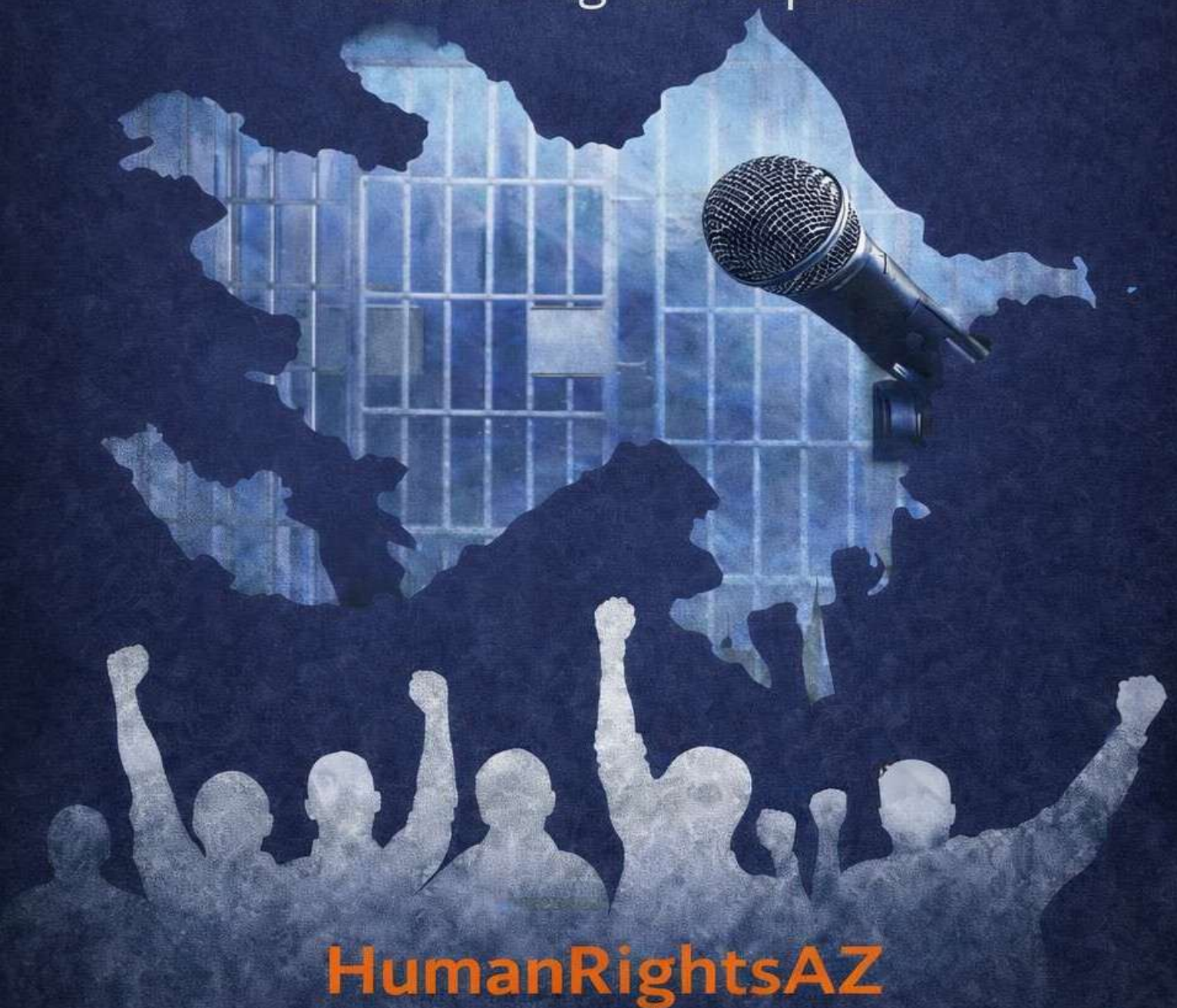


HUMAN RIGHTS AZERBAIJAN

Human Rights Situation in Azerbaijan - 2025

Rising Repression and
Shrinking Civic Space



HumanRightsAZ

www.humanrightsaz.com

March 2026

Executive Summary

The human rights situation in Azerbaijan deteriorated further in 2025 compared to previous years. Throughout the year, repression against independent journalists, political activists, and civil society actors continued. Several journalists and activists were arrested, while the activities of a number of independent media outlets were effectively paralyzed. At the same time, Azerbaijani journalists and bloggers living abroad were also targeted, with criminal cases initiated against them and some sentenced in absentia to long-term imprisonment.

According to lists compiled by human rights defenders and civil society representatives, the number of political prisoners in Azerbaijan reached 392 by the end of the year. This figure represents one of the highest levels in recent years and reflects the ongoing serious challenges related to freedom of expression and political pluralism in the country.

In 2025, the Azerbaijani authorities also adopted restrictive measures in their relations with international organizations and foreign media. The activities of certain United Nations-affiliated entities were suspended, and the accreditations of several international media outlets operating in Azerbaijan were revoked. While the government justified these decisions on the grounds of national interests and state sovereignty, international observers noted that such measures further weakened transparency and accountability mechanisms in the country.

Legislative changes introduced during the reporting period imposed additional restrictions on the activities of media and civil society. New regulations limited the financial capacities of non-governmental organizations and increased state control over independent media.

At the same time, alarming reports emerged regarding conditions in places of detention. Deaths in penitentiary institutions, particularly cases involving political activists officially described as suicides, raised serious concerns among society and human rights defenders. These incidents point to persistent problems related to transparency and accountability within Azerbaijan's prison system.

Social developments throughout 2025 also revealed growing public tension. Protests that erupted following a fatal traffic accident in the city of Imishli, as well as public outrage over the suspicious death of a young man in Ganja, demonstrated that issues of social justice and legal accountability remain highly sensitive in Azerbaijani society.

This report analyzes the key developments and trends in the field of human rights in Azerbaijan in 2025. It provides an overview of the situation across major areas, including freedom of expression, political repression, challenges within the penitentiary system, and the shrinking space for civil society.

Acknowledgment

This report was prepared by the HumanRightsAZ platform within the framework of the project “**Voices Uncensored: A Bitcoin-Based Platform for Human Rights Defenders in Azerbaijan.**” The project is implemented by human rights defender Elchin Mammad and supported by a grant from the **Human Rights Foundation** (HRF) Bitcoin Development Fund. The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Human Rights Foundation.

Introduction

The decline in the protection of human rights in Azerbaijan continued in 2025. The authorities intensified efforts to silence critical voices by taking harsh measures against independent journalism, political opposition, and civil society. Alongside independent media operating in the country, journalists and bloggers living abroad were also targeted. Criminal cases under serious charges were initiated against many of them, while others were sentenced in absentia to long-term imprisonment. These developments significantly restricted the operating space of civil society.

During the reporting period, the Azerbaijani government terminated the activities of several entities affiliated with the United Nations within the country. At the same time, the accreditations of a number of international media organizations operating in Azerbaijan were revoked. While official statements justified these measures on the grounds of national interests and the country's international standing, international observers and human rights organizations emphasized that such decisions further undermine transparency and accountability.

Legislative amendments adopted in 2025 also had a negative impact on the human rights environment. The new regulations imposed additional restrictions on media operations and limited the financial capacities of non-governmental organizations. These measures further strengthened state control over critics and independent actors.

The Azerbaijani authorities continue to reject criticism expressed in international reports, maintaining that fundamental human rights are ensured in the country. However, international organizations and European institutions have repeatedly called on the government to remove restrictions on freedom of expression, ensure media independence, and enable the effective functioning of civil society.

Municipal Elections

Municipal elections were held in Azerbaijan on January 29, 2025. More than 16,000 candidates competed for over 8,000 seats across approximately 700 municipalities nationwide. According to official data, voter turnout was relatively low, with only 31.45% of eligible voters participating in the elections.

Although several political parties took part in the elections, the process was marked by differing approaches within the opposition. The REAL Party announced that it had secured mandates in several municipalities. The Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP) declared a boycott of the elections. The Musavat Party, meanwhile, criticized the process, citing widespread electoral fraud, lack of transparency, and the use of administrative resources.

More than 70,000 domestic observers were reportedly involved in monitoring the elections. However, the absence of international observation missions was notable and limited the ability to assess the elections against international standards.

Experts attribute the low voter turnout to the limited powers of municipalities within the country's political and administrative system. According to their assessments, the lack of meaningful decision-making authority at the municipal level reduces public interest in these elections.

Overall, the elections were criticized by opposition political forces and some independent observers. They emphasized the need for reforms aimed at increasing transparency, expanding the powers of municipalities, and strengthening public trust in electoral institutions.

Personnel Changes, Corruption Allegations, and Administrative Decisions

Throughout 2025, a number of significant personnel changes were carried out within Azerbaijan's central and local executive authorities. Several high-ranking officials were dismissed and reassigned to new positions by presidential decrees. Samir Sharifov was removed from his post as Minister of Finance and appointed Deputy Prime Minister. Sahil Babayev was appointed Minister of Finance, while Anar Aliyev became Minister of Labor and Social Protection of the Population. At the same time, Mukhtar Babayev was dismissed from his position as Minister of Ecology and Natural Resources, and the President's press secretary, Azer Gasimov, was also removed from office.

Changes and law enforcement operations were also reported within local executive authorities. Islam Rzayev, head of the Balakan District Executive Authority, was dismissed and arrested one day later on charges of bribery and embezzlement. During an operation conducted in the Garadagh District Executive Authority, a deputy head and other officials were detained. Additionally, several district heads were reassigned to other regions. Elkhan Ibrahimov, who had been appointed head of the Nasimi District Executive Authority on November 12, was dismissed after only 47 days, on December 29.

In March 2025, by presidential decree, Fuad Naghiyev, Chairman of the State Tourism Agency, received a severe reprimand for shortcomings in his work. Local media reports alleged the leakage of internal communications within the agency and the involvement of certain employees in investigations. During the same period, it was reported that "Transparency Azerbaijan," the local chapter associated with Transparency International, had ceased its activities.

In April 2025, one of the most controversial decisions related to the widely criticized "Tartar case" was adopted. Former Military Prosecutor Khanlar Valiyev, whose role in the 2017 case involving allegations of torture against military personnel had been heavily criticized, was appointed as a judge of the Constitutional Court. This appointment was strongly criticized by human rights defenders and the families of victims, who viewed it as an indication of the continued climate of impunity in Azerbaijan.

At the same time, Kamran Aliyev, whose term had expired, was reappointed as Prosecutor General of the Republic of Azerbaijan by a decision of the National Assembly.

Legislative changes adopted at the end of the year also sparked public debate. During its final session of the year, the National Assembly adopted amendments to the Code of Administrative Offenses, significantly increasing fines in several areas. In particular, penalties for violations related to the submission of tax reports and reports on state duties were increased. Under the new regulations, fines were set at 300 AZN for individuals and 1,000 AZN for legal entities.

Decisions by the Tariff Council also drew public attention toward the end of the year. According to these decisions, the price of AI-92 gasoline increased by 0.05 AZN and diesel fuel by 0.10 AZN as of January 1, 2026. The new prices were set at 1.15 AZN per liter for AI-92 gasoline and 1.10 AZN per liter for diesel fuel.

The Tariff Council also introduced a new fixed monthly payment mechanism for electricity and natural gas. Under the new system, a fixed monthly fee is applied regardless of consumption levels. This fee is set at 1 AZN for households and small businesses, and 3 AZN for large enterprises. A similar fixed monthly charge will also apply to natural gas consumption.

Experts link these decisions to increasing economic pressures in the country and a decline in state revenues, particularly from the energy sector. At the same time, some economists warn that the new tariff and fine policies may place additional burdens on the population and negatively affect social welfare.

Continuation of the Special Quarantine Regime

In 2025, Azerbaijan remained one of the countries continuing to enforce a long-standing special quarantine regime. Although many restrictions introduced during the pandemic period were lifted, the country's land borders remained closed and the special quarantine regime continued to be in effect.

On December 19, 2025, a decision signed by Prime Minister Ali Asadov extended the special quarantine regime until April 1, 2026. Official statements justified this extension by referring to ongoing risks related to COVID-19.

However, the prolonged continuation of the quarantine regime has sparked public debate. Critics and some experts have pointed out that, despite the removal of pandemic-related restrictions in many countries, the continued closure of land borders and the extension of the special regime have effectively kept Azerbaijan isolated.

Human rights defenders and some analysts emphasize that this situation has affected the right to freedom of movement and the restoration of normal cross-border relations with neighboring countries. They argue that decisions regarding the long-term application of the quarantine regime should be more transparently justified and clearly explained to the public.

Human Rights and Freedoms in a Closed Country

The year 2025 was widely characterized as a difficult period for human rights and media freedom in Azerbaijan. According to reports by both international and domestic human rights organizations, journalists, civil society representatives, and public activists were subjected to systematic pressure. Throughout the year, criminal cases were initiated against journalists, NGO leaders, human rights defenders, labor rights activists, and politically active individuals, with many receiving long-term prison sentences. At the same time, the activities of media outlets were restricted, and the information environment became significantly more constrained.

Azerbaijan's human rights record in 2025 was extensively criticized in international reports. According to the International Federation of Journalists, Azerbaijan ranked among the top five countries in Europe in terms of the number of imprisoned journalists, alongside Russia (38), Belarus (30), Ukraine (28), and Türkiye (20).

Data from the Council of Europe's Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists indicated that Azerbaijan ranked second in Europe after Belarus in terms of the number of imprisoned journalists. The report also highlighted that the Media Law adopted in Azerbaijan has significantly restricted press freedom.

Assessments by international human rights organizations reached similar conclusions. Freedom House classified Azerbaijan as a "Not Free" country in its annual report. In the 2025 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Azerbaijan ranked 167th out of 180 countries. The report noted that independent media had effectively ceased to exist in the country. On November 2, 2025, RSF included President Ilham Aliyev in its list of "predators of press freedom."

The U.S. Department of State's human rights report also pointed to an increase in repression in Azerbaijan. It highlighted arbitrary arrests, systematic pressure on media and freedom of expression, and noted that at least 40 journalists and public activists had been detained.

On December 18, 2025, the European Parliament adopted a new resolution on the human rights situation in Azerbaijan. The resolution stated that the number of politically motivated arrests had reached approximately 400 by early 2025. The document was adopted with the participation of 553

Members of Parliament, with 477 voting in favor and 7 against. It also included calls for the European Union to consider possible sanctions against Azerbaijan.

Freedom of Assembly

In 2025, the exercise of freedom of assembly in Azerbaijan continued to face significant restrictions. The denial of permission for peaceful protests and the detention of individuals participating in such initiatives have become routine practices. In some cases, reports indicated that law enforcement authorities forcibly confiscated personal belongings and electronic devices from participants during protests.

During the year, only one officially submitted request to organize a public protest was recorded. The Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP) and the National Council planned to hold a rally on April 27, 2025, under the slogan “Freedom for Political Prisoners!” However, the Baku City Executive Authority rejected the request and did not grant permission for the demonstration.

One of the most notable aspects of the situation is the prolonged absence of authorized mass protests in the country. According to available information, the last officially permitted rally in Azerbaijan took place in 2019. Since then, initiatives by various political and civic groups have either been rejected outright or redirected to alternative locations in ways that effectively prevented their implementation.

Human rights defenders and international organizations emphasize that freedom of peaceful assembly is a fundamental right in democratic societies. They note that its systematic restriction significantly undermines citizens’ ability to participate in political life. In their view, both legislation and practice in this area should be aligned with international human rights standards.

Imishli Events: Fatal Accident, Public Outrage, and Subsequent Court Decisions

A traffic accident that occurred in January 2025 in the city of Imishli, followed by public protests, became one of the most notable social events of the year. The incident sparked widespread debate due to concerns over the responsibility of law enforcement authorities and the harsh response to the protests.

On January 18, a BMW vehicle belonging to the State Traffic Police collided with a Mercedes-Benz 190 in Imishli. As a result of the crash, three schoolchildren returning home were struck by the vehicles. Two died at the scene, while the third died several days later in hospital.

According to the forensic examination, the average speed of the traffic police vehicle was approximately 159 km/h. The Mercedes-Benz was driven by Baylar Bayramli, born in 2008, who was charged with driving without a license, violating traffic rules, and leaving the scene of the accident. By decision of the Lankaran Court for Grave Crimes, he was sentenced to 7 years and 6 months of imprisonment. According to official information, the families of the deceased children stated that they did not file complaints against him.

Immediately after the incident, mass protests erupted in the city. Local residents, expressing outrage, overturned a police vehicle and marched toward the District Police Department. Protesters chanted slogans such as “resignation” and demanded accountability from law enforcement authorities.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs announced that several individuals had been detained in connection with the protests and charged with hooliganism. Official reports indicated that 19 people were detained, while unofficial sources suggested that the actual number may have been higher.

Following the events, heightened police control was imposed in Imishli. Residents and social media reports claimed that internet access in the city was restricted and that Internal Troops were deployed to the area.

On July 3, court verdicts were issued against those detained in connection with the protests. Of the 19 individuals, 8 were sentenced to imprisonment ranging from 1 to 4 years, while 11 received non-custodial sentences involving restrictions on their freedom.

The Imishli events were not only a tragic traffic accident but also one of the rare instances in which local residents openly expressed social discontent. However, the subsequent investigation and court decisions were widely perceived as focusing primarily on punishing protesters, which generated significant public debate.

Arrests of Journalists and Pressure on Media

In 2025, pressure on independent media outlets in Azerbaijan continued, and the arrest of journalists remained one of the most serious human rights concerns. These pressures have become increasingly systematic, particularly since late 2023. Journalists affiliated with independent media platforms such as Meydan TV, AbzasMedia, and Toplum TV were detained at various times and were primarily charged with economic-related criminal offenses.

In several of these cases, journalists were sentenced to long-term imprisonment, while others were placed in pre-trial detention during ongoing investigations. Human rights defenders and media organizations have stated that many of these charges appear to be directly linked to the individuals' journalistic activities.

At the same time, the broadcasting of certain international media outlets in Azerbaijan was suspended. One local news agency also announced the cessation of its operations, citing financial difficulties. These developments have further narrowed the media environment in the country.

Since the beginning of 2025, arrests of journalists have entered a new phase. Detentions linked to the criminal case widely referred to as the "Meydan TV case," which began in late 2024, continued throughout 2025. Within the framework of this case, several journalists were arrested, including Shamsad Aghayev (Agha), editor-in-chief of arqument.az; independent journalists Nurlan Libre (Gahramanli), Fatima Movlamli, and Ulviyya Ali (Guliyeva); as well as photojournalist Ahmad Mukhtar. The total number of individuals detained in connection with this case reportedly reached 12.

Those detained have been charged under several articles of the Criminal Code of Azerbaijan, primarily involving economic offenses. Court proceedings in these cases are ongoing. The arrested journalists and their legal representatives deny the charges, asserting that the prosecutions are directly related to their professional activities.

International media and human rights organizations have expressed concern over the arrests and have called on the Azerbaijani authorities to respect media freedom and ensure that journalists are not prosecuted for carrying out their professional duties.

The "AbzasMedia Case" and Other Verdicts Against Journalists

In 2025, the arrest of journalists and criminal cases against independent media outlets in Azerbaijan expanded significantly in scale. In particular, proceedings known as the "AbzasMedia case" and the "Toplum TV case" drew increased international attention to the state of media freedom in the country.

The “AbzasMedia Case”: Long-Term Prison Sentences

On June 20, 2025, the court delivered its verdict in the “AbzasMedia case.” According to the ruling, the outlet’s director Ulvi Hasanli, editor-in-chief Sevinj Vagifqizi, investigative journalist Hafiz Babali, and economic journalist Farid Mehralizade were each sentenced to 9 years of imprisonment. Reporters Nargiz Absalamova and Elnara Gasimova were sentenced to 8 years, while deputy director Mohammad Kekalov received a sentence of 7 years and 6 months.

The convicted journalists rejected the charges, stating that they were being prosecuted for their professional activities. Local and international media organizations described these verdicts as a serious blow to media freedom in Azerbaijan.

The “Toplum TV Case”

In 2025, the criminal case related to Toplum TV also generated significant public attention. Within this case, journalist Shahnaz Baylarqizi (Huseynova) was initially placed in pre-trial detention; however, the measure was later replaced with house arrest. Another journalist, Farid Ismayilov, was detained in connection with the same case.

As a result of increasing pressure, the media outlet ceased its operations the country and was forced to continue its activities from abroad. Court proceedings in this case remain ongoing.

Other Media Outlets and Journalists

Throughout 2025, employees of other media organizations were also targeted under various criminal cases. Aziz Orujov, head of Kanal 13 internet television, was sentenced to 2 years of imprisonment and was released on November 27 after completing his sentence.

Teymur Karimov, an employee of Kanal 11, was initially sentenced to 8 years in prison; however, this sentence was later reduced to 6 years following appeals. Istek Totiyeva, who was detained in the same case, received a suspended sentence. Avaz Zeynalli, head of Xural TV, was released due to health concerns.

In 2025, Ahmad Mammadli, head of Yoldash Media, and Vugar Mammadov, editor-in-chief of Hurriyyet TV, were also arrested.

During the same period, Azerbaijani journalist Afgan Sadygov, founder of Azel TV, who had been detained in Georgia, was released on bail set at 5,000 GEL (approximately 3,000 AZN). He had been arrested in August 2023 at the request of the Azerbaijani authorities, who sought his extradition.

Administrative Measures against Media Institutions

In 2025, a number of administrative decisions targeting media institutions were also adopted. The Baku office of BBC News ceased operations, while the Azerbaijani branch of the Sputnik agency was shut down. Additionally, the accreditations of Voice of America and Bloomberg were revoked.

Moreover, Turan Information Agency, one of the country’s oldest independent media outlets, was forced to cease its operations. This development further reduced the number of independent sources of information in Azerbaijan.

Violence, Discrimination, and the Right to Life

In 2025, allegations of torture and ill-treatment in places of detention in Azerbaijan continued to be reported. Local human rights defenders and civil society representatives documented numerous claims of violence and inhuman treatment against detainees. However, it was noted that in most cases, these allegations were not subject to effective and independent investigations. Some activists and journalists reported that they had been subjected to physical abuse during detention and while held in police custody.

One notable incident occurred at the Sumgayit City Police Department, where a detainee attempted self-immolation while being held in a temporary detention facility. Following the incident, the head of the facility was dismissed, and several police officers reportedly received disciplinary sanctions. However, observers questioned whether these measures were sufficient to ensure accountability.

Human rights defenders also reported difficulties in ensuring detainees' access to legal counsel. In some cases, families were not promptly informed of the detention of their relatives, and the right to legal assistance was not fully guaranteed.

In 2025, several incidents involving violence and discrimination within society also attracted significant public attention. On November 4, Yasin Ibadov was fatally stabbed in Baku. According to available information, he was a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and his uncle was identified as a suspect in the killing. Some sources reported delays in law enforcement response and in the provision of timely medical assistance.

On December 26, a police raid in a club located in central Baku reportedly resulted in the detention of at least 106 individuals. Local sources indicated that many of those detained were members of the LGBTQ+ community. Detainees alleged that they were subjected to degrading treatment, physical abuse, and extortion. No detailed official statement was provided regarding the incident.

Human rights defenders emphasize the importance of conducting effective investigations into such cases, improving conditions in detention facilities, and implementing mechanisms in line with international human rights standards to prevent discrimination and abuse.

Suspicious Death in Ganja and Growing Concerns

In May 2025, a death in the city of Ganja triggered widespread public debate across Azerbaijan. Elgun Ibrahimov, born in 2007, was found seriously injured on May 13 in the yard of an abandoned dormitory building. Although he was taken to hospital, he later died from his injuries.

In a joint statement, the Prosecutor General's Office, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the State Security Service reported that, according to preliminary findings, Ibrahimov had died as a result of a fall from height, and no signs of violence were identified during the initial examination of the scene.

However, the victim's family publicly rejected this version of events. According to them, the official explanation does not address key questions surrounding the circumstances of his death and warrants a broader, independent investigation.

Following the incident, a public campaign under the slogan "Justice for Elgun Ibrahimov" emerged on social media and within civil society. As part of this campaign, citizens and activists distributed informational leaflets and called for a transparent and impartial investigation.

On May 24, civic activist Nijat Amiraslanov was detained for distributing such leaflets and sentenced to 15 days of administrative detention. On June 1, several individuals were reportedly detained near the 28 May metro station. Those detained stated that they were taken to the Nasimi District Police

Department, where their phones were checked and they were questioned. It was also reported that minors were among those detained.

In the aftermath of Ibrahimov's death, reports of a series of suicides among young people and teenagers in Ganja further increased public concern. Observers suggested that these incidents should not be viewed in isolation but rather as potential indicators of broader social and psychological challenges.

Although official authorities stated that the investigation into Ibrahimov's death is ongoing, only limited information has been made available to the public regarding its progress and findings. This lack of transparency has contributed to the persistence of unanswered questions and public skepticism.

Prosecution of Political and Civic Activists

In 2025, criminal prosecutions and court verdicts against political and civic activists in Azerbaijan continued. Throughout the year, a number of prominent activists and opposition figures were sentenced to long-term imprisonment.

Civic activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev was sentenced to 10 years in prison. Rail Abbasov, who stated that he had been arrested due to his association with Hajiyev, received a sentence of 6 years and 6 months. Tofiq Yagublu, a member of the Musavat Party and the National Council, was sentenced to 9 years of imprisonment. In protest against the verdict, Yagublu conducted a 40-day hunger strike. Former diplomat Emin Ibrahimov was sentenced to 7 years, while political activist Nijat Ibrahim received 6 years and 6 months in prison.

In the field of labor rights, Afiaddin Mammadov, head of the Confederation of Trade Unions, was sentenced to 8 years of imprisonment. Members of the organization, Mohyaddin Orujov, Aykhan Israfilov, and Elvin Mustafayev, were each sentenced to 3 years in prison. Political activist Famil Khalilov, who has a first-degree disability, received a suspended sentence.

Serious concerns were also observed regarding academic freedom. Researcher Iqbal Abilov was sentenced to 18 years on charges of treason, while Bahruz Samadov received a 15-year prison sentence.

In connection with the case of Gubad Ibadoghlu, economist Fazil Gasimov—who had been detained in Türkiye in 2023 and transferred to Azerbaijan—was sentenced on March 13, 2025, to 9 years of imprisonment.

Among those detained in 2025 was Haji Valiyev, a participant in the Second Karabakh War and head of the “Young Veterans” Public Union. Following his arrest, the organization ceased its activities.

In some cases, preventive measures were applied during the investigation stage. Civic activist Elgiz Gahraman was designated as an обвиняемый in the case against Imran Aliyev, head of the website meclis.info, and was placed under police supervision. Similarly, civic activist Anar Abdulla was initially released under police supervision in connection with the case of Anar Mammadli, head of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center. However, on August 4, 2025, the preventive measure was changed to pre-trial detention at the request of the prosecutor, and he was arrested in the courtroom. Proceedings in this case are ongoing.

On October 24, Anar Asadli, head of the dissolved Azerbaijan Rising Party (AY Party), was also re-arrested in the courtroom by decision of the Baku Court for Grave Crimes. The court justified the decision on the grounds that damages claimed by victims had not been compensated.

In 2025, human rights defenders and legal professionals also faced persecution. On October 8, lawyer Zabil Gahramanov, whose legal practice had been suspended for six months, was arrested. On

December 10, independent legal expert Namized Safarov was placed in pre-trial detention by decision of the Khatai District Court.

In the final days of the year, on December 22, civic activist Dayanat Chalabiyev-known for his critical social media posts-was also arrested. An English language teacher by profession, he was charged with intentionally causing serious bodily harm. Chalabiyev rejected the charges, stating that his arrest was linked to his critical social media activity.

The “NGO Case” and Pressure on Civil Society

In 2025, pressure on civil society institutions in Azerbaijan entered a new phase. Within the framework of an investigation widely referred to as the “NGO case,” criminal proceedings were initiated against a number of civil society activists and representatives of non-governmental organizations.

As part of this case, civil society activists Bashir Suleymanli and Mammad Alpay (Mammadzade) were arrested. Preventive measures, including house arrest and police supervision, were imposed on Hafiz Hasanov, Galib Bayramov, and Mehriban Rahimli. In addition, arrest warrants in absentia were issued for Subhan Hasanli, Jamil Hajiyevev, and Aytaj Agazade, who were subsequently placed on a wanted list.

According to available information, approximately 50 individuals have been involved in the investigation, including Ahmad Mammadzade, Galib Bayramov, Asaf Ahmadov, Zamin Zakiyev, and Nargiz Mukhtarova.

Observers note that these developments resemble a renewed phase of the large-scale crackdown on NGOs that began in 2014, targeting organizations receiving foreign funding. During that period, prominent human rights defenders Intigam Aliyev and Leyla Yunus were arrested, and numerous NGO representatives were subjected to investigation.

Among those summoned for questioning at the time was Elchin Mammad, President of the Social Union of Legal Education of Sumgait Youth. Although the investigation was later suspended, reports indicate that it was effectively revived in early 2025, leading to a new wave of arrests and prosecutions targeting civil society actors.

Human rights organizations warn that the renewed “NGO case” may further shrink an already restricted civic space in Azerbaijan. They emphasize that these developments have serious implications for the exercise of fundamental rights, including freedom of association and freedom of expression.

Exiled Activists and Trials in Absentia

In 2025, criminal prosecutions against bloggers, journalists, and civic activists living in exile and known for their critical views continued in Azerbaijan. In a number of cases, investigations were conducted in absentia, and courts issued arrest warrants and sentences in absentia against these individuals.

According to available information, several media representatives and activists residing abroad were charged with various criminal offenses. In many instances, courts issued arrest warrants in absentia against them. Among those affected are journalists and activists in exile, including Sevinj Osmanqizi, Tural Sadigli, Ordukhon Babirov, Mahammad Mirzali, Gabil Mammadov, Imamaddin Alimanov, Elshad Abdullayev, Gurban Mammadov, Ganimat Zahid, Natiq Adilov, Altay Goyushov, Abid Gafarov, Arastun Orujlu, and Emin Ahmadbayov.

Most of these individuals are known for their criticism of the Azerbaijani authorities through social media platforms and independent media channels. They reject the charges against them as politically motivated and argue that these proceedings are intended to restrict freedom of expression.

Human rights defenders and international organizations note that the expansion of criminal prosecutions in absentia against exiled journalists and activists has a negative impact on freedom of expression and political pluralism. In their view, such practices contribute to an atmosphere of pressure that extends beyond the country's borders and further limits the space for dissent both domestically and internationally.

Political Prisoners

In 2025, concerns regarding politically motivated arrests in Azerbaijan continued. According to the latest list prepared by the "Union for Freedom of Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan," the number of individuals recognized as political prisoners reached 392. This figure includes journalists, political activists, civil society representatives, and opposition members detained under various criminal charges.

In addition to new arrests during the year, restrictions on freedom of movement were also reported. According to human rights defenders, travel bans were imposed on certain activists and journalists as part of ongoing investigations.

Furthermore, dozens of political and civic activists were subjected to short-term administrative detention on various charges throughout the year. These cases were often linked to participation in peaceful protests, critical social media activity, or broader civic engagement.

Human rights defenders and international organizations emphasize that politically motivated arrests and administrative measures have a detrimental impact on political pluralism and civic participation in the country. In their view, addressing these concerns—including reviewing cases considered politically motivated—would be an important step toward improving the human rights situation in Azerbaijan.

Amnesty and Related Developments

In December 2025, a large-scale amnesty act was adopted in Azerbaijan. On December 15, President Ilham Aliyev proposed an amnesty initiative in connection with the "Year of Constitution and Sovereignty." The Milli Majlis approved the initiative on December 19, and the implementation of the amnesty began on December 22.

According to official statements, the decision was presented as one of the most extensive amnesty measures in recent years. The Ministry of Justice reported that approximately 8,000 prisoners held in penitentiary institutions would fall within the scope of the act. Preliminary information indicated that nearly 5,000 individuals would be released from imprisonment, while the sentences of around 3,000 prisoners would be reduced by six months.

However, human rights defenders noted that the vast majority of individuals recognized as political prisoners were excluded from the scope of the amnesty. According to human rights organizations, following the entry into force of the amnesty, 36 individuals recognized as political prisoners were released, with approximately 30 more expected to be released.

Human rights defenders further indicated that most of those released were religious individuals who had been convicted on drug-related charges and included in political prisoner lists.

Some representatives of civil society and human rights defenders criticized the amnesty, expressing concern that the majority of political prisoners remained excluded. In their view, the measure did not

address the systemic issue of politically motivated prosecutions and was therefore seen by some observers as largely symbolic or politically driven.

Arrest of Opposition Leader Ali Karimli and Major Political Developments of the Year

In 2025, one of the most significant and widely discussed political events in Azerbaijan was the detention and arrest of opposition leader Ali Karimli, chairman of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP). As one of the most prominent figures in the opposition, his arrest attracted considerable attention both domestically and internationally.

On November 29, Ali Karimli was detained. The following day, a court ordered his pre-trial detention. Within the same case, Mammad Ibrahim, a member of the party's governing board, was also arrested. They were charged under articles of the Criminal Code related to attempts to seize power by force and to violently change the constitutional order of the state.

Pro-government media outlets framed these arrests within broader political narratives, linking them to other criminal investigations and external political factors. In particular, reports suggested a connection between these developments and the criminal case opened against Ramiz Mehdiyev, former head of the Presidential Administration and former president of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences.

In October 2025, criminal charges were brought against Ramiz Mehdiyev, including treason, attempted seizure of power, and money laundering. A court ordered his placement under house arrest. Given Mehdiyev's long-standing role in Azerbaijan's political system, these developments generated significant public discussion.

On the night of November 30, Gultekin Hajiyeva, a member of the National Council and a politician residing in Istanbul, was detained by Turkish law enforcement authorities and taken to a deportation center. Reports emerged suggesting the possibility of her extradition to Azerbaijan.

Analysts assessing political developments in 2025 noted that both internal political tensions and broader regional geopolitical shifts influenced the country's political landscape. During the year, changes in Azerbaijan's foreign policy trajectory were observed, including reported tensions in relations with Russia.

Rising Tensions in Azerbaijan–Russia Relations: A Year of Confrontation

The year 2025 was marked as one of the most tense periods in recent Azerbaijan-Russia relations. From the beginning of the year, bilateral relations deteriorated amid a series of political and diplomatic incidents.

One of the early flashpoints was a dispute surrounding the “Russian House” (Rossotrudnichestvo) operating in Baku. Following a report broadcast by Baku TV titled “*Russian House or a Russian Intelligence Hub?*”, the head of Rossotrudnichestvo, Yevgeny Primakov, accused the Azerbaijani authorities of defamation. This led to a diplomatic exchange in which both countries summoned each other's ambassadors and issued formal protest notes. The Azerbaijani side subsequently raised concerns about the legal status of the “Russian House,” demanding that its activities be brought into compliance with national legislation and calling for the premises to be vacated.

One of the most acute phases of the tensions centered around the “Sputnik Azerbaijan” news agency. In February 2025, the agency's accreditation was revoked. In June, the Ministry of Internal Affairs conducted an operation at its office, detaining seven individuals. Executive Director Igor Kartavykh and Editor-in-Chief Yevgeny Belousov were arrested on charges of fraud and illegal entrepreneurship.

The Russian side characterized these actions as a measure against press freedom, while the Kremlin expressed hope for the journalists' release. In October, Kartavykh was released and returned to Russia.

Tensions escalated further following events in Yekaterinburg. In June 2025, during an operation conducted by Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), two Azerbaijani brothers-Ziyaddin and Huseyn Safarov-lost their lives, and dozens of Azerbaijani nationals were detained. The Azerbaijani authorities described the incident as a disproportionate use of force and summoned the Russian ambassador to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Political tensions were also reflected in international forums. On September 1, during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit held in Tianjin, China, President Ilham Aliyev met with several world leaders; however, it was noted that he avoided a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. This was widely interpreted as a symbolic indication of strained relations, particularly in the context of a civilian aircraft incident in Russian airspace and the deaths of Azerbaijani citizens in Russia.

Despite these tensions, relations between the two countries did not completely break down. At a meeting in Dushanbe, President Vladimir Putin issued an apology regarding the downing of an Azerbaijan Airlines aircraft on December 25, 2024. He stated that the incident was caused by a technical malfunction in the air defense system and noted that compensation would be provided. President Ilham Aliyev, in turn, expressed hope that the investigation into the incident would be conducted objectively.

Analysts note that, despite maintaining a formal framework of strategic partnership, these developments indicate a significant erosion of mutual trust between Azerbaijan and Russia.

Shifting Relations with the West: A New Geopolitical Course Amid the Exit of USAID and UN Agencies

In 2025, Azerbaijan's relations with Western institutions underwent significant changes, marked by a notable transformation in cooperation frameworks, particularly with the United States and United Nations agencies.

The Azerbaijani government formally terminated the activities of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), stating that the organization no longer had a legal basis to operate in the country. Commenting on the decision, Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov argued that USAID's programs primarily served U.S. interests.

This move contributed to tensions in U.S.–Azerbaijan relations. Washington continued to express concerns over human rights violations and political arrests in Azerbaijan, while official Baku characterized such criticism as interference in its internal affairs. Statements by President Ilham Aliyev regarding potential shifts in U.S. policy were also interpreted as indicating that bilateral relations were no longer operating at a strategic level.

A similar trend was observed in Azerbaijan's relations with UN agencies. Throughout 2025, several UN-affiliated organizations-including UNDP, UNHCR, UNFPA, UNICEF, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)-ceased their operations in the country. Azerbaijani authorities justified these developments by stating that Azerbaijan had transitioned from being an aid recipient to a donor and initiator state, and that future cooperation would continue only through direct engagement with the headquarters of these organizations.

International observers, however, interpreted these developments as a sign of Azerbaijan increasing its distance from global humanitarian and accountability mechanisms.

At the same time, geopolitical developments in the second half of 2025 led to the emergence of a new phase in U.S.-Azerbaijan relations. On August 8, during a trilateral summit hosted in Washington by U.S. President Donald Trump, Azerbaijan and Armenia initialed a peace agreement and adopted a joint declaration.

At a ceremony held at the White House, President Donald Trump, President Ilham Aliyev, and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan signed a joint statement. The U.S. president expressed hope for sustainable peace in the region and referred to the proposed transport corridor connecting mainland Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan as the “Trump Route.” U.S. plans for long-term guarantees and involvement in this corridor intensified discussions about a new geopolitical balance in the region.

President Ilham Aliyev described this process as the beginning of a new phase in Azerbaijan-U.S. relations and announced plans for a strategic partnership charter between the two countries. The repeal of Section 907 of the U.S. Freedom Support Act, which had long been in force, was also seen as a significant political turning point in bilateral relations.

According to analysts, these developments reflect Azerbaijan’s search for a new foreign policy balance and its efforts to adapt to shifting geopolitical realities in the region.

Peace Process with Armenia: Legal Framework and the Closure of International Mediation Mechanisms

One of the most significant political developments in the South Caucasus in 2025 was the transition of the Azerbaijan–Armenia peace process into a formal legal phase. During the year, the initialed text of the *“Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and Interstate Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia”* was presented to the public.

Under the agreement, the parties mutually recognize each other’s territorial integrity, renounce future territorial claims, and undertake a number of commitments aimed at normalizing interstate relations. These include the delimitation and demarcation of borders, the establishment of diplomatic relations, and the non-deployment of third-country military forces along the border.

As part of the evolving peace process, the long-standing international mediation mechanism established to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was formally discontinued. On September 1, 2025, all 57 participating states of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) unanimously voted to dissolve the OSCE Minsk Group by the end of the year. The OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, Elina Valtonen, described the decision as a result of a joint request by Azerbaijan and Armenia, noting that the peace process in the region had entered a new phase. This marked the formal end of an international mediation format that had been engaged in the conflict for more than three decades.

By the end of 2025, practical steps toward normalization were also observed. On December 18, Azerbaijan sent, for the first time, 22 railway tankers carrying AI-95 gasoline to Armenia. This development was seen as a concrete step toward restoring economic and logistical ties between the two countries.

Analysts note that these developments represent a significant milestone in shifting a decades-long conflict into a diplomatic and legal framework. However, they emphasize that the full signing and implementation of a peace agreement will depend on building mutual trust and establishing effective practical mechanisms—challenges that remain central to the process.

Civil Society and “Managed People-to-People Diplomacy”

At the end of 2025, reciprocal visits between Azerbaijani and Armenian civil society representatives emerged as one of the notable developments in the region. Meetings held in Yerevan in October and in Baku in November focused on confidence-building measures and increasing public support for the peace process between the two countries.

However, independent experts and some civil society representatives characterized these initiatives as examples of “managed people-to-people diplomacy.” According to their assessments, the meetings appeared to be primarily aimed at generating public legitimacy for the official peace agenda, while the scope for genuine participation by independent civil society actors remained limited.

One of the indicators of these limitations was the reported refusal to allow the Armenian delegation visiting Baku to meet with 23 Armenian detainees held in Azerbaijan. This was cited as an example of the restricted humanitarian and civic dimensions of the process.

Analysts note that while these engagements were presented as efforts to introduce a societal dimension to the peace process, they largely remained symbolic in nature, particularly in the context of a weakened independent civil society in Azerbaijan. They emphasize that meaningful and sustainable confidence-building will require broader and more independent participation of civil society actors.

Relations with Iran: Attempts at Normalization and a Policy of Cautious Balance

In 2025, relations between Azerbaijan and Iran entered a phase of relative stabilization compared to previous years. However, the relationship could not be considered fully normalized, and a cautious and measured approach continued to characterize bilateral interactions.

During the year, Iranian authorities issued a formal protest note regarding the situation of Iranian nationals detained in Azerbaijan. In response, Azerbaijani officials announced that some Iranian citizens had been pardoned, presenting this as a humanitarian gesture.

One of the key developments contributing to a relative easing of tensions was the official visit of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian to Baku in April 2025. The visit was widely interpreted as the beginning of a new phase in bilateral relations following the diplomatic tensions observed in 2023-2024.

During the visit, both sides expressed their intention to continue dialogue on regional security, economic cooperation, and transport projects. Analysts note that while these developments represent steps toward stabilizing relations, strategic trust between the two countries has yet to be fully restored, with various political and geopolitical factors continuing to influence the relationship.

The Israel-Türkiye Factor: The Fragility of Regional Balance

In 2025, Azerbaijan’s relations with Middle Eastern and regional partners also remained in focus. In this context, the postponement of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s planned visit to Baku, reportedly due to security concerns, was seen as a notable development.

According to unofficial reports, in addition to security considerations, technical and political factors related to Türkiye’s airspace also played a role in the postponement. This incident once again highlighted the fragility of the balance Azerbaijan seeks to maintain among its diverse partnerships and geopolitical interests.

Analysts compared this situation to the cancellation of Israeli President Isaac Herzog’s planned visit to Baku during the COP29 summit in 2024. Both cases were viewed as examples of how shifting regional

dynamics and ongoing tensions in the Middle East can influence diplomatic processes in the South Caucasus.

Observers note that while Azerbaijan has sought to maintain a balanced foreign policy among Türkiye, Israel, and other regional actors, ongoing geopolitical tensions have made managing this balance increasingly complex.

Diplomatic Tensions with Europe

In 2025, relations between Azerbaijan and European institutions were also marked by a number of tensions. In particular, mutual criticism characterized relations with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). PACE President Theodoros Rousopoulos publicly criticized the Azerbaijani authorities over the increase in political arrests and strongly condemned Azerbaijan's failure to implement judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). In response, the Azerbaijani authorities placed Rousopoulos on a list of individuals banned from entering the country, informally referred to as a "blacklist."

Another notable development was Azerbaijan's absence from the session of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly held in Yerevan. The Azerbaijani delegation did not participate in the session, a decision that was met with concern within European Union structures.

In 2025, a brief diplomatic tension also emerged between Azerbaijan and Germany. The incident was triggered by a social media post by German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier that included symbols associated with former separatist entities. Azerbaijani authorities strongly criticized the post, and the German ambassador in Baku was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Following the incident, the German Presidential Office issued an apology, stating that the post had been made in error. This response contributed to a rapid de-escalation of tensions between the two countries.

Analysts note that the tensions observed in 2025 between Azerbaijan and European institutions reflect growing divergences between the parties, driven both by human rights concerns and broader regional political developments.

International Corruption Scandals and Shadow Financial Networks

In 2025, a number of financial and corruption-related scandals linked to Azerbaijan became the subject of extensive coverage in European media. Various investigations published throughout the year alleged connections between individuals associated with political elites and activities such as drug trafficking, financial crimes, and international corruption schemes.

At the beginning of the year, reports of an alleged drug-related gathering at a villa in Kalivia, Greece, attracted significant attention. According to available information, Izzatkhanim Javadova-reportedly a relative of senior Azerbaijani political figures and known as a DJ-was subjected to pre-trial detention by a Greek court. Law enforcement authorities reportedly discovered cocaine, ecstasy, and crystal methamphetamine, as well as over €43,000 in cash at the residence. While Javadova denied the allegations, investigative materials indicated that broader financial links were under examination.

In parallel, corruption allegations linked to Malta resurfaced. According to reporting by *Times of Malta* and *Reuters*, the Electrogas power plant project-connected to SOCAR Trading-was associated with alleged financial transfers amounting to millions of euros through a company known as "17 Black." Investigations suggested that the company, reportedly controlled by Maltese businessman Yorgen Fenech, may have functioned as a financial conduit for senior Maltese officials. It was further alleged that substantial profits were generated through pricing discrepancies within the project.

The long-running “caviar diplomacy” scandal in Europe also continued to unfold in the judicial sphere. In Germany, the Munich Higher Regional Court found former Bundestag member Eduard Lintner guilty of bribery in connection with lobbying activities related to Azerbaijan. According to case materials, Lintner received approximately €4 million between 2008 and 2016. Other members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) were also reportedly implicated in influencing discussions of Azerbaijan-related reports.

In the United Kingdom, financial transactions linked to the family of former Azerbaijani National Security Minister Eldar Mahmudov came under scrutiny. A tribunal found that legal professional Rory Forde had failed to conduct adequate financial due diligence in property transactions involving funds connected to the Mahmudov family, resulting in significant penalties.

Additionally, Azerbaijan’s former ambassador to the United Kingdom, Rafael Ibrahimov, became the subject of legal proceedings. He was found guilty of inappropriate conduct toward three female staff members at a rehabilitation clinic in Cheshire, receiving a suspended sentence and being placed on the sex offenders register for a specified period.

Legal proceedings involving former senior figures in Azerbaijan’s banking sector also continued. The confiscation and sale of London properties belonging to Zamira Hajiyeva, the wife of former chairman of the International Bank of Azerbaijan Jahangir Hajiyev, remained one of the prominent examples of how Azerbaijani-origin assets are being scrutinized under financial oversight mechanisms in Western countries.

One of the most significant international economic controversies of the year emerged in the energy sector. In July, reports indicated that shipments of “Azeri Light” crude oil transported to Europe via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline contained elevated levels of organic chlorides. As a result, several oil companies in Italy, Romania, and the Czech Republic reportedly refused to accept the shipments, and emergency measures were implemented at certain refineries. Oil transportation through the BTC pipeline was temporarily suspended, and the issue drew the attention of the European Commission.

In connection with this incident, businessman Adnan Ahmadzada was detained in Baku and charged with mixing “Azeri Light” crude with other oil types and causing damage to economic security. Some experts suggested that responsibility for the incident could extend beyond individual actors to broader institutional and systemic structures.

At the same time, international media reported allegations that oil originating from Russia and Libya had been exported to Europe under falsified certificates of origin. These investigations referenced various companies and energy trading networks.

Regionally, reports also emerged concerning Azerbaijani-linked investments in neighboring countries. In Georgia, Azerbaijani-origin capital was reportedly involved in certain real estate projects. In the United States, allegations related to domestic violence involving family members of Azerbaijani officials also appeared in media coverage.

International assessments continued to reflect concerns about corruption. In Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, Azerbaijan ranked 154th out of 180 countries, underscoring ongoing challenges in the country’s anti-corruption efforts.

Hidden Challenges in the Armed Forces: Non-Combat Deaths and Structural Concerns in 2025

Following the Second Karabakh War, the Azerbaijani authorities elevated the “Iron Fist” narrative—symbolizing military victory—into a central element of state rhetoric. Frequently used by President

Ilham Aliyev, this concept has been presented domestically as a symbol of strength and determination. However, critics argue that in the post-war period, this rhetoric has been accompanied not only by a focus on security and defense but also by increased pressure on independent media, political opposition, and civil society.

At the same time, another serious issue received far less public attention in 2025: the number of military personnel who died in non-combat circumstances and concerns regarding conditions within the armed forces.

According to the annual report of the Caspian Military Research Institute, 42 military personnel died in non-combat conditions during 2025. This figure reflects a concerning pattern, as all recorded deaths occurred outside active combat operations.

The report indicates that 7 deaths resulted from accidents, 12 from illnesses, 7 from other incidents, and 2 from mine explosions. Notably, 10 cases were classified as suicides, while 2 deaths were reportedly linked to unlawful interpersonal relations within the military.

Social and Institutional Challenges within the Armed Forces

Experts note that the high number of non-combat deaths-particularly suicides-raises serious concerns about underlying social and institutional issues within the military. Independent monitoring organizations have long highlighted problems related to service conditions, social protection, and psychological support for military personnel.

Limited transparency within the armed forces further complicates efforts to objectively assess these issues. Analysts emphasize that restricted public access to information about incidents in military units, limited disclosure of investigation outcomes, and reliance on unofficial sources weaken public oversight.

Suicides and Service Conditions

The suicide cases reported in 2025 raise critical questions about the psychological and social environment within the military. Observers suggest that contributing factors may include difficult service conditions, financial burdens, social insecurity, and various forms of pressure experienced during military service.

According to available information, a significant number of servicemen face financial challenges, including loan obligations and family-related pressures. These difficulties may impose an additional psychological burden, particularly on those with dependents. Analysts underline that insufficient social support and underdeveloped psychological assistance mechanisms may negatively affect the well-being of military personnel.

Provisioning and Transparency Issues

Experts also point to concerns related to logistics, infrastructure, and governance within the armed forces. Allegations have been raised regarding inadequate technical resources in certain military units, as well as shortcomings in living conditions and service infrastructure.

In addition, reports occasionally emerge about informal financial collections and broader supply-related issues. Analysts stress that independent and transparent investigations into such claims are essential for strengthening institutional trust within the military.

Calls for Transparent Investigations

Specialists emphasize the need for independent and transparent mechanisms to investigate non-combat deaths, particularly suicides. Public disclosure of investigation outcomes, expansion of psychological support programs, and improvements in social protections for servicemen are identified as key priorities.

According to analysts, ensuring the protection of servicemen's rights, improving service conditions, and increasing institutional transparency are critical steps toward reducing non-combat losses and strengthening public trust in Azerbaijan's armed forces.

In the Shadow of Prisons: Conditions, Rights, and the Need for Reform in the Penitentiary System in 2025

In 2025, concerns regarding detention conditions, prisoners' rights, and the functioning of pre-trial detention facilities remained prominent in Azerbaijan. According to human rights defenders and monitoring groups, several detention centers and correctional institutions operated beyond their official capacity limits. This overcrowding has had a negative impact on both detention conditions and the effective functioning of these facilities.

Overcrowding and Disciplinary Measures

One of the widely reported issues in penitentiary institutions is the frequent use of strict disciplinary measures against inmates. In particular, the placement of prisoners in punitive isolation cells has been reported as a common practice. Human rights observers note that the repeated and harsh application of such measures negatively affects prisoners' psychological well-being and hinders their rehabilitation and social reintegration.

In some cases, families are not informed when inmates are placed in disciplinary isolation. This lack of notification raises serious concerns about transparency and restricts families' ability to stay informed about the condition of their relatives.

Penitentiary Healthcare System

Significant challenges persist in the field of prison healthcare. Reports indicate delays in reviewing applications for the release of seriously ill prisoners on medical grounds. At the same time, deficiencies remain in the medical infrastructure of penitentiary institutions, including a lack of modern equipment.

Experts emphasize that improving the quality of healthcare services in detention facilities and ensuring timely medical decision-making are essential for the protection of prisoners' rights.

Drug-Related Charges and the Need for Rehabilitation

A large proportion of individuals held in pre-trial detention are accused of drug-related offenses. Observers report that many of these detainees experience severe physical and psychological symptoms, particularly during the initial days of detention.

This highlights the urgent need for specialized medical and psychological rehabilitation programs within detention facilities. However, current legal and institutional frameworks are reportedly insufficient to support the effective implementation of such programs, underscoring the need for regulatory reform.

Right to Defense and Access to Technology

Despite ongoing reforms in the electronic court system, detainees in pre-trial facilities lack access to basic technological tools. Observers note that individuals undergoing investigation or trial often cannot use computers to prepare legal documents such as petitions, motions, or statements.

Limited and supervised access to technology within detention facilities should therefore be considered an integral component of the right to defense.

Prolonged Pre-Trial Detention and Its Impact

Another major concern is the length of pre-trial detention. Individuals held for extended periods—sometimes years—under restrictive conditions may suffer serious physical and psychological consequences. Limited mobility and confined spaces can contribute to cardiovascular problems, visual impairment, and increased psychological stress.

Psychological Support and Social Reintegration

Detainees often require psychological support, particularly during the initial adaptation period. However, the limited number of professional psychologists within the penitentiary system restricts the availability of such services.

Experts underline that expanding psychological support services and implementing structured rehabilitation programs are critical for successful social reintegration.

Human Dignity and Allegations of Ill-Treatment

Human rights defenders have also raised concerns regarding allegations of physical abuse and degrading treatment in places of detention. They stress the importance of strengthening the practical implementation of legal safeguards protecting detainees' rights and establishing effective mechanisms for investigating such allegations.

Need for Legislative Reform

Experts argue that the existing legal framework governing the penitentiary system should be reviewed and updated. Inconsistencies and limitations in the practical application of certain legal provisions may restrict the exercise of prisoners' constitutional rights.

According to analysts, improving detention conditions, ensuring the protection of rights, and increasing transparency are essential not only for the reintegration of prisoners but also for the broader humanization of the criminal justice system.

Deaths in Custody, “Suicide” Narratives, and Political Prisoners: Deepening Doubts Amid Impunity

In 2025, deaths in Azerbaijan's penitentiary system—particularly involving individuals detained in cases widely regarded as politically motivated—raised serious concerns. These incidents not only highlighted issues related to detention conditions and oversight mechanisms but also intensified public skepticism regarding official explanations attributing such deaths to “suicide.”

One of the most alarming cases of the year was the death of 22-year-old political activist Elbey Karimli, a member of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP). On December 12, authorities reported that he had died by suicide in the medical unit of Correctional Facility No. 2. Karimli had previously gained

public attention after being arrested in 2023 for writing “Stalin” on a statue of Heydar Aliyev. He was later convicted on drug-related charges, which he consistently denied, stating that the accusations were fabricated and politically motivated.

In court and in public statements, Karimli alleged that he had been subjected to pressure and ill-treatment while in police custody and that alternative charges had been proposed to him. Reports also indicated that he had engaged in hunger strikes during his detention and had been placed in a disciplinary cell in mid-2025. These factors suggest that he was not an ordinary detainee, but a politically active individual who openly resisted his detention and maintained his position despite pressure.

For this reason, the official characterization of his death as “suicide” has generated widespread doubt. Observers note that in cases involving politically outspoken individuals-particularly those who have reported torture, rejected pardon requests, and maintained their political stance-such explanations are not readily accepted by the public. The central issue is not only whether the death was self-inflicted, but also whether the surrounding conditions-including alleged ill-treatment, pressure, and detention practices-have been adequately investigated.

In Karimli’s case, although authorities stated that an investigation had been launched, no comprehensive or convincing information has been made available to the public. This reflects a broader pattern observed in Azerbaijan, where deaths in custody are often initially described as “under investigation,” but the final outcomes, responsible parties, and detailed findings are rarely disclosed. Such practices contribute to a climate of impunity.

The doubts surrounding Karimli’s death are further reinforced by previous cases involving political detainees. Observers frequently refer to the 2017 death of political activist Mehman Galandarov in pre-trial detention, which was also officially classified as suicide. At the time, family members and human rights defenders raised serious concerns about signs of torture and the lack of an effective investigation. The refusal to return the body to the family and the lack of transparency surrounding the burial process further undermined public trust.

The recurrence of such cases has significantly eroded confidence in official “suicide” narratives, particularly in politically sensitive contexts. In public perception, these deaths are increasingly viewed not as isolated incidents, but as potentially linked to ill-treatment, inhumane conditions, or coercive environments that may drive individuals to self-harm.

From a legal standpoint, the issue is clear: once a person is deprived of liberty, the state bears direct responsibility for their life and health. Therefore, any death occurring in custody requires not merely a formal investigation, but a thorough, independent, and effective inquiry capable of establishing the full circumstances of the incident. Failure to meet this obligation may constitute a violation of the right to life under international law.

Importantly, the problem is not limited to political detainees. In recent years, reports of deaths and alleged suicides in prisons, shelters, and other state-controlled institutions have shown a recurring pattern. However, in the majority of cases, final investigation results are not made public, leaving society with only initial statements that cases are “under investigation.” This reinforces the perception that authorities prioritize managing information over ensuring accountability.

The absence of transparent and systematic official statistics on deaths in custody further exacerbates the issue. Fragmented and selective disclosure of information obscures the real scale of the problem, weakens public oversight, and limits the ability of families, lawyers, and human rights defenders to pursue effective legal remedies.

Additionally, in some cases, families do not pursue complaints or legal action following such deaths. This may be due to fear, pressure, or lack of trust in the justice system. As a result, many cases remain outside effective judicial scrutiny.

The developments of 2025 suggest that deaths in custody in Azerbaijan should no longer be viewed as isolated incidents, but rather as indicators of deeper structural problems within the human rights system. In cases involving political activists and dissenting voices, the automatic classification of deaths as “suicide” cannot be considered a sufficient or credible explanation. The critical issue is not only the death itself, but the environment in which it occurred—including potential factors such as violence, isolation, disciplinary measures, medical neglect, and psychological pressure.

For this reason, minimum safeguards must be ensured in all cases of death in custody. These include independent forensic examinations, preservation of surveillance footage, timely notification of families, access to independent medical expertise, and full public disclosure of investigation findings. Without such measures, each new “suicide” report risks reinforcing perceptions not of truth and justice, but of impunity and concealed abuse.

Conclusion

The year 2025 marked a period of intensified pressure on political, legal, and civic space in Azerbaijan, with human rights challenges increasingly taking on a systemic character. Throughout the year, the continued arrests of journalists, civil society activists, human rights defenders, and political opponents demonstrated a significant narrowing of freedoms of expression, association, and participation. Findings by international organizations and resolutions adopted by the European Parliament further reinforced concerns about politically motivated prosecutions and the tightening control over independent media.

At the same time, persistent problems within the penitentiary system—including deaths in custody, allegations of torture and ill-treatment, and unresolved questions surrounding the deaths of political detainees—raised serious concerns about the effectiveness of human rights protection mechanisms. While the state bears direct responsibility for the life and health of individuals deprived of their liberty, the lack of transparent and independent investigations into such incidents has contributed to a growing perception of impunity.

Social developments during the year also reflected underlying tensions within society. Public reactions to the Imishli road accident, as well as concerns surrounding the death of a young individual in Ganja, illustrated the presence of accumulated grievances and the limited space for expressing dissent. In this context, restrictions on peaceful assembly and civic participation appear to contribute to spontaneous protests and broader public discontent.

In the realm of foreign policy, Azerbaijan navigated a complex and evolving geopolitical landscape. The transition of the peace process with Armenia into a legal phase, the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group, and the emergence of new regional dynamics marked significant developments. At the same time, tensions with Western institutions, the withdrawal of several international organizations, and diplomatic disputes with European actors underscored a shifting and, at times, strained international positioning.

Parallel to these developments, corruption-related scandals, international financial investigations, and challenges in the energy sector affected the country’s economic and political image. These issues renewed concerns regarding transparency, accountability, and the integrity of public institutions.

Taken together, the developments of 2025 suggest that Azerbaijan is at a critical juncture. The challenges identified throughout this report highlight the urgent need to strengthen the rule of law,

ensure full compliance with human rights obligations, and create an enabling environment for independent civil society.

Sustainable stability and long-term development cannot be achieved solely through political or economic decision-making. They depend fundamentally on the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, the strengthening of public trust in state institutions, and the consistent application of the rule of law.

The overarching lesson of 2025 is clear: without prioritizing human rights, transparency, and accountability at the center of governance, meaningful and inclusive progress will remain difficult to achieve.

Recommendations

To the Government of Azerbaijan

- Ensure the immediate and unconditional release of individuals detained on politically motivated charges, including journalists, civil society activists, and opposition figures.
- Guarantee full respect for freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly in line with international human rights standards.
- Conduct prompt, independent, and transparent investigations into all deaths in custody, allegations of torture, and ill-treatment, and hold those responsible accountable.
- Reform the penitentiary system to address overcrowding, improve detention conditions, and ensure access to adequate healthcare, psychological support, and legal assistance.
- Introduce independent monitoring mechanisms for places of detention, including access for national and international observers.
- Ensure that pre-trial detention is used only as a measure of last resort and limit its duration in accordance with international standards.
- Provide detainees with controlled access to technological tools necessary for the preparation of legal documents as part of the right to defense.
- Strengthen the independence of the judiciary and ensure fair trial guarantees in all cases.
- Increase transparency in public institutions, including the publication of data on deaths in custody and the outcomes of investigations.
- Review and amend legislation affecting media and civil society to remove undue restrictions and align with international obligations.

To the European Union and Council of Europe

- Maintain consistent monitoring of the human rights situation in Azerbaijan and continue raising concerns regarding political prisoners and restrictions on fundamental freedoms.
- Use available mechanisms, including resolutions and diplomatic engagement, to encourage compliance with judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).
- Support independent civil society actors, journalists, and human rights defenders through funding, protection programs, and international advocacy.
- Integrate human rights benchmarks more explicitly into cooperation frameworks with Azerbaijan.

To the United Nations and International Organizations

- Increase engagement with Azerbaijan through relevant UN mechanisms, including Special Rapporteurs and treaty bodies, to address systemic human rights concerns.
- Advocate for access to places of detention for independent international monitors.
- Support programs aimed at strengthening the rule of law, judicial independence, and protection of fundamental freedoms.

- Encourage the Azerbaijani authorities to resume and deepen cooperation with UN agencies and international human rights mechanisms.

To International Donors and Foundations (including HRF)

- Continue providing financial and technical support to independent media, civil society initiatives, and human rights defenders working on Azerbaijan.
- Support digital security, documentation, and advocacy efforts aimed at exposing human rights violations and strengthening accountability.
- Expand emergency assistance programs for at-risk activists, journalists, and their families, particularly those facing persecution or exile.
- Invest in long-term capacity-building initiatives that strengthen independent platforms documenting human rights abuses.

To Civil Society and Independent Media

- Continue documenting human rights violations using verified, evidence-based approaches.
- Strengthen collaboration between local and international actors to amplify advocacy efforts.
- Promote public awareness of fundamental rights and encourage civic engagement despite existing restrictions.
- Develop secure and resilient platforms to ensure the continuity of independent reporting and documentation.

About HumanRightsAZ

HumanRightsAZ is an independent human rights platform dedicated to documenting human rights violations in Azerbaijan and advocating for the protection of fundamental freedoms.

Despite repression, imprisonment, and exile faced by its founder and members, HumanRightsAZ remains committed to exposing abuses, advocating for political prisoners, and amplifying the voices of individuals silenced under authoritarian rule in Azerbaijan.

In October 2024, we launched a new initiative:

HumanRightsAZ.com - an English-language, volunteer-driven online platform designed to document human rights violations and mobilize international awareness and solidarity.

The platform publishes reports, testimonies, legal analyses, and updates on political repression, arbitrary detentions, restrictions on civil society, and broader human rights challenges in Azerbaijan.

HumanRightsAZ operates independently and is driven primarily by volunteer contributions and the commitment of human rights defenders determined to ensure that abuses are documented and not forgotten.

Our Work

HumanRightsAZ.com is developed and maintained by the **Social Union of Legal Education of Sumgait Youth**, a civil society organization currently operating in exile.

Founded in 2000, the organization has a long history of human rights and legal advocacy work in Azerbaijan, including:

- Providing legal assistance to nearly **5,000 low-income individuals and entrepreneurs**
- Training **173 teachers** on human rights and civic education

- Supporting **2,740 citizens** with legal defense in courts
- Publishing the weekly newspaper “**Yukselish Namine**” (2005–2012) and later the online platform www.yukselis.info (2012–2020)

Over the years, the organization has implemented human rights and civic education initiatives with the support of international partners, including:

- **German Marshall Fund**
- **National Endowment for Democracy**
- **Taiwan Foundation for Democracy**
- **British Embassy**
- **U.S. Embassy**

Our Values

Truth: We are committed to accurate, independent, and evidence-based documentation of human rights violations.

Dignity: Every human being has the right to live free from fear, repression, and injustice.

Solidarity: International awareness and support are essential in defending human rights and protecting those at risk.

Courage: We continue our work despite threats, repression, and exile.

Website:

www.humanrightsaz.com

**HUMAN RIGHTS
AZERBAIJAN**