opened in May last year, appears to be making little progress. The journalist is accused of attempted extortion under section 311.3 of the criminal code, based on the evidence of a ruling party parliamentarian, Gular Akhmedova. The ex-MP is herself [now facing prosecution](#) for corruption and murder. Unlike Zeynalli, however, she has avoided prison and has been placed under house arrest.

The journalist was [arrested in October 2011](#), shortly after he wrote an article highly critical of President Ilham Aliiev and the newspaper's computer equipment was seized. Despite his [serious health problems](#), his requests for bail have been refused and he remains the target of intimidation and denial of his rights.
