

Testimony to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

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I am grateful to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for holding this very important hearing and for giving me the opportunity to speak about repression against civil society in Azerbaijan. I want to thank Congressman Chris Smith for his decades of tireless advocacy for human rights in Azerbaijan and for consistently using his platform to shine a light on political repression and demand accountability.

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a private, nonprofit foundation dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world. Each year, NED makes more than 2,000 grants to support the projects of non-governmental groups abroad who are working for democratic goals in more than 100 countries. NED has supported civil society in Azerbaijan since the 1990s.

**Political Context:** Azerbaijan uses sophisticated diplomatic tactics to blunt international criticism of their repressive and kleptocratic system. In addition to employing “caviar diplomacy,” which includes bribes, gifts, and favors for foreign officials and parliamentarians, Azerbaijan is very adept at the use of diplomatic foils to remain in the good graces of western governments even as it violates every norm and value that should underpin those relationships. In one famous instance, an Italian MEP Luka Velonte was sentenced to four years in jail for accepting bribes from Azerbaijan to derail the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe’s

(PACE) response to Azerbaijan's human rights abuses.<sup>1</sup> After extensive investigation, PACE disciplined the MEPs involved and Azerbaijan eventually lost its seat in the body.

Azerbaijan took a profound authoritarian turn in 2013 adopting legislation hostile to media and civil society and putting many prominent public figures in jail. Since Russia's 2022 full scale invasion of Ukraine, Europe became more motivated to move away from Russian gas, increasing imports from Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has grown even more adept at using these assets to preempt any attempt at domestic or international accountability. However, as research by Dr. Gubad Ibadoglu indicates, Azerbaijan can only meet increasing demand for gas in Europe through swaps with Russia and Iran.<sup>2</sup> A new pipeline from Russia to Iran through Azerbaijan is also being projected, which would further strengthen Azerbaijan's hand in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Iran and Azerbaijan also held military exercises recently.

Similarly, Azerbaijan uses the peace process with Armenia to avoid accountability for human rights abuses. There were expectations that permitting Azerbaijan to host COP would lead to human rights improvements and to a peace agreement with Armenia. It was expected that the peace process would be completed prior to the conference, instead the COP turned into an embarrassing confrontation with President Aliyev, who used the occasion to praise the oil and gas industry, showing he did not share even the basic environmental premises of the event. The desire to bring the conflict with Armenia to a close shaped how the United States Government

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<sup>1</sup> For details please see report by European Stability Initiative "Caviar Diplomacy" <https://www.esiweb.org/proposals/caviar-diplomacy> and report by OCCRP "Azerbaijan Laundromat" [The Azerbaijani Laundromat | OCCRP](#).

<sup>2</sup> Ibadoglu, Gubad, Three Key Factors Reducing Oil Revenues in Azerbaijan (August 09, 2024). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4920430> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4920430>

<sup>33</sup> [Russia, Iran agree on gas pipeline route via Azerbaijan, talks in final stage — minister - Business & Economy - TASS](#)

under the last administration approached human rights and democracy issues with Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, far from paving the way to the release of prisoners, reform of restrictive norms, or a peace treaty, Azerbaijan continued to arrest more journalists, scholars, and activists and drag out the peace negotiations, while simultaneously strengthening ties with US adversaries such as Iran, Russia, and China.

### **Political Prisoners:**

There are 350 political prisoners in Azerbaijan<sup>4</sup>. I wish I could name each one here. I will limit myself to four cases:

**Dr. Gubad Ibadoglu** is a highly respected economist who has dedicated his career to anti-corruption work through the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and other efforts to instill transparency into the hydrocarbon industry. He is a refugee from Nagorno-Karabakh. When he was arrested in July 2023, Dr. Ibadoglu was preparing to publish a study on wastefulness in government contracts for construction in Nagorno-Karabakh relative to very low rates of returning residents. He is a diabetic with a heart condition which was aggravated in prison. Dr. Ibadoglu had lived in the US both as Reagan- Fascell Fellow and subsequently taught at Rutgers University. After nearly a year in jail and numerous high-level calls for his release, including from Secretary of State Blinken, he was transferred to house arrest. He remains in legal limbo, still facing a legal case and unable to leave the country for medical care. His family's properties have been seized, and a criminal case has been opened against his brother, Galib Bayramov. Dr. Ibadoglu reports suffering ill treatment from Iftikhar Gurbanov, Deputy Chief of

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<sup>4</sup> Please see the website [Anar Mammadli Campaign to end repression in Azerbaijan](#) |for more information on political prisoners in Azerbaijan.

the Medical Department of the Ministry of Justice who had similarly mistreated famous human rights activists Arif and Leyla Yunus during their imprisonment.

**Anar Mammadli** is an expert in election observation, having run the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center for nearly 20 years. In 2013 he was sentenced to 5 years and 6 months on politically motivated charges after critical reporting on the presidential elections in 2013. While in prison, he received the Vaclav Havel Prize from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 2014. He won a case in the ECHR which found multiple violations. Mammadli was released in 2016. In 2024, Mammadli co-founded the Climate of Justice Initiative ahead of COP29, with the purpose of calling for the release of political prisoners in Azerbaijan. Mammadli was re-arrested following his critical reports on the snap presidential elections held on 7 February 2024 and a critical speech in the side event at UN Human Rights Council on 15 March 2024, mirroring the circumstances of his 2013 arrest.<sup>5</sup>

**Media Case:** The defendants — *Abzas Media* Director Ulvi Hasanli, Editor-in-Chief Sevinj Vagifqizi, Deputy Director Mahammad Kekalov, journalists Nargiz Absalamova and Elnara Gasimova, as well as Editor of *Turan*'s Economic Department Hafiz Babali, and economist and *RFE/RL* journalist Farid Mehralizada. All have been in pre-trial detention for about a year. They object to judges assigned to their case, Rasim Sadikhov and Novruz Karimov, who made politicized judgments against lawyer Intigam Aliev whose case was found to have multiple violations by the ECHR. This case, like the others, is an effort to punish critics and stifle civil society.

**Tofiq Yagublu:**

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<sup>5</sup> [Critical speech](#)

Tofiq Yagublu is an opposition politician and democracy proponent who has been a leader of the Musavat Party and a member of the National Council of Democratic Forces. On December 14, 2023, he was imprisoned for the third time on politically motivated charges. After a sham trial, he was sentenced to nine years in prison on March 10, 2025. Yagublu has been on hunger strike to protest his unlawful conviction since April 1, and after 27 days was transferred to the prison hospital on April 28, where he remains in critical condition.

I'm grateful to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for the opportunity to raise these cases and welcome your questions.