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(Author)

Azerbaijan: Exiled Critics Convicted in Absentia

(Berlin, June 10, 2026) – [Azerbaijani](#) authorities are prosecuting critics in exile, often based on social media posts and online commentary, Human Rights Watch said today. Those targeted, often convicted in absentia with long sentences, are at risk of extradition, detention during travel, and other forms of cross-border pressure.

“These trials of government critics abroad lack all credibility and due process, and are simply intended to silence them,” said [Giorgi Gogia](#), deputy Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “Azerbaijani authorities appear to manufacture criminal cases from online speech so they can use them to pursue critics far beyond its borders.”

Human Rights Watch reviewed eight verdicts issued by the Baku Courts for Serious Crimes between July 2025 and March 2026 in trials held in absentia. The courts convicted and sentenced Azerbaijanis living in Europe and the United States to between 6 and 16 years in prison in proceedings that relied heavily on the opinions of government-appointed forensic experts and involved state-appointed lawyers who had no contact with the absent defendants.

The cases reflect a broader shift in Azerbaijan’s efforts to silence dissent beyond its borders. Amendments to the Criminal Procedures Code adopted in December 2023 introduced in absentia criminal proceedings for the first time. The new framework has enabled courts to turn online speech into criminal convictions that can later serve as the basis for extradition requests, detention during international travel, or asset seizures.

Azerbaijani law formally allows a person convicted in absentia to request a new trial if they return to the country or are extradited. However, this offers little practical protection to exiled critics, who would face immediate detention and the prospect of challenging their convictions before the same judicial system that convicted them on dubious evidence in their absence.

For more than a [decade](#), Azerbaijan has systematically imprisoned independent [journalists](#), [civil society](#) activists, and [political opposition](#) figures. As space for dissent inside the country shrank, many critics who avoided imprisonment continued their work from exile. Azerbaijani authorities increasingly [sought](#) to reach them through extradition requests, pressure on foreign governments, harassment of family members, and other forms of transnational repression.

Human Rights Watch reviewed in absentia convictions involving individuals living in France, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. While the facts varied, they shared strikingly similar hallmarks. Prosecutors relied heavily on often years-old social media posts, YouTube broadcasts, and other online commentary. Courts accepted conclusions by government-appointed forensic experts purporting to determine whether the content was criminal; and state-appointed lawyers provided little or no meaningful defense.

One of the clearest examples is the case of Altay Goyushov, a historian and academic living in France. On February 18, the Baku Court for Serious Crimes convicted him under article 281.2 of the Criminal Code of publicly calling for the violent seizure of power and sentenced him to six years in prison. The prosecution's evidence consisted of a YouTube livestream broadcast in 2020, and two Facebook posts published in 2024 and 2025, discussing popular uprisings in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine, with political commentary and historical comparisons, and criticizing the Azerbaijani government. A court-appointed forensic expert concluded that the statements constituted calls for the violent seizure of power, a finding the court accepted.

The same day, the court also sentenced a political analyst Arastun Oruclu, who lives in New York, to eight years in prison on similar charges. Prosecutors cited YouTube videos in which Oruclu said that citizens should continue their struggle for accountability and that the government should either respond to public demands or leave office. Authorities characterized those statements as calls for the violent seizure of power and mass disorder, which the court also accepted.

The largest case involved seven defendants living in Germany, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. On December 25, 2025, the Baku Court for Serious Crimes convicted all seven of calling for

mass disorder and the violent seizure of power. Two were also convicted on fraud and terrorism-related charges. Prison terms ranged from 9 to 14 years. Prosecutors alleged that the defendants had coordinated the production and dissemination of content that constituted incitement through YouTube channels and other social media platforms. Again, the court relied on expert opinions characterizing content involving dozens of digital recordings and channels.

Every speech-related case reviewed share a common thread: the Ministry of Justice's Forensic Expertise Center for linguistic analysis issued findings that the online content contained calls for violent seizure of power, mass disorder, or terrorism. Yet the criteria used appear to have excluded what is required under international law to determine whether speech amounts to [incitement](#). An expert opinion that fails to take into consideration international standards on protection of freedom of expression is inherently flawed.

"The expert opinion is often the central piece of evidence in these cases," one lawyer familiar with the proceedings told Human Rights Watch. "Because the defendant is absent, there is no meaningful opportunity to challenge the expert's conclusions."

In absentia trials always raise serious fair trial concerns, which is why, under international law, verdicts given in absentia must be subject to a retrial. None of the verdicts recorded meaningful challenges to prosecution evidence or substantive defense arguments by the state-appointed lawyers or defense witnesses. Several hearings took place behind closed doors. Although the verdicts are formally available through Azerbaijan's electronic court system, identifying information is routinely anonymized, limiting public scrutiny of the proceedings.

Azerbaijan's use of a deeply flawed form of evidence in proceedings marked by fundamental procedural shortcomings shows how far the authorities are willing to go to engage in transnational repression, Human Rights Watch said.

International human rights law protects political speech, including speech that is critical, controversial, or offensive. While governments may prohibit speech that constitutes [incitement to violence](#), the threshold is high and requires careful consideration of intent, context, and imminence. Governments may not equate criticism of state institutions or calls for political change with threats to national security. Restrictions on freedom of expression must be lawful, necessary, and proportionate. The reviewed cases indicate that Azerbaijani authorities are using overly broad criminal provisions to punish dissenting views rather than addressing genuine threats of violence.

The convictions also have implications far beyond Azerbaijan. As a party to the European Convention on Extradition, Azerbaijan can invoke these convictions when seeking the return of individuals living abroad. Foreign courts may reject such requests, particularly over concerns about political prosecution, unfair trial, torture, or ill-treatment, but targeted individuals may still face detention, costly legal proceedings, travel restrictions, and prolonged uncertainty. The convictions may also increase risks for Azerbaijani critics traveling through third countries that have extradition arrangements with Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan should immediately review all in absentia convictions involving speech-related offenses and quash convictions based on protected expression. They should also amend criminal code articles related to expression and ensure compliance with international standards and fair trial rights. European governments should carefully scrutinize any extradition request based on such convictions and ensure that asylum and protection procedures take into account the risk of politically motivated prosecution upon return.

"Azerbaijan's message is that leaving the country will not shield critics from retaliation," Gogia said. "European governments should ensure that these convictions do not become tools of transnational repression."

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