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Europe/Ex-USSR - Azerbaijan

Supposed "study"

Unfair Lobbying and Trials against Journalists in Azerbaijan

22 March 2013

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Reporters Without Borders is appalled at the harsh action the Azerbaijani regime is taking against its critics in the run-up to the presidential election this autumn, and distances itself from dubious attempts to create an anti-European mood in the country and thus weaken the opposition. One example of this is a supposed "[study](#)" currently in circulation on the decline of values in Europe, which claims the support of human rights organisations like *Reporters Without Borders*.

"We were in no way involved in this study - contrary to what it claims - and consider it absolutely disproportionate to compare human rights abuses in Germany with those in Azerbaijan," Christian Mihr, Executive Director of the German section of Reporters without Borders, stressed in Berlin.

The author of the "study" is **Eynulla Fatullajev** (Eynulla Fatullayev or Эйнулла Фатуллаев), a journalist who gained international recognition as a critic of the regime. As the editor of two opposition newspapers he spent more than four years in prison before President Ilham Aliyev [granted him a pardon](#) in May 2011. Since his release Fatullajev has published reports that are conspicuously pro-governmental in their stance, among other things about the situation of political prisoners in Azerbaijani prisons.

Fatullayev presented his "study", from which *Reporters Without Borders*, *Amnesty International* and many other quoted persons have since distanced themselves, in Brussels in January 2013. A few days later the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe rejected a resolution calling for the release of political prisoners in Azerbaijan by a large majority and instead merely passed a general declaration on the state of human rights in the country. The German Rapporteur Christoph Strässer attributed this to [massive lobbying on the Azerbaijani side](#). The European Stability Initiative had already described this type of lobbying in detail in a report titled "[Caviar Diplomacy](#)" published in May 2012. "We note with consternation that even former critics of the regime are now being roped in for this," *Reporters Without Borders'* director Mihr commented.

Seven months before the presidential elections take place in October, critical journalists and media are being subjected to enormous pressure in Azerbaijan. On March 12, a court in Baku sentenced **Avaz Zeynalli**, the chief editor of Khural newspaper, to nine years in prison. He [had repeatedly voiced](#) harsh criticism of President Ilham Aliyev in his texts. Further criminal proceedings are underway against **Hilal Mammedov**, chief editor of the minority newspaper *Tolishi Sado* and other journalists. The most important opposition newspaper in the country, *Azadliq*, is on the brink of bankruptcy owing to hefty fines imposed as a result of defamation cases. In mid-February, Baku courts upheld fines amounting to approximately 62,000 euros [against the newspaper](#).

At least nine journalists were arrested on January 26 for taking part in non-authorized street protests in Baku, including **Khadija Ismayilova**, a reporter who has attracted international attention for her research into abuses of power and corruption, and blogger **Emin Milli**.

Ismayilova was ordered to pay a fine of just under 400 euros in summary proceedings without any assistance from her lawyers, while Emin Milli was sentenced to 15 days of administrative detention.

The penalties for participating in unauthorised gatherings had already been substantially increased prior to the protests. On March 11 President Aliyev signed further changes to the law, limiting the freedom of assembly and making the work of civil society organisations more difficult. NGOs now need [official approval for every donation](#) of more than 200 manat (approx. 200 euros).

Reporters Without Borders sees Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev as [one of the worst predators](#) of press freedom worldwide. The southern Caucasian country ranks 156th out of 179 states in *Reporters Without Borders'* current [Press Freedom Index](#).

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