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Presentation before the European Broadcasting Union-organized
Workshop on Media Freedom in Azerbaijan

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Dear workshop organizers and participants,

While Azerbaijan prepares to host Eurovision, the international song contest that will gather journalists from more than 40 participating countries later this month and fix the world's eyes on Baku, the country's current state of press freedom is alarming.

Journalists in Azerbaijan continue to suffer violent attacks in retaliation for their work as impunity for their attackers endures. Investigative and critical reporters find themselves the subject of smear campaigns, including in the state-controlled media, designed to stop them from illuminating inconvenient or embarrassing government truths. Authorities continue to favor politically motivated prosecutions and imprisonments as a method to silence critics. Long-lasting impunity in the 2005 murder of prominent independent editor [Elmar Huseynov](#) and, most recently, of freelance reporter [Rafiq Tagi](#), who died in a hospital in late November after suffering a stabbing attack, continue to inspire self-censorship in the embattled press corps.

The ugly intimidation campaign launched against prominent journalist [Khadija Ismailova](#) just as she was investigating President Ilham Aliyev's family's alleged interests in lucrative construction projects in Baku; the recent [wave of imprisonments](#) of independent and pro-opposition journalists (at least six are now behind bars); and the brutal attack on award-winning reporter and media freedom defender [Idrak Abbasov](#)—as well as attacks on four other independent journalists—have all taken place just weeks before Eurovision.

Such a crackdown on the press is unacceptable at any time, but is especially so when Azerbaijan aspires to present a positive image abroad as the host of the popular international song contest.

In fact, [Azerbaijan has so far spent a higher amount](#) on the event than any Eurovision host in the contest's history, according to an independent investigation by the online newsmagazine *Transitions Online* (TOL). Expenses for related construction and logistics add up to 566.6 million manat (US\$721 million), TOL reported. (Those include the costs of Eurovision venue and new road construction; work on a backup contest venue; the renovation of a downtown square; the relocation of residents displaced by contest-related construction; and the purchase of transport vehicles.) By comparison, the highest-costing Eurovision contest to date was the Russia-hosted event in 2009; estimated cost for that contest was US\$44 million, TOL said.

In the words of Mehish Ahmedov, the head of the economic regulation department at the State Economic University in Azerbaijan and a member of the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan party: "It is very important for Azerbaijan to make itself recognized in the world. There is no better opportunity

than Eurovision to show the world ... that we have a developed economy, we have good infrastructure.... Constructing a small bridge can cost several hundred million. This is a bridge to the future. We should spend as much money as necessary to make it good.”

But Azerbaijani authorities’ efforts to polish the country’s image will be meaningless if they continue to fail miserably at the test that any developed country which aspires for international recognition must pass—a tolerance for a free press. By implementing systematic reforms to improve press freedom conditions, investigating attacks on the press and bringing the responsible to justice, and embracing a zero-tolerance policy toward enemies of the press, Azerbaijan could reverse its poor democratic record and invest in its future in a meaningful way.

Azerbaijan must start by immediately releasing the [six journalists](#) it currently jails in retaliation for their work, scrapping all criminal charges against them, and allowing them to do their work without fear of reprisal. In addition, authorities must investigate and prosecute all responsible for mounting an [intimidation and smear campaign](#) against reporter Khadija Ismailova; investigate and prosecute all those culpable for the [April 18 violent attack](#) on journalist Idrak Abbasov and his colleagues Gyunai Musayeva, Esmir Dzhavadova, Galib Hasanov, and Elnur Mammedov; decriminalize defamation without delay and cease the use of the criminal code as a means to punish critical journalists; allow [international journalists](#) to report independently and without obstruction in Azerbaijan; and publicly reconfirm the commitment to international press freedom and freedom of expression obligations.

The Eurovision contest provides a particularly beneficial opening for international engagement and constructive pressure on Azerbaijan. But those should not be limited to the timeframe and peg of the song contest. Press freedom conditions in Azerbaijan must be in the limelight constantly so that the press corps can feel the support of the global press freedom and human rights community at their side at all times, both now and after Eurovision.

According to Azerbaijan’s [Presidential Library](#), Azerbaijan is a member of 32 international and regional organizations, including the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the United Nations. Azerbaijan also participates in the European Commission’s [European Neighborhood Policy \(ENP\)](#), a partnership agreement with the European Union that provides economic incentives in exchange for commitment to reforms, including in the sphere of human rights. Through the ENP, Azerbaijan regularly receives aid and investment from the European Union.

But those partnerships come with adopted commitments. Under its membership in the Council of Europe alone, Azerbaijan has ratified [more than 50 treaties](#) since it joined the organization in 2001. That includes the [Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms](#), whose Article 10 guarantees freedom of expression, including the “freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authorities and regardless of frontiers.” As a [member of the United Nations](#), Azerbaijan has adopted the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), whose Article 19 guarantees “the right to hold opinions without interference” and the freedom “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media.” Azerbaijan must be held to these commitments, and

the international community must not shy away from penalizing Baku for failing to adhere to them, even if that includes withholding economic aid. International partners must make investment and trade agreements, as well as other incentives, contingent on Azerbaijan's specific improvements of press freedom conditions.

With its oil supplies and geographic placement, Azerbaijan has been an important energy security and anti-terrorism partner for both the European Union and the United States—oil in the Caspian Sea provides an alternative to Russian and Persian Gulf supplies, and the West needs a stable ally along Iran's border. These interests have muted political criticism by international institutions, but security interests must never push human rights concerns to the backseat. With an ever-widening gap between the positive image Azerbaijan tries to project abroad in the run-up to Eurovision and its treatment of the independent press at home, international engagement to improve conditions for journalists is now more relevant than ever. This is also the time when Baku will find it virtually impossible to ignore international criticism; it will be prompted to respond in a substantive way rather than with its customary defiance.

International leaders must raise concrete press freedom concerns and specific cases of abuse and demand redress at every opportunity in bilateral and multilateral meetings with their Azerbaijani counterparts. They ought to do so in consultation with the independent journalist and media freedom community of Azerbaijan as well as with international organizations that monitor and document press freedom issues in the country and advocate for journalist rights.

With specific regard to Eurovision, the [European Broadcasting Union](#) (EBU), which oversees the organization of the contest, has a significant role to play in supporting press freedom in Azerbaijan. Even though the EBU has [repeatedly said](#) that it believes Eurovision is [not political](#), it has the duty to raise press freedom concerns with Azerbaijani authorities; failure to do so will be perceived as a carte blanche by the enemies of the free press. Assured in their impunity, they will continue to crack down on critical voices. The organizing of this workshop is a good first step toward the EBU's engagement on press freedom in Azerbaijan, but it must be just the preamble to substantive dialogue with Azerbaijani state representatives. Without follow-up, this workshop would be perceived as an afterthought, easy to ignore by authorities eager to keep rights violations under the glitzy wraps of Eurovision.

Here are specific steps the EBU ought to take next:

- As an overseer of the Eurovision international song contest, the EBU must publicly condemn Azerbaijan's harassment of foreign journalists who travel to the country to cover human rights violations and are often obstructed on the job.
- As a union of broadcasters, the EBU must publicly call on Azerbaijan to allow international broadcasters, such as Radio Free Europe /Radio Liberty and Voice of America, to broadcast on national frequencies.
- The EBU must adopt an active rather than neutral position on press freedom violations in Azerbaijan and publicly condemn them as they happen.
- The EBU must bring concerns discussed here to Azerbaijan's government and President Ilham Aliyev in particular, and urge him to publicly pledge to address those concerns.

Thank you for your attention.