

# **AZERBAIJAN: Bullet for Critics, Free Housing for Propagandists**

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"You can cut all the flowers but you cannot keep Spring from coming."

— Pablo Neruda

During the cold war, the Soviet Union kept its citizens in an information vacuum by jamming of Russian-language broadcasts by the Radio Liberty, the Voice of America, BBC, Deutsche Welle, and other foreign radio stations. But even that system had cracks. Those who wanted to continue tuning in to alternative opinions - along with jazz and rock music - would find a way to fight censorship and access the information they need.

Azerbaijan is an oil and gas-rich country on the western shore of the Caspian Sea, which gained formal independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991.

With its utterly gorgeous capital, designer boutiques, ultra-modern skyscrapers, luxurious resorts, and perhaps the best music festivals in the region, Azerbaijan still resembles the Soviet Union as the regime there has managed to "preserve" and even further embrace the very Soviet culture of repression and censorship of free press and critics.

In Azerbaijan, there is a brave group of men and women who consider publishing that could mean they were imprisoned for a lengthy time, locked in a psychiatrist clinic or forced into exile. And, there is the general public, who consider finding a way to access to reliable information, just like their parents did during the Soviet era.

There are almost no independent media left in the country, critical journalists have been silenced -- at least in two cases with murder -- or put behind bars, and the intensity of state propaganda rivaled even the Soviet days. In recent years, international NGOs and foundations have been kicked out of the country. Azerbaijani media and freedom of expression NGOs have been harassed and forced to close.

The country's best journalists, bloggers and activists -- have been harassed, jailed, beaten, killed, and forced into hiding or exile. Foreign journalists -- perceived as potential threats to the glamorous and modern image of the country promoted by the regime -- have been banned from entering the country. Media laws have been further tightened, and the possibility of imposing restrictions on Internet use have been further explored, with plans by the Ministry of Communications to license Facebook, WhatsApp and Skype, on top of the on-going crackdown on online activists and bloggers.

## ***Imprisoned for being tortured***

Azerbaijan's most popular blogger Mehman Huseynov knew the risks he was taking. In a series of articles, Huseynov had campaigned against the local administration and alleged corruption by senior government officials. He had received numerous threats. The Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) -- the organisation Mehman was chairing and which used to be a home for critical journalists and activists -- had been shut down. His brother Emin Huseynov has been harassed and prosecuted for his press freedom work and eventually forced into exile.

On 9 January 2017, a group of plain-clothes officers attacked Mehman, blindfolded and gagged him with towels, forced a bag over his head and took him to the police station, where police used an electroshock weapon on his groin, and punched him, bloodying his nose. The next day, officers took him before a court that found him guilty of disobeying police orders and fined him 200 manat (US\$120). In March 2017, a Baku court sentenced him to two years in prison on charges of defaming an entire police station, after he gave a statement in front of the courthouse in which he described the abuses he had suffered at that police station.

### ***The Danger of Investigating Top Level Corruption***

In 2015, reporters from the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) published a story titled “Offshores Close to President Paid Nothing for State Share of Telecom”. The story revealed that Azerbaijanis lost more than USD 600 million in a deal that made no sense except for a murky offshore connection to President Aliyev.

The OCCRP story was based on original reporting by Khadija Ismayilova, the award-winning investigative journalist who has repeatedly exposed corruption amongst the highest echelons of Azerbaijan’s political elite – including the ruling Aliyev family.

In reaction to the OCCRP story, Ismayilova, who was by that time in prison on bogus criminal charges, wrote: “This investigation, along with others, is the reason for my arrest. More investigations of this kind are needed. That’s because black money helps governments to keep their nations enslaved”.

Several months later, when delivering a defiant closing statement in a Baku courtroom before her conviction and sentencing to seven and a half years in prison, Ismayilova would remark on the irony of the situation: that the government had accused her of tax evasion, embezzlement and abuse of power -- the very crimes among officials she had sought to expose in her investigative reporting.

During the trial, not a single witness testified against Ismayilova. However, this fact did not prevent the court from convicting her on charges of tax evasion, illegal entrepreneurship, and abuse of power. The “express” trial, which was conducted with few independent observers allowed in, made a mockery of the Azerbaijani judicial system.

Whilst behind bars, Ismayilova saw her friends and colleagues sentenced to lengthy jail terms one after another; it is in detention that she learned that another journalist – someone covering her trial – had been brutally beaten and later died in hospital due to a lack of proper medical care.

Ismayilova was eventually released in 2016 but she is not free—the regime has imposed a travel ban on her.

### ***A fatal bullet for pursuing investigative journalism***

In March 2005, *Monitor* magazine editor-in-chief Elmar Huseynov was murdered in a well-organised attack that appeared to be a contract-style killing. After receiving a number of death threats, he was gunned down in the stairwell of his apartment building in Baku, where he died on the scene. More than twelve years later, the authorities have failed to adequately investigate this case and no one has been brought to justice for the attack. Huseynov was well known as a hard-hitting investigative journalist who was highly critical of the authorities. His case has become deeply symbolic, reminding the Azerbaijani media community of the courage needed to pursue investigative journalism and of the inherent risks associated with this work.

### ***Propaganda and loyalty awards***

Similarly to what predecessors did during the Soviet era , Azerbaijan has been employing so-called a carrot and stick approach. In the Soviet Union, loyal "intelligentsia" -- academics, journalists, and writers -- were entitled to many state privileges including spacious apartments in downtown Moscow or then-Leningrad ( now Saint Petersburg).

Inspired by their Soviet past, the Azerbaijan government has been providing free housing for journalists in the capital Baku. Yet another, but an even more sophisticated tactic to tighten state control of the media. The independent groups in Azerbaijan have argued that a free apartment in the new building is nothing but a bribe, threatening press freedom and making it harder for journalists to defy the authorities.

The government controls all national television channels and most newspapers, news agencies and web portals - leaving journalists and bloggers who work for independent publications increasingly vulnerable and exposed.

In addition to this, the authorities have been employing an army of bloggers and trolls to get its pro-regime message across.

### ***Conclusion***

The stories of Mehman Huseynov, Khadija Ismayilova, and Elmar Huseynov is a graphic illustration of the dangers of working as a journalist in Azerbaijan.

But these stories are also a brilliant example of courage, resilience, and perseverance. While reporting the truth in Azerbaijan is almost a suicidal mission there are brave men and women, taking risks to push back against control.

Indeed, "you can cut all the flowers, but you cannot keep Spring from coming."