

Human Rights Crisis in Azerbaijan:
The European Union Prioritises Energy and Geopolitics

TRADING AWAY PRINCIPLES

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TO END REPRESSION
IN AZERBAIJAN

Trading Away Principles
Human Rights Crisis in Azerbaijan:
The European Union Prioritises Energy and Geopolitics

December 2025

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Contents

Executive Summary	4
1. The Context: Azerbaijan’s Ascent and Europe’s Silence	6
2. Values-Based Agenda vs Interest-Driven Cooperation	8
2.1. From Normative Partnership to Transactional Cooperation	8
2.2. Gradual Erosion of Values-Based Policy	9
Table: Evolution of EU-Azerbaijan Relations.....	10
2.3. The 2022 Rupture	11
3. Principled Engagement vs Interest-Driven Pipelines and Trade	12
3.1. The 2022 Energy Deal	12
3.2. Declining EU Imports, Rising EU Exports	12
3.3. EU Investments and the Middle Corridor	13
3.4. Variable Dependence Across EU Member States	13
3.5. Azerbaijan’s Oil and Gas Exports in the Context of Russia’s War on Ukraine	13
3.6. Missed opportunities and value-blind cooperation	14
4. Human Rights Principles vs Azerbaijan’s System of Repression	16
4.1. Authoritarian System.....	16
4.2. Systemic Policy of Repression	17
4.3. Repression Beyond Borders	19
4.4. EU Tolerance for Repression	20
4.5. EU Speaking in Dissonance	21
Illustration: A Decade of Repression vs Europe’s Shift in Priorities	22
5. Conclusion	23
Recommendations: A Renewed Roadmap for EU Engagement for Human Rights and the Rule of Law	25
Recommendations to the authorities of the Republic of Azerbaijan.....	25
Recommendations to the European Commission, the European External Action Service and the European Parliament	26
Recommendations to EU Member States.....	27
Methodology	28

Executive Summary

This report, published by the [Campaign to End Repression in Azerbaijan](#), examines how the European Union deprioritised human rights in its relationship with Azerbaijan at the very moment the country is undergoing its most intense period of repression since independence. Azerbaijan's geopolitical relevance has grown through its control of energy routes, its balancing act in the oil and gas market, and its past presidency of the United Nations Climate Change Conference. At the same time, the EU shifted from a values-based partnership to a transactional approach centred on energy, trade and connectivity. This shift has coincided with a dramatic closing of civic space inside Azerbaijan and with the expansion of repression beyond its borders.

Azerbaijan built a system designed to eliminate independent voices and civic freedoms:

Over the past decade, Azerbaijan has dismantled independent civil society and media through restrictive legislation, criminal prosecutions, administrative harassment and police violence against protestors. Human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars face arbitrary detention, smear campaigns, coerced confessions, the misuse of criminal, administrative and tax law, and solitary confinement when imprisoned. Independent NGOs cannot register or access funding; independent media outlets have been closed; and international organisations, including United Nations agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), have been expelled. With at least 400 political prisoners, the country now has the highest number of political prisoners since joining the Council of Europe.

This report shows that EU political engagement has not matched the gravity of the repression:

Despite being Azerbaijan's main export market and largest investor, the EU is not using its leverage. The 2022 energy memorandum and subsequent political dialogue treat hydrocarbons, connectivity and climate cooperation as insulated from human rights concerns. High-level EU officials visiting Azerbaijan avoided meeting political prisoners and their relatives, human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars or publicly raising emblematic cases. In contrast, Azerbaijan has interpreted the European Union's silence as a political signal that deeper repression carries little diplomatic cost.

The report also examines how energy policy has driven the EU's shift away from principled engagement:

Since the 2022 energy memorandum, hydrocarbons, connectivity and the Middle Corridor shaped relations more than human rights or democratic standards. Azerbaijan supplies only a small share of the EU's overall energy imports, yet the political importance of diversification has elevated Baku's leverage. This created a dynamic in which energy and trade priorities are treated as detached from Azerbaijan's deepening authoritarianism. Allegations that Russian fossil fuels are being channelled through Azerbaijan, alongside the country's rising imports of Russian oil and gas, raise further questions about whether current cooperation serves the EU's strategic interest in reducing dependence on authoritarian suppliers.

At the same time, the EU's institutional response has been fragmented:

The European Parliament has consistently called for conditionality, sanctions and the suspension of the 2022 energy agreement, while the Commission and EEAS prioritised geopolitical and economic interests. This dissonance weakens the EU's credibility and creates uncertainty for Azerbaijani civil society actors, who face unprecedented restrictions at home and increasing threats in exile through surveillance, intimidation of relatives, abusive extradition attempts, and trials in absentia.

This report concludes that the founding values of the EU are at risk:

The report concludes that the EU's current approach undermines its founding values and risks signalling to authoritarian actors that human rights are negotiable when strategic interests are at stake. It also overlooks the essential role of independent civil society — inside Azerbaijan and in exile — as the last remaining safeguard against democratic collapse.

The report calls for a fundamental reset of EU policy towards Azerbaijan:

It urges the European Commission, the European External Action Service and the European Parliament to place the protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law at the centre of any renewed EU-Azerbaijan partnership agreement and of the implementation of the 2022 energy memorandum. This includes defining and publishing clear benchmarks, such as the immediate release and full rehabilitation of political prisoners, measurable reforms of NGO and media legislation, and genuine cooperation with Council

Trading Away Principles

Human Rights Crisis in Azerbaijan: The European Union Prioritises Energy and Geopolitics

of Europe and UN mechanisms, including implementation of the Mammadli group of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.

European Parliament resolution as detailed roadmap for EU engagement with Azerbaijan:

To give these benchmarks political weight, the report recommends that the European Parliament adopt a resolution that sets out a detailed roadmap for EU engagement with Azerbaijan. Such a roadmap should align the actions of the Commission, the EEAS and Member States, and make progress in negotiations on a new agreement explicitly conditional on concrete, sustained improvements in the human rights situation. It should also clarify that escalation of repression, including against journalists and civil society organisations, would trigger the suspension of negotiations or the refusal to conclude new agreements.

Support civil society and independent media, including those in exile:

Finally, the report stresses that no sustainable change is possible without independent civil society and media, inside and outside Azerbaijan. It therefore recommends that the EU significantly strengthen and adapt its political and financial support to Azerbaijani human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, activists, academics and community organisers. This includes flexible and rapid funding, relocation and protection schemes, sustained backing for exiled organisations and media outlets, and active efforts to ensure that Azerbaijani civil society can participate meaningfully in EU, Council of Europe, OSCE and UN processes.



1. The Context:

Azerbaijan's Ascent and Europe's Silence

In April 2025, during her press conference in Baku at the end of a two-day visit, European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Kaja Kallas, described EU-Azerbaijan relations as “a two-way street.” She met President Ilham Aliyev and agreed to resume negotiations on a new partnership agreement to replace the 1999 framework, a process stalled since 2015.

Kaja Kallas' visit took place in a changed geopolitical context in Europe. These shifts strengthened Azerbaijan's position. Its geography, its balancing act in the oil and gas market, and its control over key energy routes increased its strategic weight. Azerbaijan is also gained visibility through the presidency of the 29th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29) which it hosted in Baku in November 2024, humanitarian support to Ukraine whilst increasing imports natural gas and crude oil from Russia, and the peace process with Armenia.

At the same time, Europe faces uncertainty over energy, security, and economic stability. These dynamics shaped the EU's willingness to deepen cooperation with Azerbaijan, even as the human rights situation in the country deteriorated at unprecedented speed. Two months before Kaja Kallas arrived in Baku, 357 political prisoners were behind bars; by October 2025 the number had reached 392, according to the Union For the Freedom of Political Prisoners in Azerbaijan. At time of publishing, the total number certainly surpassed 400 political prisoners, as more arrests took place since. Notably, opposition leader Ali Karimli and his associates were detained on 30 November 2025. Early October, the prosecution of defence lawyer Zabil Gahramanov marked a new phase in the country's repression.

During her press conference, Kaja Kallas praised Azerbaijan's contribution to EU energy diversification and its humanitarian support to Ukraine. She barely mentioned human rights. This was interpreted in Baku as a political shift. Especially given her praise: “We are also grateful, she added, for Azerbaijan's humanitarian support for Ukraine, and for [its] leadership in hosting the COP29 climate Summit last year.” Her praise of the presidency of COP29 was particularly noted by the country's authorities.

AZERBAIJAN

Government

President of the Republic, since 2003

- Ilham Aliyev

Vice-President, since 2017

- Mehriban Aliyeva, wife of Ilham Aliyev

Previous Former President, 1993-2003

- Heydar Aliyev, father of Ilham Aliyev

Prime Minister, since 2019

- Ali Asadov, formerly economic advisor to the President

Global indexes

Bertelsmann BTI Transformation Index, 2024

- 102nd of 137 jurisdictions

Civil Liberties Index, 2024

- Score: 2.6 (max. most liberties: 10)

Corruption Perception Index, 2025

- 154th of 180 countries and territories (score: 22/100)

The Economist Democracy Index, 2025

- 126th of 167 countries and territories

Freedom in the World Score, 2025

- Score: 7/100 (“Not Free” for more than 20 years)

Freedom on the Net Score, 2025

- Score: 34/100 (“Not Free”)

Nations in Transit Score, 2025

- Score: 1/100 (“Consolidated Authoritarian Regime”)

World Press Freedom Index, 2025

- 167th of 180 jurisdictions

Hosting COP29 was indeed seen by the Azerbaijani authorities as a major consecration. For many years, the authorities worked to improve Azerbaijan's branding and international image, including by hosting several large international events, such as the [2012 Eurovision Song Contest](#), the inaugural [European Games in 2015](#), the annual [Formula One Azerbaijan Grand Prix](#), the 2019 Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) [Europa League final](#) and the 2020 UEFA European Football Championship. The country also hosted dozens of international conferences, exhibitions, and trade shows.

Pro-government outlet [Caliber](#) celebrated Kaja Kallas' visit as a break from "dogmatic" European criticism. It claimed Brussels was now ready to treat Azerbaijan as "one of its key partners" without raising governance concerns and stated:

This year, the European Union has indeed taken a step toward pragmatism in its relations with Baku, yielding swift and constructive results. Achieving this was no easy task after years of condescending attempts by Euro-liberal circles to lecture Azerbaijan on domestic policy ... The recent changes in EU policy appear all the more significant... It is worth recalling how many years Azerbaijan was lectured about "proper governance, human rights, and democratic norms," effectively denying the country's people the ability to independently address these issues.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijani authorities endeavoured to keep the appalling human rights situation out of the public eye. Thus, these international events are often preceded by crackdowns, waves of repression and the [erection of fences and facades](#) to "keep guests away from the less elegant side of life in Azerbaijan's capital city."

COP29 was not different and for Azerbaijan's civil society it is now the symbol of unprecedented levels of repression.

The arrest of Anar Mammadli on 29 April 2024, and that of Bashir Suleymanli on 14 March 2025, are emblematic of the repression and of the government's will to silence any debate on environmental or climate issues, as [underlined](#) by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders, Michel Forst. Anar Mammadli was arrested barely weeks after launching the Climate for Justice Initiative with Bashir Suleymanli and other Azerbaijani environmental and human rights defenders. Their cases are indeed a symbol of the long decade of repression in Azerbaijan, from their arrests in respectively 2013 and 2014 to their new detention since April 2024 and March 2025.

This "long decade of unprecedented repression" [peaked in 2024](#): a year of all-out silencing of dissent, dissonance and disagreement, whilst reinforcing power. President Aliyev called a snap presidential election for 7 February 2024 and snap parliamentary elections for 1 September 2024. The elections were [qualified](#) by Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights observers as "uncompetitive", "taking place in a restrictive environment," and "falling short of international standards."

At no point did Kaja Kallas mention any of this during her visit, nor did she meet with political prisoners and their relatives, with human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars.

This report examines what the European Union's current approach means for human rights, how it aligns with the Union values and its own principles and standards, and what consequences flow from a relationship in which these appear to have receded behind geopolitical priorities, in the name of "pragmatism in its relations with Baku."

We already in a [previous report](#) underlined how the Council of Europe's failure to enforce its standards calls its engagement with Azerbaijan into question, enabling impunity.

2. Values-Based Agenda vs Interest-Driven Cooperation

Through this chapter, we review and analyse Azerbaijan's longstanding relations with the European Union, since the signature of the [EU-Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement \(PCA\)](#) entered into force in 1999. The goal stated in the PCA of promoting respect for democracy, the rule of law and human rights, as well as market economy reforms rapidly with the years transformed into a transactional cooperation focusing on energy.

2.1. From Normative Partnership to Transactional Cooperation

Article 71 of the PCA foresaw cooperation for the establishment or reinforcement of democratic institutions to strengthen the rule of law and the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms according to international law and OSCE principles, including:

- Technical assistance programmes intended to assist in the drafting and implementing of relevant legislation and regulations;
- The functioning of the judiciary;
- The role of the State in questions of justice;
- The operation of the electoral system.

During the 2000s and early 2010s the EU sought partnerships based on shared normative values and governance standards. These partnerships aimed to provide comprehensive support for transition processes, particularly in areas like human rights and democracy.

The EU-Azerbaijan European Neighbourhood Policy Action Plan signed in 2006 committed the government to instigate reform, signalling a commitment to integration in the EU and a key step closer to Europe, and giving an opportunity to move toward a potential Association Agreement, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) and visa liberalisation agreement. In its strategy to promote democracy in Azerbaijan, the EU acted more as a “soft power,” based around dialogue, cooperation and education.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) was met with substantial enthusiasm by civil society, which supported “European aspirations” and promoted liberal democracy and fundamental freedoms. The EaP further empowered civil society in 2009 with the creation of a new institution called the Civil Society Forum, which empowers NGOs to influence their governments more effectively.

By 2009, despite better performance by Azerbaijan on energy and transport issues, there was no or limited progress in the implementation of many other aspects of the EaP Action Plan, particularly in the areas of political dialogue and reform, including protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, indicating the government's willingness for cooperation rather than for integration.

By 2010, a vibrant community of NGOs had been able to develop in Azerbaijan, working on issues such as human rights, corruption, elections, the promotion of democracy, and the rule of law.

Whilst the Association Agreement would have required deep reforms in the area of human rights and democracy, education and mobility, the worsening human rights record, the rising number of political prisoners, the increasing number of laws in contrary to the EU standards restricting basic freedoms and repressions indicated that the Azerbaijani authorities had little desire to shake the foundations on which its power lies.

The [EaP integration index](#) for 2013, which scored the performance of the six EaP states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) on three dimensions (linkage, approximation and EU management), showed Azerbaijan's lack of performance and motivation. Azerbaijan ranked fifth amongst the six states — Belarus being last. The index noted that only [one meeting on democracy and human rights issues](#) had been held by the EU-Azerbaijan Sub-Committee on Justice, Freedom and Security in 2013.

At the EaP Vilnius Summit in November 2013, Azerbaijan officially declared it would not be signing an Association Agreement. Whilst differences in positions over Karabakh was one of the reasons for declining the proposed agreement, the perspective of human rights conditionality was also a determining factor. In the run-up to Vilnius, Azerbaijan proposed a modernization partnership that should proceed from “mutual respect and equality of rights of the parties.” This signaled all-round that Baku would deem any EU intervention as inappropriate to what authorities would consider a genuine partnership for modernisation.

Then Foreign Policy Adviser Novruz Mammadov explained this refusal in national media: “We told the EU that some provisions in the association agreement proposed by them do not suit us, and we want to fully maintain our independence and sovereignty.”

Azerbaijan’s rejection of an Association Agreement was a fundamental break in value-based cooperation. With the end of the perspective of an agreement which required such conditionality, human rights lost its sense and gradually receded from the subsequent negotiations.

2.2. Gradual Erosion of Values-Based Policy

Azerbaijan submitted a draft agreement for a new partnership during the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga in 2015. Baku’s interests were to establish a strategic partnership based on mutual benefits in the energy sector and the economy and to avoid political integration with the EU.

This led to discussions between EU and AZ over the “Strategic Partnership for Modernization (SPM),” which would lay the groundwork for how the partnership would proceed and what future cooperation would entail. The SPM is Baku’s way to navigate around the more political and reform-oriented association with the EU and enter into a partnership that only exploits the huge economic opportunities that the EU single market can provide to Azerbaijan.

In February 2016, speaking with the press before her visit to Baku, then EU High Representative Federica Mogherini announced that preparations for the new partnership were progressing and talks with the EU Member States over launching a formal negotiation process would soon be carried out. At the end of the year, the Council mandated the Commission and the European External Action Service to negotiate the SPM with Azerbaijan on behalf of the EU and its Member States. An [in-depth analysis on EU Relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan](#) published in October 2017 by the European Parliament’s Directorate-General for External Policies commented critically on the launch of negotiations on a new EU-Azerbaijan agreement “in spite of serious political and human rights problems in the country” and the fact that Azerbaijan seemed only interested in a cooperation which did not challenge the political *status quo*. Despite its reservations, it did not exclude that there were bargaining opportunities for the EU, albeit slim. However, the document warned that “under no conditions should the European Union allow the renewed format of its relations with Azerbaijan to be used as a convenient framework for the government to consistently crack down on what are in essence European traditions and institutions in the country” and that the beginning of negotiations between the EU and Azerbaijan had “not affected the persecution of activists and attacks on” freedoms.” It concluded: “This indicates that Azerbaijan’s leadership perceives that values and human rights issues are not important issues for the EU.”

In 2018, the EU and Azerbaijan concluded their [Partnership Priorities](#), which defined four key areas guiding their bilateral cooperation:

- Strengthening institutions and good governance, including the fight against corruption;
- Economic development and market opportunities, including support for accession to the World Trade Organization;
- Connectivity, energy efficiency, environment, and climate action, including support for the Southern Gas Corridor connecting Azerbaijan to Italy;
- Mobility and people-to-people contacts, including facilitation of visa issuance and the Erasmus+ university exchange programme.

Whilst the 1996 PCA, founded on democracy, international law and human rights, remains the legal framework for EU-Azerbaijan relations in the absence of a new agreement, EU pragmatism transformed cooperation into a transactional relationship devoid of a values-based approach.

Table: Evolution of EU-Azerbaijan Relations

Date	Event / Development	Key Principle / Takeaway
1999	EU-Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) entered into force	Commitment to democracy, rule of law, human rights; foundation of normative cooperation; EU support to democratic institutions and rule-of-law alignment
2000s-early 2010s	EU builds value-based partnerships aimed at democratic transition and governance reforms	Normative, values-driven approach; soft power, dialogue, reform incentives
2006	EU-Azerbaijan European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) Action Plan signed	Pathway toward Association Agreement; reform commitments; closer integration
2009	Creation of Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum	Empowering independent civil society; participatory governance; democratic engagement
2009-2010	Growth of strong NGO community in Azerbaijan working on human rights, elections, anti-corruption	Civil society flourishing under EU-supported normative frameworks
2013 (EaP Index)	Azerbaijan ranked 5th of 6; minimal progress on democracy, rights, rule of law	Weak political will; cooperation without integration; stagnation in reforms
Nov. 2013	Azerbaijan refuses Association Agreement at Vilnius Summit	Rejection of human rights conditionality; assertion of sovereignty over reform commitments
2015	Azerbaijan submits draft for new partnership at Riga Summit	Shift toward economic and energy-based cooperation; avoidance of political integration
Feb. 2016	Mogherini announces preparations for new Strategic Partnership for Modernisation (SPM)	EU begins pivot from values-based to transactional engagement
Dec. 2016	Council mandates Commission and EEAS to negotiate SPM with Azerbaijan	Formal move toward a partnership less anchored in political conditionality
Oct. 2017	European Parliament analysis warns against cooperation without rights safeguards	EU alerted that Baku perceives values as negotiable and low-priority for EU
2018	EU-Azerbaijan Partnership Priorities adopted	Focus shifts to governance, trade, connectivity and mobility; human rights de-emphasised in practice
1996-2018 (cumulative)	PCA remains legal framework but loses normative weight in practice	Pragmatism replaces values; human rights conditionality weakened
2022	Russia's war on Ukraine accelerates EU shift toward energy security	Energy replaces human rights as primary driver of EU-Azerbaijan relations
2022-2025	EU treats Azerbaijan primarily as transit and energy supplier	Human rights sidelined; political pressure disappears
April 2025	Kaja Kallas's visit to Baku symbolises full turn to geopolitical pragmatism	EU's senior-level silence signals that values are non-essential to partnership

2.3. The 2022 Rupture

Pushed by these various factors, the EU turned the page on its normative agenda which used to be the cornerstone of its relationship with the countries of the South Caucasus.

Russia's unlawful war of aggression on Ukraine accelerated the shift. The EU now treats Azerbaijan primarily as an energy supplier and transit state, as witnessed with the April 2025 visit to Baku of EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Kaja Kallas.

This transactional approach has consequences:

- Human rights issues no longer shape negotiations;
- Pressure for political reform has disappeared;
- Azerbaijani authorities perceive values as non-essential to partnership

3. Principled Engagement vs Interest-Driven Pipelines and Trade

This chapter examines three main areas: the European Union's strategic interests driving its policy shift towards Azerbaijan; the EU's economic imperative to downplay Azerbaijan's values; and whether this "pragmatism" ultimately benefits the EU's long-term strategic goals.

During her press conference in Baku in April 2025, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Kaja Kallas, highlighted that the EU is Azerbaijan's largest trading partner and biggest investor. This is accurate: the [EU is Azerbaijan's largest export market](#), representing 63.3 per cent of exports. The EU accounts for 41.2 per cent of Azerbaijan's total trade.

This raises an important question: Why is the EU not using this leverage to press Azerbaijan to align more closely with EU values?

3.1. The 2022 Energy Deal

In July 2022, the EU and Azerbaijan signed a memorandum of understanding on strategic energy partnership. This [agreement](#) shaped EU policy toward Azerbaijan ever since.

At the press conference following the signature of the memorandum, European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, stressed the importance of expanding the Southern Gas Corridor. She affirmed that the EU would increase imports from more than 8 billion cubic metres per year to 20 billion cubic metres within a few years. The EU expected to reach 12 billion cubic metres already "from next year." This expansion would, [in her words](#), compensate for cuts in Russian gas and "contribute significantly to Europe's security of supply."

Ursula von der Leyen also emphasised Azerbaijan's "tremendous potential in renewable energy" and stated that the EU aimed for Azerbaijan to "evolve from being a fossil fuel supplier to becoming a very reliable and prominent renewable energy partner."

3.2. Declining EU Imports, Rising EU Exports

According to [UN Comtrade \(2024\)](#) data, trade between the European Union as a whole, including all its member states, and Azerbaijan from 2022 to 2024 moved in different directions for imports and exports. Between 2022 and 2024, the EU's imports from Azerbaijan, which mainly include oil and gas, dropped sharply — from 32.7 billion USD in 2022 to 16.4 billion USD in 2024 — a fall of almost 50 per cent in just two years. The European Union imported a total oil and gas products worth USD 504.8 billion in 2024, of which only USD 16.1 billion originated from Azerbaijan, amounting to about 4.3 per cent of the EU's total energy imports.

Meanwhile, EU exports to Azerbaijan steadily increased, rising from USD 2.1 billion in 2022 to USD 2.9 billion in 2024. This reflects Azerbaijan's growing demand for European machinery, technology, and industrial goods, and points to a slow broadening of trade beyond hydrocarbons.

Instead of bringing its legislation and practice in line with international standards and with its commitments, Azerbaijan progressively put in place a system of repression which allows to arbitrarily detain, sentence and release anyone at any given time, with the aim to punish, to silence, or to deter.

3.3. EU Investments and the Middle Corridor

The [Middle Corridor](#) gained strategic significance as an alternative trade route between China and Europe that avoids Russia.

In April 2025, the EU announced EUR 3 billion for transport projects along this route. Azerbaijan, situated between Central Asia and the Black Sea region, benefits substantially. Its ports, railways, and highways are generating increasing transit revenues.

EU investment in transport, customs modernisation, and green energy helped Azerbaijan upgrade infrastructure and attract international investors. Modernisation efforts — such as improvements to the Port of Baku, the Baku—Tbilisi—Kars railway, and digital logistics systems — are consolidating Azerbaijan’s role as a transport hub between China, Central Asia, and Europe.

3.4. Variable Dependence Across EU Member States

If it is true that whilst Azerbaijan represents only [4.3 per cent of all energy imports](#) overall, the share is much higher in some EU Member States connected to the Southern Gas Corridor pipeline — up to 40 per cent of Bulgarian natural gas imports come from Azerbaijan and for Italy and Greece it is 15 per cent.

However, as risk analyst Benjamin Godwin [told the BBC](#), “the power will not go out in Europe without Azerbaijani gas, but that is not the point ... The EU’s strategy is to have as much gas from as many different locations as possible, and whilst it is not reliant on Azeri gas, it would like to have more gas from Azerbaijan to ultimately reduce its dependence on Russia.”

This illustrates that diversification, not dependence, drives EU’s interest towards Azerbaijan.

3.5. Azerbaijan’s Oil and Gas Exports in the Context of Russia’s War on Ukraine

Before Russia’s war on Ukraine, almost half of the EU’s gas supply came from Russia. The war exposed the vulnerability created by overreliance on fossil fuels and on a single authoritarian supplier. Years of delayed renewable investment amplified this vulnerability. Once the war began, the EU sought rapid alternatives to avert an energy crisis whilst working toward phasing out Russian gas entirely. Azerbaijan was one of several short-term supply options.

[Allegations](#) emerged in 2024 that Russian gas was being “laundered” through Azerbaijan to meet high European demand, concerning notably [gas contracts](#) between Gazprom and SOCAR and supplies of Russian crude oil to the SOCAR-owned oil refinery STAR in Türkiye.

The Strategic Partnership MoU signed between the EU and Azerbaijan in July 2022 foresees doubling gas imports from Azerbaijan by 2027 — volumes which, [according to experts](#), Azerbaijan does not have the capacity to deliver and at the same time, meet domestic demands.

UN Comtrade data shows that Azerbaijan’s imports of Russian oil and gas nearly tripled between 2022 and 2024, rising from USD 463.8 million to USD 1.18 billion. Azerbaijan claims these imports are used for domestic consumption, freeing up local production for export to the EU.

In October 2023, [Russia’s Lukoil agreed](#) to lend Azerbaijan’s state oil company SOCAR about USD 1.5 billion as part of a deal to supply up to 200,000 barrel Russian crude oil to the STAR Refinery in Türkiye, which SOCAR owns. Reports said that the STAR plant had earlier reduced or stopped importing Russian oil because of international financial restrictions and pressure from Western banks after Russia invaded Ukraine. Later, in March 2024, [Reuters](#) reported that SOCAR repaid a USD 1.3 billion loan from US banks Citigroup and JPMorgan two years earlier than planned. This repayment happened around the same time SOCAR received the Russian loan and was seen by some observers as a way to resume Russian oil imports whilst reducing reliance on Western financing.

The European Commission initially reacted cautiously to these allegations, but the European Parliament's [October 2024 resolution](#) expressed concern over “worrying reports of Russian gas being rebranded” for the European market. It warned that the MoU could undermine the EU's objective of reducing dependence on Russia, as flows into Azerbaijan could increase the volume of Azerbaijani gas available for re-export to Europe.

In July 2025, the [EU adopted its 18th sanctions package](#) against Russia. It discretely included an import ban on refined oil products derived from Russian crude, which impacts the SOCAR-owned STAR refinery in Türkiye. Furthermore, the Russian shadow fleet vessel listings added to the sanctions list include [two Azerbaijani oil tankers](#), *Shusha* and *Karabakh*, which were transporting oil from the Russian port of Primorsk to Nemrut Bay in Türkiye.

Whether labelled as rebranding or substitution, the outcome is the same: Russia benefits, and EU efforts to reduce reliance on authoritarian energy (by scaling down imports from Russia) are weakened (by scaling up imports from Azerbaijan).

3.6. Missed opportunities and value-blind cooperation

The 2022 energy agreement not only foresees to double gas exports to Europe — it also foresees future cooperation on renewables and is expected to pave the way for deeper and longer-term cooperation with Azerbaijan in other sectors, such as aviation and the development of Baku's port. Human rights organisations pointed out that the agreement was a [failed opportunity](#) to link it to progress on human rights, and that the EU should have refused a new agreement without insisting on political reforms, changing the laws that restrict non-governmental organisations and the media, and the release of all political prisoners.

Through trade and energy agreements, the EU contributes — directly or indirectly — to the consolidation of authoritarian rule in Azerbaijan, leaving grave human rights violations unaddressed. This raises a broader strategic question: does abandoning value-based cooperation in favour of interest-based pragmatism actually serve the EU's long-term interests?

The European Union is Trading Away Principles

Before 2022: EU reliance on Russian gas

A large share of EU gas came from Russia. Over-reliance on fossil fuels and a single authoritarian supplier created a major strategic vulnerability.



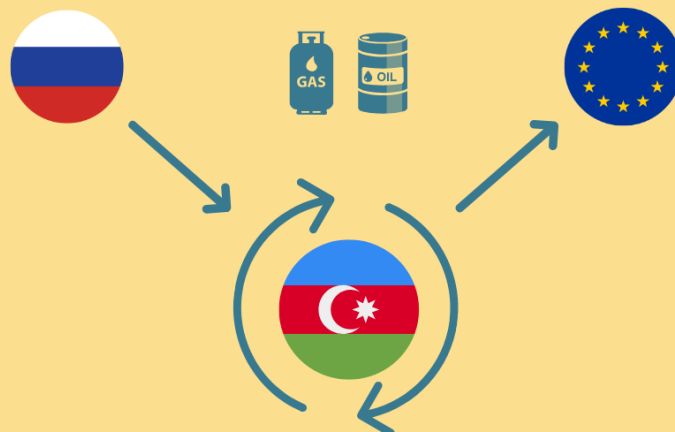
Following start of war on Ukraine: Azerbaijan fills the gap

To prevent shortages, the EU increased gas cooperation with Azerbaijan.



Outcome: Even stronger authoritarian fossil fuel dependency

Azerbaijan exports more to the EU whilst importing more from Russia, raising concerns about substitution and long-term vulnerability.



4. Human Rights Principles vs Azerbaijan's System of Repression

Putting aside human rights, democracy and the rule of law in the European Union's current negotiations with Azerbaijan occurs at a moment when repression is reaching unprecedented heights in a country with an already longstanding record of human rights violations.

4.1. Authoritarian System

Azerbaijan is an authoritarian state which:

- Has been ruled by the same family for 30 years;
- Since gaining independence with the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, the country has had only [one free election](#), the presidential election of 7 June 1992;
- Has been consistently ranked as "Not Free" by Freedom House since 2003;
- Ranked 167th in RSF Press Freedom Index (down from 164 in 2024 and 151 in 2023);
- Ranked 154th in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, with the lowest score ever attained (22/100);
- The current president is in office since 2003 with a referendum in 2009 removing the limit on the number of terms;
- The current vice-president is the wife of the president, nominated by the president to a function without a term limit, created in 2017 by the president.

Over the decades, the Azerbaijani authorities successfully put in place a well-oiled system of repression, leaving no space for civil society, dissent or criticism. A carefully crafted, complex system of laws and regulations governing civil society organisations, media outlets, political parties, public participation and freedom of assembly are construed in such a way that they leave no space for independence and are used to wilfully target and sanction these organisations and individuals. Amendments to the legal system virtually eliminated the possibility for NGOs to operate freely or receive foreign funding, whilst amendments to media laws eroded the right to freedom of expression. These laws serve not to govern society, but to silence dissenting voices, intimidate civil society and prosecute those who challenge the government. The [judiciary lacks independence](#), subordinated to the executive the same way a number of other institutions are, preventing any chance of a fair trial, with many cases resulting in pre-determined outcomes.

In the [Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World for 2024](#), the European External Action Service noted on Azerbaijan:

The overall state of human rights and democracy in Azerbaijan deteriorated further in 2024, as reflected by the unprecedented crackdown ... reduced space for civil society and independent media, and continuous limitations to civil liberties. The crackdown on journalists, human rights defenders, and civic and political opposition activists ... further intensified. ... Activities of non-governmental organisations remain restricted, including by the obligation to register grant agreements in a complex and arbitrary procedure.

4.2. Systemic Policy of Repression

Human rights violations over the years have become systemic and led to the following practices which constitute elements of the policy of repression:

Misuse of criminal, administrative and tax law, and political trials:

As underlined by the European Court of Human Rights (inter alia *Aliyev v. Azerbaijan*, 20 September 2018, applications nos. 68762/14 and 71200/14), Azerbaijani authorities weaponised legislation to criminalise activities of human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars. When not using legislation developed over the past decade, the authorities misuse criminal, administrative and tax law, as well legislation on treason and crimes against the public order, with improper, ulterior motives to silence and punish critics. Whilst detaining and imprisoning critics, the authorities also impose travel bans on their associates and forfeit their assets under these prosecutions. Periodically, the authorities escalate the cycles of repression, whilst the ongoing intensification occurred gradually since December 2022.

Institutional violence towards political prisoners:

Even behind bars, political prisoners continue to experience pressure. Prison administration strives to deter the activities of political prisoners and utilises undue restrictions to prevent them from taking public stances and making critical statements about detention conditions. The prison staff employs harassing tactics, provocations, instigation of fellow inmates against the political prisoners, denial of rights and privileges (phone calls, outside contact, medical assistance, etc.), breach of attorney-client confidentiality, unwarranted searches and seizures, and abuse of solitary confinement as a retaliation policy.

“Administrative detention” practice:

The authorities (local police departments) continue to use ‘administrative detention’ practices as a warning preceding criminal prosecution towards human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars. The practice involves the misuse of quasi-criminal law (primarily the offence of failure to abide by police orders) for short-term (up to 30 days) confinement sentences. The conditions of police confinement centres are far worse than standard penitentiaries, with ill-treatment constituting a regular habit.

Political violence and hate crime:

Occasionally, the authorities resort to political violence, instigating or organising behind-the-scenes assaults by local non-state actors. During the last decade, incidents occurred more frequently in the hinterland rather than in the metropolis. Meanwhile, the non-state actors (third parties) engage in hate crimes under the ineffective implementation of positive obligations of protection.

Targeted smear campaigns:

Government officials, pro-government figures, and government-oriented media habitually initiate smear campaigns against opposition, civil society and critical media. Through targeted media coverage, human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars are subjected to gratuitously offensive statements, defamation and breach of privacy by leaked personal life details. Public officials and government-oriented media misrepresent facts, misleading the public audience about the standing of critics. Smear campaigns have chilling effects on critical voices, being perceived as a precursory threat to prosecution, by virtue of unofficial authorisation by senior-level executives.

Deep structural reforms are needed in Azerbaijan to bring about sustainable change, including the overhaul of restrictive legislative frameworks which regulate the repression of fundamental freedoms. As it stands, political prisoners are not released because of a legal recognition of their right to exercise fundamental freedoms; these are arbitrary decisions, mostly in the form of presidential pardons. The systemic repression allows to tighten the screws at any time, including re-arresting those who had been previously detained and released, as in the case of Anar Mammadli.

As pointed out in [our report](#), along with the restrictions on NGOs, the last decade has also seen extensive legislative crackdowns on independent media, which have had a heavy toll on the media landscape of Azerbaijan, both offline and online. The restrictive regulatory and legislative framework, along with the criminalisation of defamation, financial pressures, closure of media outlets and revocation of licenses, has stifled independent journalism and media in the country. Successive waves of repression, fuelled by amendments made to the repressive Media Law, gradually wiped out the active independent media







community in Azerbaijan. Since November 2023, the media outlets Abzas Media, Toplum TV, Meydan TV and Kanal 13 were raided and shut down, and at least 30 journalists and media workers were arrested. In February 2025, Turan news agency, the last independent local media headquartered in the country, was forced to suspend its activities and was ultimately closed. The same month, BBC was forced to shut its Baku office, which was operating since 1994. In February 2025, Baku **revoked** accreditation of Bloomberg correspondent working in Azerbaijan, following Voice of America, BBC Azerbaijan, and Sputnik. The latter two also had their offices shut down. On 6 May 2025, Voice of America journalist, Ulviyya Ali, was detained under foreign currency smuggling charges. In August 2025, **26 journalists** were in detention in Azerbaijan, facing charges such as money laundering, tax evasion, and smuggling.

At the same time, Baku decided to **close four UN offices**, namely the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The Azerbaijani authorities also announced the closure of the local office of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

The EU Delegation to Azerbaijan, which opened in February 2008, deals with justice sector reform, and support to civil society, which are priority areas for EU action on human rights in Azerbaijan. The **2024 EEAS report on human rights** describes the EU action on these areas as “supporting steps in the direction of an independent, fair and efficient justice system” and that it “supports CSOs and strongly promotes the elimination of legal provisions that currently hamper CSOs space and action” and “supports the freedom of press and the plurality of opinions.” It monitors trials, raises concerns about human rights issues with the Azerbaijani institutions and authorities, and advocates advocating against the prosecution of individuals on political grounds.

In 2025, Azerbaijan has an unprecedented number of political prisoners.

Azerbaijan: Systemic Policy of Repression

 <p>Misuse of Criminal Law and Political Trials</p> <p>Fabricated criminal cases against critics and dissidents; detention and imprisonment of opponents; travel bans on relatives; confiscation of assets; repeated cycles of intensified repression.</p>	 <p>Institutional Violence in Prison</p> <p>Harassment by prison staff; provocations and pressure from other inmates; denial of medical care and communication rights; breach of attorney-client confidentiality; arbitrary searches; abuse of solitary confinement.</p>	 <p>Administrative Detention” as Intimidation</p> <p>Up to 30-day detentions for minor or fabricated offences; used as prelude to criminal prosecution; police holding centres with worse conditions than prisons; routine ill-treatment.</p>
 <p>Political Violence and Hate Crimes</p> <p>Physical attacks and intimidation by non-state actors acting with tacit state approval; increased incidents in rural regions; failure to protect victims despite legal obligations.</p>	 <p>Targeted Smear Campaigns</p> <p>Defamation in pro-government media; dissemination of private or intimate information; public shaming; false narratives engineered to undermine critics; intimidation signalling future prosecution.</p>	 <p>Repression Beyond Borders</p> <p>Surveillance, threats, and attacks abroad; intimidation of relatives inside Azerbaijan; criminal cases in absentia; harassment during travel; attempts to force returns.</p>

4.3. Repression Beyond Borders

For Azerbaijani authorities, repression does not stop at home. The systemic policy of repression has had a chilling effect on the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms in Azerbaijan, and forced human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars to flee the country for their safety and security.

The number of them in exile has been steadily increasing in the past decade.

As [analysed](#) by Freedom House, Azerbaijan arrived third amongst the top perpetrators of incidents of transnational repression against journalists in 2014-2024. A study commissioned by European Parliament [identified](#) the following practices by the Azerbaijani authorities targeting its dissidents abroad:

- Surveillance;
- Physical attacks;
- Intimidation of relatives;
- Criminal cases *in absentia*;
- INTERPOL abuse;
- Mobility restrictions.

On 29 May 2017, investigative journalist Afgan Mukhtarli, who had been living in Georgia in exile since 2015 after receiving threats in Azerbaijan, was abducted in Tbilisi and the next day, re-appeared in Baku under arrest. Charged with illegally crossing the border, smuggling and resisting police, he was sentenced to six years in prison.

Since then, there have been repeated attacks against journalists and bloggers.

As we documented, a new pattern [developed since March 2025](#) is the use of trials *in absentia*, alongside public summonses, threats of international arrest warrants and misused extradition channels, are being deployed to harass and intimidate exiled critics, disrupt their mobility and expose them to risks when travelling

Azerbaijan also [arrests](#) relatives who remained in the country and practices surveillance, online harassment and threats. Repeatedly [private information](#), probably obtained in surveillance operations, was used to publicly [shame women](#) human rights defenders or female relatives of dissidents. In February 2021, the blogger in exile in France, Mahammad Mirzali, was [blackmailed](#) with a video of intimate footage taken in his sister's bedroom.

The findings of the European Parliament study are particularly concerning regarding the abuse of Interpol's systems. The study highlights how governments continue to exploit Red Notices to detain, restrict movement, and facilitate the deportation of exiled critics. The Azerbaijani government previously already [issued various Interpol Red Notices](#) against critics in exile in the EU. In January 2020, Azerbaijani opposition activist Dashgyn Agalarli was [briefly detained](#) in Poland on the basis of an Interpol Red Notice filed by Azerbaijan for alleged tax evasion.

4.4. EU Tolerance for Repression

Regarding the human rights impact of the European Union on the human rights situation, neither EU cooperation nor its presence in the country have managed to address the systemic violations which have been plaguing Azerbaijan since the decades.

Until recently, standing by the EU's commitment to democracy and human rights goals in agreement negotiations, as outlined in the 1996 PCA, and applying pressure on Azerbaijani authorities achieved at least human rights concessions like the release of political prisoners. It demonstrates the EU's past willingness to set limits and pursue systemic change.

The EU now says it does raise the human rights situation with Azerbaijani authorities “in public and in private:”

- After Azerbaijan submitted a draft for a new strategic partnership agreement to the European Commission in 2015, the authorities released several prominent political prisoners during the spring of 2016, including Intigam Aliyev, Khadija Ismayilova and Rasul Jafarov. These releases followed sustained external pressure, including the US Azerbaijan Democracy Act and discussions in the US Congress on the Global Magnitsky Act;
- The mandate for the European Commission and the EEAS to negotiate the new agreement was approved in November 2016, and the EEAS Spokesperson reiterated at the time the need for Azerbaijan to comply with the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights;
- The pattern repeated in March 2019, when 51 political prisoners were included amongst the 399 individuals released by presidential pardon on the occasion of Nowruz, just two weeks before the meeting of the EU-Azerbaijan Cooperation Council. At the press conference following the meeting, Federica Mogherini welcomed the pardoning of political prisoners by President Aliyev.

These episodes illustrate that, although inconsistent and never sufficient to generate systemic reform, the EU's earlier use of political pressure contributed to concrete human rights gains. Baku demonstrated on several occasions that it responds to international pressure when doing so is necessary to protect its strategic interests. The leverage created by the weight of the Azerbaijan's trade and economic interest towards the EU is significant, but the EU has shown little inclination to obtain human rights concessions against offering economic opportunities to Azerbaijan.

The current approach contrasts with the past. It is characterised by the silence of the EU at the political level. Whilst the EU maintains that it raises human rights concerns “in public and in private”, high-level statements have become rare and largely symbolic. When seven AbzasMedia journalists were sentenced to up to nine years in prison in June 2025, the EEAS issued a four-line [statement](#) noting that the sentences were a “worrying development” and reiterating the EU's commitment to “continued dialogue and cooperation.” The message suggested that engagement with the Azerbaijani authorities would continue regardless of the scale of repression.

Azerbaijan's readiness to offer limited concessions when external pressure was real contrasts sharply with the results of the EU's current approach. As high-level criticism faded and political conditionality largely disappeared, the Azerbaijani authorities have come to understand that the risks of deepening repression are minimal. This change in perception matters: it marks the point at which isolated human rights concessions — previously secured through targeted diplomatic pressure — gave way to a political environment in which the EU's silence is seen as acquiescence.

It is against this backdrop that the EU's apparent tolerance for continued repression must be understood. The consequences of this shift are visible:

- Without conditionality or credible political pressure, the Azerbaijani authorities escalated their repression. The number of political prisoners is now the highest since independence, with journalists accounting for roughly half of all cases;
- Across civil society, there is a growing recognition that the EU's change in posture — moving away from principled, value-based engagement — has removed one of the few external constraints that previously limited the scale and pace of the crackdown.

We [documented separately](#) how the EU's funding of the Council of Europe's work in Azerbaijan raises doubts.

4.5. EU Speaking in Dissonance

The European Parliament stands at the forefront and plays a fundamental role in protecting and promoting human rights, formulating principles and declarations, and proposing concrete actions, mechanisms and procedures to ensure the respect and promotion of fundamental values.

In its 2024 annual [Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World](#), the EP underscored the EU's responsibility to defend universal democratic values and principles and human rights, outlining that the EU has the tools available for that purpose, such as suspending European Neighbourhood policy projects that contribute directly or indirectly to human rights violations in non-EU countries, adding human rights clauses to trade agreements with third countries, and enforcing the [EU's global human rights sanctions regime](#) (EU Magnitsky Act) and encouraged to use them.

Whilst the [Parliament](#) consistently takes strong positions on the state of human rights and the rule of law, there is a lack of coherence between statements of principle and the tangible application of measures to guarantee coherent and consistent accountability of EU human rights policy.

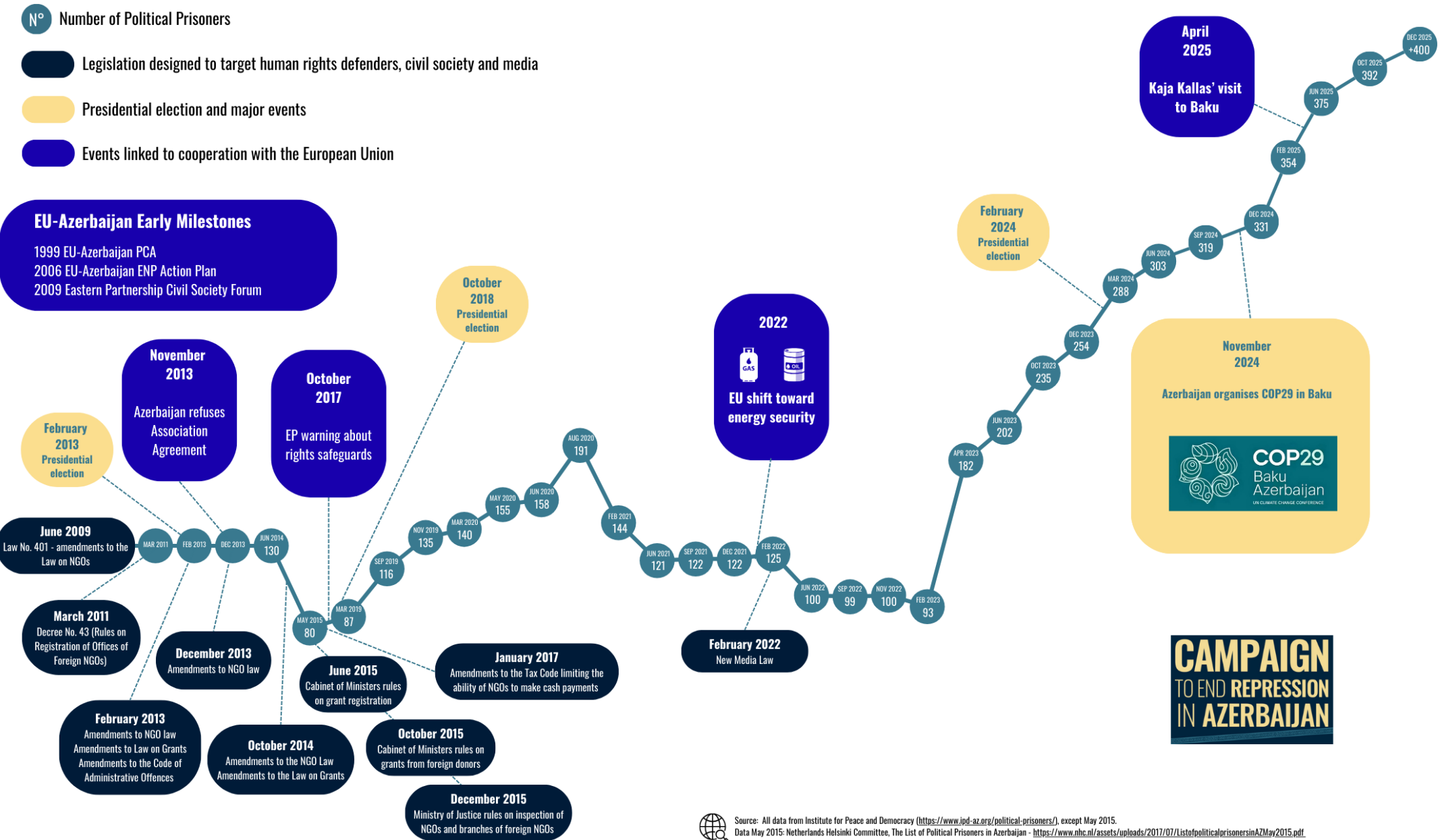
This disconnect between EU institutions is also visible in its approach to Azerbaijan. Whilst the European Commission and EEAS increasingly focused on “realpolitik,” geopolitical and economic interests, the EP called out the human rights situation in two resolutions in 2024:

- In its [October 2024 resolution](#), the EP reiterated its call for EU sanctions under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime on Azerbaijani officials who have committed serious human rights violations. It called on the EU Special Representative for Human Rights to request meetings with political prisoners in Azerbaijan; insisted that any future partnership agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan be made conditional on the release of all political prisoners, the implementation of legal reforms and the overall improvement of the human rights situation in the country. The EP further called on the Commission to suspend the 2022 memorandum of understanding on the strategic partnership in the field of energy and to end its reliance on gas exports from Azerbaijan;
- In December 2024, the EP adopted another [resolution on Azerbaijan](#), condemning the repression against civil society and the media, including employees of AbzasMedia and MeydanTV, and reiterated its recommendations that the EU impose sanctions against on Azerbaijani officials responsible for serious human rights violations and suspend the Memorandum of Understanding on a strategic partnership in the field of energy.

In June 2025, the MEPs Mounir Satouri, Chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights, Nils Ušakovs, Chair of the Delegation for relations with the South Caucasus, and MEP Dan Barna, the EP's Standing Rapporteur on Azerbaijan issued a [joint statement](#) in reaction to the harsh prison sentences handed down to the seven AbzasMedia journalists and the peace activist and researcher Bahruz Samadov, calling for sanctions on Azerbaijani officials and, stressing that any future partnership agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan be made conditional on the release of all political prisoners and the improvement of the human rights situation, called on EEAS “to avoid any steps that would risk to embolden the regime on the current path.”

None of the EP's calls have been followed up on by the Commission and EEAS in its relations with Azerbaijan.

Illustration: A Decade of Repression vs Europe's Shift in Priorities



Source: All data from Institute for Peace and Democracy (<https://www.ipd-az.org/political-prisoners/>), except May 2015. Data May 2015: Netherlands Helsinki Committee, The List of Political Prisoners in Azerbaijan - <https://www.nhcc.nl/assets/uploads/2017/07/ListofpoliticalprisonersinAZMay2015.pdf>.

5. Conclusion

The European Union's foreign policy stance with regard to Azerbaijan stands in stark contrast to its own principles and standards, as well as to its position on other countries in the region where human rights are beleaguered, such as Belarus.

Belarus, like Azerbaijan, is ruled by an authoritarian leader since 1994, with a history of rigged elections, human rights abuses, and repression. In 2014, Belarus declined an association agreement with the EU. However, the EU's [main policy objective](#) has been to encourage Belarus's autonomy by offering a geopolitical alternative to Russia and promoting democratic governance and human rights through engagement with civil society and sanctions against the regime.

After the rigged presidential election in Belarus in August 2020, the European Council [condemned](#) it and the ensuing repression. It withheld recognition of the election results, imposed sanctions, reduced financial assistance to Belarus, and increased support for civil society. The EU consistently pursued this policy, outlined a plan for [economic support in case of a peaceful transition](#), and established a [consultative group](#) for dialogue between the EU and Belarusian civil society and opposition on the situation and future EU actions.

In line with the Council conclusions on Belarus of 12 October 2020, redirecting assistance from the public authorities to non-state actors, the EU has by 2024 [mobilised EUR 170 million](#) for civil society, human rights defenders, independent media, educational and cultural institutions and small and medium sized businesses in exile.

On the other hand, Belarus does not dispose of the oil and gas reserves which Azerbaijan does, and [trade volumes with the EU](#) have always been relatively modest — the EU represented 10.5% of Belarusian imports (for €8.1 billion) in 2024 whilst the EU the same year imported food, raw materials, chemicals and machinery for €1.3 billion.

The support provided by the Belarusian regime to Russia in its war of aggression on Ukraine has been an additional driver for a firmer support for human rights in Belarus.

Similarly, the EU's stance has been very clear on the events unfolding in Georgia since 28 October 2024, after the preliminary official results of the parliamentary election of 26 October were announced. On 7 February 2025, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas and Commissioner Marta Kos [sharply condemned](#) the first wave of legislative amendments brought by Georgian Dream, the party that declared victory in the 26 October 2024 elections and took power. The Commission and EEAS continued to hold a critical stance towards Georgian Dream and denounced its power grab, violence against peaceful protestors, and ongoing persecution and prosecution of human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars.

Paradoxically, it is in the context of its policy choices pursuant to the same war that the EU is turning a blind eye on the human rights situation in Azerbaijan.

Furthermore, in 2023 and 2024 the EU provided support for a [new project](#) caring for exiled independent journalists and media from Russia and Belarus working within the EU. This increased recognition highlighted the importance of exiled media and civil society in repressive contexts.

Yet, the EU remains blind to the needs of exiled relatives of political prisoners in Azerbaijan, as well as exiled Azerbaijani human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars, too often facing extraterritorial repression. The EU also remained largely silent to the repression in the country. It does not adapt its policies to the reality that, at the time of writing this report, there is effectively no independent civil society or media operating in the country anymore. Human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists are left without proper political support and without financial resources.

Political and financial resources for political prisoners and their relatives, human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars are even more important since the end of any support from the United States of America.

Trading Away Principles

Human Rights Crisis in Azerbaijan: The European Union Prioritises Energy and Geopolitics

At the time the EU would be more needed than ever in Azerbaijan to stand for its values and support those who promote human rights, the rule of law and independent media, its current relations with Azerbaijan suggest that human rights can be negotiable. This undermines its credibility, including with regard to its policy on situations where the EU is willing and intent to stand up for human rights and democratic values. The resolve behind Kaja Kallas' vocal and principled criticism of the crackdown in Belarus and Russia's crimes on Ukraine may seem less resolute in the face of her continued silence on the repression in Azerbaijan. The continued expression of trust in the Azerbaijani authorities by Marta Kos may make her sound less resolute and credible in addressing the situation in Georgia and the democratic backsliding in the enlargement region.

The EU's diverging policy standards toward authoritarian leaderships indeed indicate it is starting to lose touch with its founding values.

As we document in this report, the European Union's current relations with Azerbaijan suggests that it is open to value-free cooperation with an authoritarian state if there is a geopolitical or economic interest, sending a signal which can be picked up by others in the region. The EU is not only effectively giving up on human rights and the rule of law in Azerbaijan, but also weakening its credibility to contribute to peace, security, free and fair trade, and the protection of human rights.



SUPPORT THE CAMPAIGN

The Campaign to End Repression in Azerbaijan is a joint project of human rights defenders and NGOs, highlighting the systemic nature of arbitrary detention by the Azerbaijani government for over two decades.

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CAMPAIGN
TO END REPRESSION
IN AZERBAIJAN

SCAN ME



Recommendations: A Renewed Roadmap for EU Engagement for Human Rights and the Rule of Law

Recommendations to the authorities of the Republic of Azerbaijan:

- ⇒ Immediately and unconditionally release all human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars detained on politically motivated grounds and ensure their full rehabilitation, including quashing of convictions and restoration of civil and political rights.
- ⇒ Cease misuse of criminal, administrative, and tax law to harass, intimidate, or punish human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars, and ensure all proceedings meet international fair trial standards.
- ⇒ Review and fundamentally amend legislation and regulatory practice designed to restrict and control independent civil society, media and public participation, in line with European standards and implement recommendations made by the Venice Commission and other Council of Europe institutions, including by:
 - Revising laws adopted and amended since 2009 on non-governmental organisations (public associations and foundations), state registration and state register of legal entities, grants and the Code of Administrative Offences;
 - Simplifying registration of NGOs, including branches and representative offices of international organisations;
 - Removing obstacles to access to international grants and domestic donations; and
 - Ensuring that any regulation of NGOs and media is necessary, proportionate and non-discriminatory.
- ⇒ Overhaul the legal and regulatory framework governing media and information, including the restrictive Media Law and the criminalisation of defamation, to enable independent media (offline and online) to operate freely; ensure that registration, accreditation, licensing, access to funding and access to information are not used as tools of political control.
- ⇒ Implement without further delay all individual and general measures required by the European Court of Human Rights in the Mammadli Group of cases and related judgments, including full restitution for victims and structural reforms to ensure non-repetition and prevent the weaponisation of criminal law against human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars.
- ⇒ Establish a national working group to review the use of arbitrary detention and develop safeguards against its recurrence, composed of representatives of the executive, parliament, judiciary and civil society, in close cooperation with the European Union and the Council of Europe, with a mandate to propose reforms to criminal procedure, pre-trial detention, search and seizure, and remedies for abuse.
- ⇒ Guarantee the independence of the judiciary and prosecution by reforming appointment, promotion and disciplinary procedures in line with Council of Europe standards, ensuring protection from political interference and creating effective remedies against unlawful detention, unfair trials and abuse of criminal law for political purposes.
- ⇒ End practices of transnational repression targeting critics abroad, including surveillance, online intimidation, coercion by proxy, pressure on relatives, enforced returns and physical assaults; investigate past incidents, including those reported in EU Member States, and hold those responsible to account.
- ⇒ Ensure that independent civil society, including those working on elections, corruption, climate and environmental justice, can operate and participate freely in public life; end blacklisting and other measures that prevent exiled critics from returning or participating in public debates.

Recommendations to the European Commission, the European External Action Service and the European Parliament:

- ⇒ Place the protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law at the centre of any renewed EU-Azerbaijan partnership agreement and of the implementation of the 2022 energy Memorandum of Understanding, by defining and publishing clear benchmarks that include:
 - The immediate and unconditional release and full rehabilitation of those detained on politically motivated grounds, including the individuals named in this and previous reports;
 - Measurable progress in revising NGO and media legislation and practice in line with European standards and recommendations made by the Venice Commission and other Council of Europe institutions; and
 - Demonstrated cooperation with the Council of Europe and UN mechanisms, including implementation of the Mammadli Group of cases.
- ⇒ Make progress in negotiations on a new EU-Azerbaijan agreement explicitly conditional on these benchmarks and be prepared to suspend negotiations or refrain from concluding new agreements if the Azerbaijani authorities escalate repression or fail to demonstrate concrete, sustained improvement.
- ⇒ Use the leverage created by the 2022 energy MoU and by the EU's status as Azerbaijan's main export market and investor to press for human rights improvements, rather than treating energy diversification, connectivity and climate cooperation as insulated from the human rights crisis. This includes reviewing whether energy imports and projects risk undermining the EU's objective of reducing dependence on Russian fossil fuels.
- ⇒ For all senior EU visits to Azerbaijan (Council President and Commission President, VP / High Representative, Commissioners, European Parliament delegations and others), systematically:
 - Raise individual cases of political prisoners and insist on their immediate and unconditional release;
 - Request prison and court access in emblematic individuals;
 - Systematically seek and incorporate input from human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars ahead of the visit; and
 - Make public statements that link energy and political cooperation to respect for human rights and the rule of law.
- ⇒ In the European Parliament, continue to adopt strong resolutions on Azerbaijan that:
 - Use a resolution to adopt clear benchmarks as described above aimed at fixing a roadmap for the Commission and EEAS' engagement with Azerbaijan;
 - Name individual cases when they are emblematic of patterns of repression;
 - Condemn the misuse of criminal and administrative law to silence critics;
 - Call for legislative and policy reforms aligned with European standards and recommendations made by the Venice Commission and other Council of Europe institutions; and
 - Insist that parliamentary cooperation and inter-parliamentary diplomacy are conditioned on measurable progress on these points.
- ⇒ Make full use of the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime by imposing targeted sanctions (travel bans and asset freezes) on officials and entities responsible for serious human rights violations in Azerbaijan, including those involved in the arbitrary arrest, prosecution and ill-treatment of human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars, and those obstructing the execution of ECtHR judgments.
- ⇒ Strengthen and adapt EU political and financial support to independent Azerbaijani civil society and media, inside and outside the country, including by:
 - Establishing flexible, rapid-response funding mechanisms modelled on support to Belarusian civil society;
 - Expanding emergency support, relocation and protection programmes for at risk human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars;
 - Supporting exiled media and civic initiatives hosted in EU Member States; and
 - Enabling independent Azerbaijani actors to participate meaningfully in EU, Council of Europe, OSCE and UN processes.

- ⇒ In the EU Delegation to Azerbaijan, adopt a robust human rights country strategy that prioritises:
- Systematic trial monitoring of politically sensitive cases and public reporting on patterns;
 - Regular outreach to families of political prisoners and exiled activists;
 - Consistent engagement with independent civil society, especially civil society in exile; and
 - Active follow-up on the implementation of Council of Europe and UN recommendations

Recommendations to EU Member States:

- ⇒ Align bilateral engagement with Azerbaijan, including energy contracts, trade, security and climate cooperation, with EU-level human rights benchmarks and messages; refrain from concluding or deepening bilateral arrangements that undercut EU conditionality or signal political endorsement in the absence of human rights progress.
- ⇒ In bilateral contacts at all levels (heads of state and government, foreign ministers, ministers, ambassadors and parliamentary delegations), consistently:
- Raise individual cases of political prisoners and insist on their immediate and unconditional release;
 - Request prison and court access in emblematic individuals;
 - Systematically seek and incorporate input from human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars ahead of the visit; and
 - Make public statements that link energy and political cooperation to respect for human rights and the rule of law.
- ⇒ Ensure regular diplomatic presence at court hearings and, where possible, in detention facilities in cases involving human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars; share trial-monitoring findings within the EU and with Council of Europe and UN mechanisms.
- ⇒ Scale up political, financial and practical support to Azerbaijani human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and media workers, politicians and civic activists, academics and scholars in exile, for example through:
- Relocation schemes, fellowships and temporary protection measures;
 - Support to exiled NGOs and media outlets; and
 - Facilitating their safe engagement with EU institutions, Council of Europe mechanisms, OSCE structures and UN processes.

Methodology

Drawing from the work of the collective of human rights defenders and lawyers and NGOs involved in the Campaign to End Repression in Azerbaijan, this report was drafted by an independent human rights expert hired by [Progress & Change Partnerships](#) which serves as the secretariat of the Campaign, on behalf of its Steering Committee.

Research and Drafting

The researcher undertook their research based on first-hand material made available to them by the Campaign and its partners, interviews they conducted with members of the Steering Committee and human rights and policy experts, and second-hand material gathered through desk-research and as follow-up to the interviews.

Steering Committee members, human rights lawyer Samed Rahimli and economist and human rights defender Zohrab Ismayil, have greatly contributed to the research and drafting of the report.

The researcher worked independently and made an initial draft report available for peer-review by the Steering Committee.

The research for this report scrupulously adhered to the [Lund-London Guidelines on International Human Rights Fact-Finding Visits and Reports](#).

In drafting this report, we decided to include the references directly through hyperlinks rather than to use notes. This responds to the analytics related to our previous reports, showing they were mainly read on mobile devices. Would you need additional information on references, please do contact the publisher at info@endrepression-az.org. We also decided not to include a list of abbreviations, as those we use are very common and our target audience will know most of them.

The publication process was led by Florian Irminger, President, Progress & Change Partnerships.

Definition of Political Prisoners

There is no “one” definition of a political prisoner. In writing this report, we have taken the definition to encompass all individuals whose liberty has been deprived arbitrarily or inconsistently, in line with the international standards set forth in the European Convention on Human Rights and its Protocols. In *short*, “a political prisoner is a person who is deprived of his or her liberty for political rather than strictly legal and acceptable motives”.

Our findings guide us in indicating that such individuals are political prisoners. Similarly, other groups are guided by their findings in indicating who is a political prisoner. Thus, when referring to the work of others, their work is quoted and referenced in the report. In certain cases, the arbitrariness of the detention has been confirmed by independent authorities, such as the European Court of Human Rights.

To guide us in our findings, we strictly adhered to the principles set forth by Judge Stefan Trechsel (see, Stefan Trechsel, “The notion of ‘political prisoner’ as defined for the purpose of identifying political prisoners in Armenia and Azerbaijan,” *Human Rights Law Journal*, Vol. 23, pp. 293-300 (December 2002)) and PACE Resolution 1900 (2012), on the basis of the independent assessment commissioned by Council of Europe Secretary General on the definition of “political prisoners” by Stefan Trechsel, Evert Alkema and Alexander Arabadjiev.

For ease of reference, we present a summary of the [criteria](#) which guided us in our work:

A person deprived of his or her personal liberty is to be regarded as a “political prisoner”:

- a. If the detention has been imposed in violation of one of the fundamental guarantees set out in the ECHR and its Protocols, in particular freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of expression and information, freedom of assembly and association;
- b. If the detention has been imposed for purely political reasons without connection to any offence;
- c. If, for political motives, the length of the detention or its conditions are clearly out of proportion to the offence the person has been found guilty of or is suspected of;
- d. If, for political motives, he or she is detained in a discriminatory manner as compared to other persons; or

If the detention is the result of proceedings which were clearly unfair and this appears to be connected with political motives of the authorities.

For the EU, Principles Became Optional with Azerbaijan

This report by the Campaign to End Repression in Azerbaijan examines how the European Union has deprioritised human rights in its relationship with Azerbaijan, as energy and geopolitical considerations have taken precedence. It outlines how this policy shift coincides with the human rights crisis inside the country, marked by record numbers of political prisoners, the dismantling of civil society and independent media, and expanding transnational repression. Drawing on extensive analysis of EU-Azerbaijan relations since 1999, the report highlights the consequences of EU silence, the erosion of values-based cooperation, and the risks this poses for the EU's credibility and long-term strategic interests.

Conclusion

Only a return to clear human rights benchmarks, political conditionality and principled engagement will allow the EU to restore its credibility and prevent Azerbaijan from treating repression as a cost-free choice.

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