



JOINT STATEMENT

Azerbaijan: Sport for Rights coalition condemns sentencing of journalist Khadija Ismayilova

The Sport for Rights coalition strongly condemns the sentencing of Azerbaijani journalist Khadija Ismayilova to a staggering 7.5 years in jail. On 1 September, the Baku Court of Grave Crimes convicted Ismayilova on charges of embezzlement, illegal entrepreneurship, tax evasion, and abuse of office. Ismayilova was acquitted of the charge of inciting someone to attempt suicide. Sport for Rights considers the charges against Ismayilova to be politically motivated and connected to her work as an investigative journalist, particularly her exposure of corruption among the ruling Azerbaijani elite.

"We condemn today's verdict in the case of Khadija Ismayilova, which puts an outrageous yet expected ending to the grotesque proceedings against her", CPJ Europe and Central Asia Program Coordinator Nina Ognianova said. "The time for business as usual with Azerbaijan is over. We call on Baku's counterparts in the international community to make no further dealings with this highly repressive state until Ismayilova is unconditionally released and fully acquitted of all fabricated accusations".

"Khadija Ismayilova's trial failed to meet minimum fair trial guarantees, a pattern that has been regularly observed by IPHR's monitors in similar cases in Azerbaijan", said Brigitte Dufour, IPHR Director. "The defence's motions are routinely rejected, which runs contrary to the principle of equality of arms - a cornerstone of the right to a fair trial - and indicates that the judges in these trials are openly siding with the prosecution".

One of Azerbaijan's most prominent investigative journalists, Ismayilova is also among the most courageous, one of very few willing to report on risky topics such as human rights violations and corruption. In the months leading to her arrest in December 2014, Ismayilova was aware she could be targeted, which she linked to her investigations into the business interests of President Ilham Aliyev's family. Despite being warned not to return to the country from trips abroad – during which she spoke at international organisations on abuses taking place in Azerbaijan – Ismayilova persisted, speaking out critically until her arrest, and even afterwards, in letters smuggled out from jail.

Sport for Rights believes that in jailing Ismayilova, the Azerbaijani authorities sought to silence her critical voice before the country faced increased international media attention during the inaugural European Games, which took place in Baku in June 2015. Sport for Rights has referred to Ismayilova as a "Prisoner of the European Games" – along with human rights defenders Leyla and Arif Yunus, Rasul Jafarov, and Intigam Aliyev, who were also arrested in the run-up to the games.

"For her thorough and fearless investigative journalism, which has uncovered corruption at the highest levels of power, Khadija has earned numerous accolades, including PEN American's 2015 Barbara Goldsmith/Freedom to Write Award", said Karin Deutsch Karlekar, director of Free Expression programmes at PEN American Center. "However, speaking the truth has grave consequences in Azerbaijan, where independent reporting has been all but extinguished through farcical trials, imprisonment, murder, and other forms of severe harassment. We demand that the government cease this unprecedented witch-hunt against journalists and their family members, and enable Azerbaijani citizens to freely access a range of news and information".

The harsh sentencing of Ismayilova is the latest incident in an unprecedented crackdown being carried out by the Azerbaijani authorities to silence all forms of criticism and dissent. Less than two weeks before Ismayilova's verdict, the same court sentenced human rights defenders Leyla

and Arif Yunus to 8.5 and seven years in jail, respectively. Authorities have so far disregarded the widespread calls for humanitarian release of the couple, who both suffer serious health problems that continue to worsen in custody. Human rights defenders Intigam Aliyev, Rasul Jafarov, and Anar Mammadli are also serving staggering sentences of 7.5 years, six years and three months (recently reduced from 6.5 years by the appellate court), and 5.5 years, respectively, all on politically motivated charges.

The situation for journalists is also dire. On 9 August, journalist and chairman of the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety Rasim Aliyev died in hospital after being severely beaten the previous day. Aliyev had reported receiving threats in the weeks leading to the attack, and the police failed to provide him with protection. This attack followed an earlier high-level threat against an Azerbaijani journalist, Berlin-based Meydan TV Director Emin Milli, in connection with his critical reporting on the European Games. In addition to Ismayilova, journalists Nijat Aliyev, Araz Guliyev, Parviz Hashimli, Seymur Hezi, Hilal Mammadov, Rauf Mirkadirov, and Tofiq Yagublu are also behind bars on politically motivated charges.

The Sport for Rights coalition reiterates its call for Ismayilova's immediate and unconditional release, as well as the release of the other jailed journalists and human rights defenders in Azerbaijan. The coalition also calls for the Azerbaijani government to take immediate and concrete steps to improve the broader human rights situation in the country, particularly in the context of the upcoming November parliamentary elections. Without independent media coverage, including critical voices such as Ismayilova's, the elections cannot be considered free and fair. Finally, Sport for Rights calls for greater vigilance by the international community to developments in the country, and increased efforts to hold the Azerbaijani government accountable to its international human rights obligations.

Supporting organisations:

ARTICLE 19

Civil Rights Defenders

Committee to Protect Journalists

Freedom Now

Front Line Defenders

Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights

Human Rights House Foundation (HRRF)

Index on Censorship

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

International Media Support (IMS)

International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR)

NESEHNUTI

Norwegian Helsinki Committee

PEN American Center

People in Need

Platform

Polish Green Network

Solidarity with Belarus Information Office

World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders