

Azerbaijani Journalist Fears Arrest As Part Of Continuing Crackdown

By Robert Coalson

An Azerbaijani investigative journalist has been told that she faces arrest upon her return to Baku from a trip to meet with members of the Parliamentary Assembly of Europe (PACE) in Strasbourg.

Khadija Ismayilova, who is known for her extensive reporting on the business interests of the family of Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev and who hosts a daily program for RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service, said a criminal libel case has been opened against her and she has been ordered to appear in court on October 3.

"I have been warned that, upon returning from my trip, I will be facing arrest and maybe this is another way to warn me," she told RFE/RL in a telephone interview. "I believe they want me either not to go back to Azerbaijan or to be scared and not be loud about things in Azerbaijan. They have to understand that this is not the way to deal with me."

Ismayilova sees the case as part of a broader crackdown against civil society that has been going on in Azerbaijan since Baku took over the chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in May. According to local rights activists, there are currently 98 political prisoners in Azerbaijan, including 14 independent journalists and bloggers.

The case against Ismayilova centers on a purported document that she posted on social media alleging that the Azerbaijani secret services used an explicit, illegally filmed sex tape to blackmail an opposition activist into informing on other opposition figures.

Ismayilova says she deleted the name and all references to the individual in question, but he has nonetheless filed a criminal-libel complaint against her.

'Disabled' Civil Society

She says her purpose was to expose the government's use of this tactic.

"The Ministry of National Security of Azerbaijan and the special services of Azerbaijan are notorious for using secretly filmed sexual-life tapes against their critics," she told RFE/RL. "It has been used against me. It has been used against others. For me, this criminal case will be an opportunity to highlight this [practice] in Azerbaijan."

"I am not avoiding prosecution," Ismayilova said. "I am eager to go and I really look forward to having a loud discussion about the methods the special services of Azerbaijan are using against their critics."

Last year, a website connected with the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party published an article under the headline "Khadija's Armenian Mother Should Die" that included the name of the neighborhood in Baku where Ismayilova's mother lives. It also included the address of Ismayilova's sister, who was accused of being a "pimp" involved in "sex trafficking" in Turkey.

In 2012, an illegally obtained explicit video of her was published on the Internet.

Ismayilova says that her lawyer is among those who have been jailed during the crackdown and the Baku-based Media Rights Institute, which has been defending her, has been effectively shut down.

"Institutionally, civil society has been disabled in Azerbaijan," she said. "There are a few individuals left, and they are trying to silence these individuals by these means."

She added that she traveled to Strasbourg because all the rights activists who met with European parliamentarians in previous years have either been jailed or are in hiding.

"Khadija's role in Azerbaijani civil society cannot be overstated," says former U.S. diplomat and independent rights activist Rebecca Vincent in an email interview. "She is a fearless investigative journalist, one of the few in the country willing to examine taboo topics such as corruption among the ruling elite."

"Khadija's arrest would be a major blow to the already embattled independent media and human rights community," she added.

Ismayilova says she will not consider remaining abroad.

"I'm going back to Baku because it is my home and I will not let people kick me out of my home," she said.

<http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan-journalist-ismayilova-fears-arrest/26615533.html>