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Azerbaijan: Human rights defenders Ulvi Hasanli and Sevinc Vaqifqizi detained for 4 months

On 21 November 2023, the Khatai District Court in Baku placed human rights defender and journalist **Ulvi Hasanli**, and woman human rights defender and journalist **Sevinc Vaqifqizi**, in pre-trial detention for 4 months. The human rights defenders are being investigated for “conspiring to bring money into the country unlawfully,” a criminal offence articulated in Article 206.3.2 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan. If charged, they face up to eight years in prison.

[Abzas Media](#) is a human rights online media outlet in Azerbaijan. The focus of its work involves investigating corruption within the Azerbaijani authorities. [Ulvi Hasanli](#) is a human rights defender and journalist, as well as the director of Abzas Media, a role he has held since 2016. He strives to expose the negative impact of corruption in society and show how it deepens power imbalances and socio-economic inequality in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Previously, Ulvi Hasanli led numerous pro-democracy youth organisations, including Dalga, Free Youth Movement and NIDA youth movement. These organisations work to advance democratic and social change in Azerbaijan. [Sevinc Vaqifqizi](#) is a woman human rights defender and journalist, as well as the editor-in chief of Abzas Media; she has documented and exposed high-level corruption, including allegations against high-ranking officials – even the President and members of his family. She previously worked as a local journalist for exile-based independent media outlet Meydan TV for 9 years.

On 20 November 2023, law enforcement officers detained Ulvi Hasanli while he was travelling to Baku Airport and brought him to the Baku City Police Department. The authorities also raided his house and the premises of the Abzas Media newsroom, and claimed that they found EUR 40,000 during the 5-hour raid. Abzas Media have suggested that the money was planted specifically to target the human rights defender. The authorities interrogated Ulvi Hasanli, primarily in relation to the investigations at Abzas Media into alleged corruption by state authorities. They reportedly beat the human rights defender during the interrogation.

When commenting on the detention of the human rights defender Ulvi Hasanli, the woman human rights defender Sevinc Vaqifqizi, the editor-in chief of Abzas Media, stated that Ulvi Hasanli’s arrest is directly related to the investigative work by the media outlet into the corruption schemes related to state authorities and businesses in Nagorno-Karabakh. On 21 November 2023, at 1:30 am, law enforcement officers detained woman human rights defender Sevinc Vaqifqizi, the editor-in chief of Abzas Media, when she returned to Baku from Istanbul. The authorities also raided her home.

This is not the first time the woman human rights defender and journalist has been targeted in recent years. Azerbaijani authorities previously barred Sevinc Vaqifqizi from travelling abroad, subjecting her to a travel ban between 2015 and 2019. In 2021, she was one of the journalists whose devices were targeted as part of a ‘Pegasus’ cyber attack – a spyware used by various governments, including Azerbaijan, to survey and disrupt the work of human rights defenders, organisations and journalists.

Throughout the last decade, Azerbaijani authorities have been systemically targeting human rights defenders in the country, through a major crackdown on basic rights and freedoms. A number of legislative amendments have been adopted in recent years that restrict the work of human rights defenders and which put their activities under strict governmental control. The round up of the most prominent human rights defenders, and their subsequent trials and imprisonment throughout the

2010s, contributed to the growing authoritarianism in Azerbaijan. In recent years, authorities have orchestrated several crackdowns on human rights lawyers, LGBTQI+ human rights defenders, women's rights defenders, and investigative journalists.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the unjustified arrest and pre-trial detention of human rights defenders and journalists Ulvi Hasanli and Sevinc Vaqifqizi, based on fabricated charges which, this organisation believes, are being used to target the human rights defenders for their legitimate and peaceful human rights work. Front Line Defenders condemns this violent repression of human rights defenders, which may have a chilling effect on civil society, undermining hopes of a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders to carry out their work in Azerbaijan.

Front Line Defenders calls upon the authorities of Azerbaijan to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release the human rights defenders and journalists Ulvi Hasanli and Sevinc Vaqifqizi and ensure their physical and psychological integrity;
2. Drop all charges against human rights defenders and journalists Ulvi Hasanli and Sevinc Vaqifqizi;
3. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the allegations of physical violence against Ulvi Hasanli, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Azerbaijan are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisal and free from all restrictions, including judicial harassment.