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RSF – Reporters Sans Frontières

(Author)

Step inside Sevinj Vagifgizi's prison cell: RSF recreates detention conditions of journalists detained in Azerbaijan

Imprisoned for 800 days, Sevinj Vagifgizi is paying the price for her investigative work on corruption within the regime, as are the 24 other Azerbaijani journalists currently behind bars in the authoritarian Caucasus state. To draw attention to and condemn the repressive measures targeting media professionals in the country, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has recreated their prison conditions in the heart of Paris, Berlin and Bern.

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"In Azerbaijan, prison has become a tool of censorship. By depriving journalists of medical care, water, human contact and information, the regime seeks to stifle them physically and professionally. By reproducing their detention conditions, we want to make this organised stifling visible and remind people that, even behind bars, these journalists continue to champion the right to inform.

Thibaut Bruttin
RSF Director General

On Wednesday 28 January, a container barely four square metres large — the same size as the solitary confinement cells of jailed Azerbaijani journalists — appeared at Place de la Republique, in the heart of Paris. Like the real prison cells, which some journalists have been trapped in for years, the container's filthy interior — inmates are not allowed to clean their cells — contains a camp bed and insects, which journalist **Elnara Gasimova** refers to as "my involuntary friends." Visitors are invited to explore the cell by torchlight as an immersive soundscape plays, giving

them a taste of the harsh reality lived by these wrongly detained news professionals.

25 Azerbaijani journalists currently in detention

Ahmed Mukhtar (Əhməd Muxtar)

Jailed since 27/08/2025, *Freelance Photojournalist*, Charges:

- Illegal entrepreneurship, committed with large-scale profits
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, committed by an organised group or criminal organisation, in large quantities
- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group
- Forgery and use of forged documents

Uviyya (Ali) Guliyeva (Ülviyyə Quliyeva)

Jailed since 07/05/2025, *Voice of America*, Charges:

- Illegal entrepreneurship, committed with large-scale profits
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, committed by an organised group or criminal organisation, in large quantities
- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group
- Forgery and use of forged documents

Fatima Mövlamli (Fatimə Mövlamli)

Jailed since 28/02/2025, *Toplum TV*, Charges:

- Illegal entrepreneurship, committed with large-scale profits
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, committed by an organised group or criminal organisation, in large quantities
- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group
- Forgery and use of forged documents

Nurlan (Libre) Gahramanli (Nurlan Qəhrəmanlı)

Jailed since 20/02/2025, *Meydan TV*, Charges:

- Illegal entrepreneurship, committed with large-scale profits
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, committed by an organised group or criminal organisation, in large quantities
- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group
- Forgery and use of forged documents

Shahnaz Beylargizi (Şahnaz Bəylərqızı)

Jailed since 06/02/2025 (house arrest), *Toplum TV*, Charges:

- Smuggling of funds by an organized group

Shamshad Agha (Şəmşad Ağa)

Jailed since 06/02/2025, *Toplum TV*, Charges:

- Illegal entrepreneurship, committed with large-scale profits
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, committed by an organised group or criminal organisation, in large quantities
- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group
- Forgery and use of forged documents

Farid Ismailov (Fərid İsmaylov)

Jailed since 17/01/2025, *Toplum TV*, Charges:

- Smuggling of funds by an organized group

Ramin Deko (Ramin Cəbrayılzadə (Deko))

Jailed since 06/12/2024, *Meydan TV*, Charges:

- Illegal entrepreneurship, committed with large-scale profits
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, committed by an organised group or criminal organisation, in large quantities
- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group
- Forgery and use of forged documents

Natig Javadli (Natiq Cavadlı)

Jailed since 06/12/2024, *Meydan TV*, Charges:

- Illegal entrepreneurship, committed with large-scale profits
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, committed by an organised group or criminal organisation, in large quantities
- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group
- Forgery and use of forged documents

Hayala Agayeva (Xəyalə Ağayeva)

Jailed since 06/12/2024, *Meydan TV*, Charges:

- Illegal entrepreneurship, committed with large-scale profits
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, committed by an organised group or criminal organisation, in large quantities
- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group
- Forgery and use of forged documents

Aytaj Tapdyg

Jailed since 06/12/2024, *Meydan TV*, Charges:

- Illegal entrepreneurship, committed with large-scale profits
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, committed by an organised group or criminal organisation, in large quantities
- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group
- Forgery and use of forged documents

Aysel Umudova (Aysel Umudova)

Jailed since 06/12/2024, *Meydan TV*, Charges:

- Illegal entrepreneurship, committed with large-scale profits
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, committed by an organised group or criminal organisation, in large quantities
- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group
- Forgery and use of forged documents

Aynur Elgunesh (Aynur Elgünəş)

Jailed since 06/12/2024, *Meydan TV*, Charges:

- Illegal entrepreneurship, committed with large-scale profits
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, committed by an organised group or criminal organisation, in large quantities
- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group
- Forgery and use of forged documents

Farid Mehralizada (Fərid Mehralızadə)

Jailed since 30/05/2024 - Sentenced on 20/06/2025, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Charges:

- Smuggling of funds by an organized group

Imran Aliyev (İmran Əliyev)

Jailed since 18/04/2024, *Meclis.info*, Charges:

- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Illegal entrepreneurship, with large-scale profits
- Employment without a formal contract
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, by an organised group, in large quantities
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group

Alesker Mammadli (Ələsgər Məmmədli)

Jailed since 08/03/2024, *Toplum TV*, Charges:

- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Illegal entrepreneurship, with large-scale profits
- Employment without a formal contract
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, by an organised group, in large quantities
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group

Mushvig Jabbarov (Müşviq Cəbbarov)

Jailed since 06/03/2024, *Toplum TV*, Charges:

- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Illegal entrepreneurship, with large-scale profits
- Employment without a formal contract
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, by an organised group, in large

quantities

- Tax evasion committed by an organized group

Ilkin Amrakhov (İlkin Əmrahov)

Jailed since 06/03/2024, *Toplum TV*, Charges:

- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Illegal entrepreneurship, with large-scale profits
- Employment without a formal contract
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, by an organised group, in large quantities
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group

Elnara Gasimova (Elnarə Qasımova)

Jailed since 13/01/2024 - Sentenced on 20/06/2025, *Abzas Media*, Charges:

- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Illegal entrepreneurship, with large-scale profits
- Employment without a formal contract
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, by an organised group, in large quantities
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group

Hafiz Babali (Hafiz Babalı)

Jailed since 13/12/2023 - Sentenced on 20/06/2025, *Abzas Media*, Charges:

- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Illegal entrepreneurship, with large-scale profits
- Employment without a formal contract
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, by an organised group, in large quantities
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group

Nargiz Absalamova (Nərgiz Absalamova)

Jailed since 30/11/2023- Sentenced on 20/06/2025, *Abzas Media*, Charges:

- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Illegal entrepreneurship, with large-scale profits
- Employment without a formal contract
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, by an organised group, in large quantities
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group

Sevinj Vagifgizi (Sevinc Vaqifqızı)

Jailed since 21/11/2023- Sentenced on 20/06/2025, *Abzas Media*, Charges:

- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Illegal entrepreneurship, with large-scale profits
- Employment without a formal contract
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, by an organised group, in large quantities
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group

Ulvi Hasanli (Ülvi Həsənlı)

Jailed since 20/11/2023- Sentenced on 20/06/2025, *Abzas Media*, Charges:

- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Illegal entrepreneurship, with large-scale profits
- Employment without a formal contract
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, by an organised group, in large quantities
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group

Mahammad Kekalov (Məhəmməd Kekalov)

Jailed since 20/11/2023- Sentenced on 20/06/2025, *Abzas Media*, Charges:

- Smuggling of funds by an organized group
- Illegal entrepreneurship, with large-scale profits
- Employment without a formal contract
- Money laundering of criminal proceeds, by an organised group, in large quantities
- Tax evasion committed by an organized group

Polad Aslanov

Jailed since 14/06/2019 - Sentenced on 17/11/2020, *Xeberman.com*, Charges:

- High treason

During her 800 days in prison, [Sevinj Vagifgizi, editor-in-chief of the independent investigative outlet *Abzas Media*](#), has been mistreated by prison staff, denied sufficient access to food and water and her personal belongings have been withheld. Last September, she was suddenly transferred to a far-away prison to isolate her from her loved ones even more. The corruption she exposes in her investigations runs deep in Azerbaijan and is reflected in the country's prison conditions: journalist **Alesker Mammadli**, who is behind bars and seriously ill, is being denied medical care, and independent reporter **Nargiz Absalamova** has reported that doctors sometimes demand several times the usual price for medicine and treatment.

Behind bars, Sevinj Vagifgizi and other journalists nevertheless persevere with their work, writing about their detention conditions and those of their fellow prisoners. In a letter, Nargiz Absalamova writes: "Hot water is provided only twice a week for two to three hours. Cold water is available twice a day — one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening." This commitment to informing the public results in "sanctions" from prison staff. Contact with the outside world is severely restricted and provided on the condition that prisoners do not write about prison life is — something that is particularly trying for news professionals. "Faced with the information blackout in prison, I try not to lose my sense of reality," writes **Ulviyya Ali**, a former contributor to *Voice of America* (VOA).

A media outlet exposing corruption

Sevinj Vagifgizi is editor-in-chief of the independent investigative outlet *Abzas Media*, which reports mainly on corruption within the political elite. The newsroom has, for example, uncovered several corruption scandals linked to reconstruction projects in the Nagorno-Karabakh region as well as the opaque allocation of funds benefiting the president's family and Turkish business partners. For years, the [investigative journalist](#)'s commitment to the right to information has exposed her to continuous repression: a travel ban, police violence, arrests, threats and obstacles to her work. Even when she was temporarily in exile in Berlin in 2021, where she benefitted from an RSF fellowship, she was surveilled by Azerbaijani intelligence services using Pegasus spyware. In November 2025, she was awarded [the RSF Press Freedom Prize](#) in the courage category.

Nine years in prison for informing the public

After being arrested on 21 November 2023, Sevinj Vagifgizi was [sentenced](#) to nine years in prison on charges of "foreign currency smuggling". Five other members of *Abzas Media*'s editorial team were also sentenced to prison terms ranging from seven to nine years following an unfair trial in which their fundamental rights were violated. Similar proceedings are targeting journalists from *Toplum TV*, *Meydan TV* and other independent media outlets.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Azerbaijan — an authoritarian petrostate — has become a key strategic energy partner for the European Union. Fossil fuel deliveries are set to increase significantly by 2027, despite the massive repression carried out by the regime against press freedom and civil society. A restrictive media law [adopted in 2022](#) is notably [being used](#) to censor all voices critical of the regime and make media funding considerably more difficult. Access to international media outlets such as *BBC News Azerbaijani* is [also being restricted](#), making it almost impossible to obtain independent information in and about Azerbaijan.

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