

Statement by Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum on the ongoing crackdown on media and civil society and the recent arrest of independent journalists in Azerbaijan

Brussels, 22 November 2023

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum condemns the recent arrests of independent journalists Ulvi Hasanli - Head of Abzas Media, Sevinj Vagifgizi – Editor in Chief of Abzas Media Editor and journalist and disability rights activist Mahammad Kekalov, as well as the recent extension of Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu’s pre-trial detention, and calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to stop the politically motivated persecutions and prosecutions of activists, journalists and political opposition.

The remnants of independent media are again under attack in Azerbaijan where at least 3 journalists have been arrested over the last 48 hours.

On 20 November 2023, **Ulvi Hasanli**, the director of independent media platform Abzas Media, was arrested and charged with smuggling under Article 206.3.2. of the Criminal Code (smuggling as a group). In a statement published by Abzas Media on [Facebook](#), the outlet highlights that the arrest is most likely linked to a series of investigations led by Hasanli and his team that expose elite corruption within the high spheres of the government. As in the case of Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu, an amount of money in cash was discovered by the police at Hasanli’s residence (EUR 40,000). Hasanli denied any wrongdoing and knowledge of the money. This is not Hasanli’s first encounter with Azerbaijani police as he was questioned and arrested at least twice this year for covering the environmental protests in Soyudlu, in the Gadabay region of Azerbaijan, and filming the flashmob organised by a feminist group at the United States (US) Embassy in Baku. He is one of the few outspoken critics against the 2022 Media Law and its effect on media freedoms in the country.

On 21 November 2023, **Sevinj Vagifgizi**, the Editor in Chief of Abzas Media was also detained while returning to Azerbaijan from Istanbul. Her house was searched, but no illegal items were found. Like Hasanli, Vagifgizi is also being charged under the same Article 206.3.2 of the Criminal Code (smuggling as a group).

On the same day of Hassanli’s arrest, **Mahammad Kekalov**, a young journalist and disability rights activist, was also forcibly taken by plain-clothed police officers from his home. Similar to the [the case of Bakhtiyar Hajiyev](#)’s arrest in December 2022, Kekalov was detained shortly after his return to Baku from the EaP CSF’s Annual Assembly held in Brussels last 13-16 November 2023. Kekalov’s family and friends have not been given any information about his whereabouts following his detention. They fear he has been physically assaulted and tortured while in detention. No official statement has been made regarding the charges filed against him or his place of detention.

Earlier this month, **Orhan Hajili**, the son of the Musavat party leader Arif Hajili, was arrested in the context of a traffic accident, raising suspicion that his sentence was used by the Azerbaijani authorities as a mean to pressure Hajili himself.

Alongside the intimidation of human rights defenders and journalists in recent days, on Thursday 16 November, the court also extended **Gubad Ibadoghlu's** pre-trial detention by another 3 months until the end of February 2024.

These recent arrests fall into Azerbaijani authorities' troubling pattern of wielding charges related to drug dealing, illegal drug possession and foreign currency smuggling as tools to falsely accuse and stifle dissenting voices.

In these circumstances, we, the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum join the international community in calling the Azerbaijani authorities to immediately release journalists **Ulvi Hasanli, Sevinj Vagifqizi, Mahammad Kekalov, as well as Gubad Ibadoghlu, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, and all political prisoners and human rights defenders currently behind bars.**

We urge the Azerbaijani authorities to stop the wave of arrests and ongoing crackdown on independent media and civil society and put an end to the growing tendency to prosecute them on bogus charges.

We call on the Azerbaijani government to abandon increasingly restrictive legislation and draconian measures that increase state control and limit the work of civil society, media and political opposition, including the 2022 Media Law.

We urge the Azerbaijani government to reverse the worrisome trend of harassment, repression and violence perpetuated against dissidents and their lawyers.

We urge the European Union and Member States to closely monitor the implementation of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) judgments on politically motivated cases in Azerbaijan.

We urge the European Union and Member States to consistently uphold EU democratic values and human rights when engaging with the Azerbaijani authorities and government and reconsider its strategic partnership on energy given Baku's track record on human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Members of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum