



Criminal Proceedings in Absentia: Azerbaijan's Tool Against Exiled Critics

Overview of a Systematic Practice Used to Silence Dissenting Voices in Exile

Authored by Samed Rahimli
Human Rights Lawyer
Member of the Steering Committee of the Campaign to End Repression in Azerbaijan

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Transnational Repression and Azerbaijan

Alongside domestic repression targeting dissent, the Azerbaijani authorities use transnational repression to pursue critics abroad. These tactics enable the extraterritorial persecution of dissidents and members of the diaspora. Exiled activists and human rights defenders are subject to constant surveillance by Azerbaijani state structures.

[Research](#) by Freedom House shows a rise in transnational repression by authoritarian governments. In 2023, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) adopted a [resolution](#) expressing serious concern about the growth of these incidents and urging member states to prevent and investigate them. The resolution identified China, Russia, Turkey, Egypt and Tajikistan as the main countries involved in transnational repression, and included Azerbaijan in the list. It underlined that Azerbaijan has engaged in extraordinary renditions of opponents, particularly journalists, and coordinated physical and verbal attacks against exiled activists.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, common forms of transnational repression [include](#):

- Violence and intimidation abroad;
- Harassment through extradition requests, unlawful arrests or deportations;
- Abuse of security laws with extraterritorial effect;
- Restrictions on mobility;
- Digital threats or attacks;
- Proxy punishment of relatives or associates inside the country.

A [study](#) commissioned by the European Parliament identifies several obligations of host states towards exiled human rights defenders facing transnational repression. These include:

- Protection from harm, intimidation, privacy breaches and digital insecurity, with preventive policing and risk assessments treating transnational repression as comparable to state-sponsored violence or organised crime;
- Prompt and impartial investigations into incidents occurring on their territory, with criminal accountability for perpetrators;
- Strict protection against refoulement and against abusive extradition requests or politically motivated indictments;
- Support for secure residence status, documentation and rapid reporting mechanisms;
- Safeguards against the misuse of domestic systems, including ensuring that immigration and border authorities do not act automatically on alerts from abusive states, and non-cooperation with politically motivated criminal proceedings;
- Active protection of freedom of expression and civic space in exile, enabling exiled defenders to continue advocacy work without intimidation.

In this study, Azerbaijan appears as a state extending repression abroad through surveillance, attacks on exiles, intimidation of relatives, criminal cases *in absentia*, misuse of INTERPOL channels and restrictions on mobility. It is described as an entrenched authoritarian state that systematically represses dissent at home and abroad, and increasingly benefits from the European Union's shift towards pragmatic, interest-based engagement that sidelines human rights concerns.

Azerbaijan conducted extraordinary renditions of at least two prominent journalists: [Rauf Mirgadirov](#) (from Turkey) and [Afgan Mukhtarli](#) (from Georgia).

Exiled critics and human rights defenders are also placed under persistent surveillance.

The authorities have targeted exiled critical bloggers in Europe, often labelled in domestic propaganda as “vulgar opposition”. These individuals criticised the President and his family using language the authorities deemed offensive. Repressive acts against them have included violence and intimidation, digital attacks and punishment of relatives inside Azerbaijan, as detailed in the European Parliament’s study.

The recent expansion of criminal proceedings *in absentia*, together with public summonses and threatened or forthcoming international search warrants, shows that the authorities intend to broaden their transnational repression tactics. INTERPOL diffusion and extradition procedures

risk being used to harass exiled critics, disrupt their mobility and expose them to temporary detention or questioning when travelling. Nearly all critical civil society organisations and independent media outlets are currently subject to criminal prosecution in Azerbaijan. Anyone associated with these organisations in exile is therefore at risk of politically motivated extradition attempts and related complications with law enforcement authorities in host states.

This pattern provides reasonable grounds to conclude, at a prima facie evidentiary standard, that the Azerbaijani authorities use criminal proceedings in absentia, abusive extradition requests and mutual legal assistance procedures in bad faith as tools of transnational repression.

State-led Repression: Expansion of Prosecutions in Absentia

Since mid-March 2025, the Office of the Prosecutor General of Azerbaijan has initiated criminal proceedings against leaders and staff of human rights oriented and critical NGOs. These organisations operated mainly under “service contract” regulations and received funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the German Marshall Fund (GMF).

The Office of the Prosecutor General has revived an NGO-related criminal case that was closed in mid-2023. It is now unofficially referred to as the “Renewed NGO/USAID case”.

Between mid-March and early April 2025, several NGO leaders were charged with financial crimes. Some were remanded in custody pending trial. Others were placed under house arrest or restrictive police supervision.

Soon after, the authorities initiated criminal cases against exiled critical bloggers, chiefly accusing them of incitement to subversion or riots on the basis of their online content. This cluster of

prosecutions has become known as the “Critical Bloggers Case”.

For exiled civic activists and bloggers, the Office of the Prosecutor General [launched](#) criminal proceedings *in absentia*. The authorities used public television to summon these individuals for questioning. At the same time, official and pro-government outlets reported that remand orders *in absentia* had been issued or that international search warrants would follow. In the months that followed, several trials *in absentia* began, resulting in convictions for incitement to subversion or riots.

To date, the authorities have [issued](#) public summonses to exiled critics in two main waves:

1. March-April 2025: proceedings *in absentia* against 13 individuals
2. November 2025: proceedings *in absentia* against 10 individuals

A further isolated summons was issued in August 2025.

Evidence: Exiled Critics and Human Rights Defenders Subject to Summonses in Absentia

The evidence is list of 24 exiled critics and human rights defenders to whom the Office of the Prosecutor General issued summonses in the framework of the criminal proceedings *in absentia* since March 2025 (the list is prepared based on media monitoring of publicly available data):

No	Name	Profile Role/Activity	Key charges (based on the Criminal Code – ‘CC’)	Current state of proceedings	Probable grounds for persecution
1	Subhan Hasanli	Lawyer/ Head of Social Rights Centre	Money laundering, abuse of office, falsification of public records Sections of the CC: 193-1.2.3, 308.2 və 313	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated, summoned, and a remand in custody order in absentia was ordered: 15 March 2025	Funding through USAID/GMF, critical civil society activism
2	Tural Sadigli	Critical blogger	Fraud, incitement to riots and subversion, forgery Sections of the CC: 12.1, 178.1, 12.1, 34.2, 220.2, 12.1, 34.2, 281.2, 12.1, 320.1	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated, summoned, and a remand in custody order in absentia was ordered: 16 March 2025 Trial in absentia was started: 17 October 2025	Gratuitously offensive, critical statements to the President and his family/ Gratuitously offensive, critical statements about governmental officials
3	Gurban Mammadov	Critical blogger/Lawyer	Incitement to terrorism, riots and subversion, disclosure of classified information Sections of the CC: 12.1, 34.2, 220.2, 214-2, 12.1, 34.2, 281.2, 284.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated, summoned, and a remand in custody order in absentia was ordered: 16 March 2025 Trial in absentia was started: 17 October 2025	Offensive, critical statements about governmental officials/critical, sensationalised coverage of the Tartar case
4	Elshad Mammadov	Critical blogger	Incitement to <i>coup d'état</i> Sections of the CC: 278	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated, summoned, and a remand in custody order in absentia was ordered:	Offensive, critical statements about governmental officials

No	Name	Profile Role/Activity	Key charges (based on the Criminal Code – 'CC')	Current state of proceedings	Probable grounds for persecution
				16 March 2025 Trial in absentia was started: 17 October 2025	
5	Mahammad Mirzali	Critical blogger	Incitement to riots and subversion Sections of the CC: 220.2, 281.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated, summoned, and a remand in custody order in absentia was ordered: 16 March 2025 Sentenced to 6 years and 6 months in absentia: 15 September 2025	Gratitiously offensive, critical statements to the President and his family/ Gratuitously offensive, critical statements about governmental officials
6	Gabil Mammadov	Critical blogger	Various charges, including financing of and incitement to terrorism Sections of the CC: 24 counts, including 214-1, 214-2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated, summoned, and a remand in custody order in absentia was ordered: 16 March 2025 Sentenced to 16 years in absentia: 30 July 2025 and 'automatic' appeal dismissed: 09 September 2025	Gratitiously offensive, critical statements to the President and his family/ Gratuitously offensive, critical statements about governmental officials
7	Suleyman Suleymanli	Critical blogger	Incitement to riots and subversion Sections of the CC: 220.2, 281.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated, summoned, and a remand in custody order in absentia was ordered: 03 April 2025	Offensive, critical statements about governmental officials
8	Orkhan Aghayev	Critical blogger	Incitement to riots and subversion Sections of the CC: 220.2, 281.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated, summoned, and a remand in custody order in absentia was ordered: 03 April 2025 Trial in absentia was started: 17 October 2025	Gratitiously offensive, critical statements to the President and his family/ Gratuitously offensive, critical statements about governmental officials

No	Name	Profile Role/Activity	Key charges (based on the Criminal Code – 'CC')	Current state of proceedings	Probable grounds for persecution
9	Imamaddin Alimanov	Critical blogger	Incitement to subversion Sections of the CC: 281.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated, summoned, and a remand in custody order in absentia was ordered: 16 March 2025 Sentenced to 7 years in absentia: 28 July 2025 and 'automatic' appeal dismissed: 09 September 2025	Offensive, critical statements about governmental officials
10	Aytaj Aghazade	Feminist activist/Head of AYNA gender-support centre	Money laundering, abuse of office, falsification of public records Sections of the CC: 193-1.2.3, 308.2 və 313	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated, summoned, and a remand in custody order in absentia was ordered: 11 April 2025	Funding through USAID/GMF, critical civil society activism
11	Rafael Piriye	Critical blogger	Incitement to riots and subversion Sections of the CC: 220.2, 281.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated, summoned, and a remand in custody order in absentia was ordered: 11 April 2025	Offensive, critical statements about governmental officials
12	Elshad Abdullayev	Exiled Businessperson/ Former Rector of the Azerbaijan International University	Various charges, including tax evasion and abuse of office Sections of the CC: 213.2.2, 308.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated, summoned, and a remand in custody order in absentia was ordered: 12 April 2025	Critical statements/ Whistleblowing
13	Ordukhan Temirkhan (Babirov)	Critical blogger	Incitement to riots and subversion Sections of the CC: 220.2, 281.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated, summoned, and a remand in custody order in absentia was ordered: 17 April 2025	Gratuitously offensive, critical statements to the President and his family/ Gratuitously offensive, critical statements about governmental officials

No	Name	Profile Role/Activity	Key charges (based on the Criminal Code – 'CC')	Current state of proceedings	Probable grounds for persecution
14	Arif Mammadov	Former diplomat (among others), former Head of the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Council of Europe/ Whistleblower/ Exiled critic	Misappropriation/ Abuse of office Sections of the CC: 179.3.2, 308.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated, summoned, and a remand in custody order in absentia was ordered: 17 April 2025	Whistleblowing on the PACE lobbying corruption/critical remarks
15	Altay Goyushov	Historian/ Director of the Baku Research Institute/ Science Po-affiliated scholar/ civil society leader	Incitement to subversion Sections of the CC: 281.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated and summoned: 14 November 2025	Critical statements of government functioning/critical civil society activities
16	Arastun Orujlu	Political analyst	Incitement to riots and subversion Sections of the CC: 220.2, 281.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated and summoned: 14 November 2025	Critical statements of government functioning/critical civil society activities
17	Sevinj Osmangizi	Journalist/ Head and anchor of the OsmangiziTV	Incitement to riots and subversion Sections of the CC: 220.2, 281.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated and summoned: 14 November 2025	Exiled critical media coverage
18	Abid Gafarov	Critical blogger	Incitement to riots and subversion Sections of the CC: 220.2, 281.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated and summoned: 14 November 2025	Critical statements of government functioning/critical civil society activities

No	Name	Profile Role/Activity	Key charges (based on the Criminal Code – 'CC')	Current state of proceedings	Probable grounds for persecution
19	Vagif Allahverdi (aka Victor Alexander)	Critical blogger	Incitement to riots and subversion Sections of the CC: 220.2, 281.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated and summoned: 14 November 2025	Critical statements
20	Beydulla Manafov	Critical blogger	Incitement to subversion and ethnic, religious hatred Sections of the CC: 281.2, 283.1	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated and summoned: 14 November 2025	Critical statements
21	Murad Guliyev	Critical blogger	Incitement to subversion Sections of the CC: 281.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated and summoned: 15 November 2025	Critical statements
22	Ilgar Hajiyev	Exiled businessperson/ Former owner of the Akkord Construction	Fraud and money laundering Sections of the CC: 178.3.2, 193-1.3.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated and summoned: 15 November 2025	Critical statements
23	Manaf Jalilzade	Critical blogger	Incitement to subversion Sections of the CC: 281.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated and summoned: 15 November 2025	Critical statements
24	Ganimat Zayidov	Journalist/ Editor-in-Chief of Azadliq Newspaper/ Owner and anchor of AzerbaijanSaati	Incitement to subversion Sections of the CC: 281.2	Criminal proceedings in absentia were initiated and summoned: 18 November 2025	Exiled critical media coverage