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FREEDOM ON THE NET 2022

Azerbaijan

NOT FREE

38
/100

A. <u>Obstacles to Access</u>	12 /25
B. <u>Limits on Content</u>	15 /35
C. <u>Violations of User Rights</u>	11 /40

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

35 /100 **Not Free**

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free). See the research methodology and report acknowledgements.



TOP

Overview

Internet freedom remains restricted in Azerbaijan. During the coverage period, the environment improved because more people accessed the internet, according to some measurement sources, and the government did not block social media platforms, as it did during the 2020 military conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the government continued to manipulate the online information landscape, blocking numerous independent and opposition websites. The recently enacted media law places further restrictions on online media outlets and creates hurdles for those who try to establish a new outlet. The prosecutor's office and the courts employed trumped up charges, usually relating to drugs or "hooliganism," to prosecute activists who criticize government policies or figures online.

Power in Azerbaijan's authoritarian regime remains heavily concentrated in the hands of Ilham Aliyev, who has served as president since 2003, and his extended family. Corruption is rampant, and the formal political opposition has been weakened by years of persecution.

Editor's note: This report's coverage period ended before the Azerbaijani military launched attacks on Armenian territory in September 2022. The text does not reflect internet freedom-related developments that occurred during the attacks.

Key Developments, June 1, 2021 - May 31, 2022

- The most recent internet measurements show the continued blocking of key opposition and independent news websites, including Abzas.net, *Azadliq* newspaper, Azadliq Radio (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's [RFE/RL's] Azerbaijani language service), Gununsesi, Kanal 13 TV, and Meydan TV (see B1).
- In February 2022, President Ilham Aliyev signed a new media law compelling online media outlets to register with the government and obtain government permission before publishing news articles (see B3, B6, C4).
- Courts handed out prison sentences, including a ten-year sentence, to government critics, often accusing individuals of consuming drugs or engaging in "hooliganism," despite the accused providing evidence that contradicts these claims (see C3).

- In July 2021, an investigation revealed that Azerbaijanis, including journalists, had been targeted with Pegasus spyware (see C5).
- Online activists who were arrested for their activities alleged that they were beaten by law enforcement while detained (see C7).

A. Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections?

5/6

Score Change: The score improved from 4 to 5 because of increased internet penetration rates and speed, according to some measurement sources.

Although measurement sources indicated that the internet became more accessible during the coverage period, state ICT monopolies remain a key obstacle to improving internet access and service quality across Azerbaijan. ¹ According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2021 Inclusive Internet Index, around 78 percent of households have access to the internet. ² This relatively high penetration rate obscures disparities in access.

Internet speed in Azerbaijan increased over the past year. According to internet metrics company Ookla, the median fixed-broadband download speed in Azerbaijan rose from 13.1 Mbps in June 2021 to 21 Mbps in May 2022. During the same period, the median mobile broadband speed increased from 29.3 Mbps to 32.2 Mbps. ³

According to the 2021 data from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), Azerbaijan is home to 19.9 fixed-broadband internet subscriptions per 100 people, and 68.8 mobile-broadband subscriptions per 100 people. ⁴

Both second-generation (2G) and third-generation (3G) mobile networks cover virtually all the population, while fourth-generation (4G) networks cover about half. In July 2020, in partnership with Nokia, leading mobile operator Azercell expanded its 4G geographic coverage, focusing on semiurban and rural regions.

As of March 2022, fifth-generation (5G) technology is not in use in Azerbaijan, ⁶ although the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport said it hopes to introduce the technology by the end of the year. ⁷ However, local experts and users say it will take longer for 5G technology to reach Azerbaijan. According to economist Natig Jafarli, Azerbaijan must increase its scientific, technical, and production capacity as well as its purchasing power in order to introduce 5G technology.

According to the *Mobile Economy Russia & CIS Report*—released in 2021 by GSMA, a London-based industry group representing mobile operators worldwide—Azerbaijan is expected to join the 5G network by 2023. ⁸ In 2019, Azercell and Sweden-based Ericsson signed a three-year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) outlining a joint deployment plan for 5G projects, ⁹ trials, and use cases in Azerbaijan. In November 2019, Azercell piloted 5G services in Baku’s city center for a short time. ¹⁰

Users mainly access the internet via mobile devices. In October 2021, Azercell announced plans to further expand its long-term evolution (LTE) network coverage. According to the company, LTE network geographical coverage reached 74.3 percent in the first nine months of 2021, with the highest network speed in Baku. ¹¹

Users report regular connectivity problems. Outside of Baku, connectivity is poor and some users claim they struggle to access even 1 Mbps speeds during peak hours. ¹² According to Rovshan Rustamov, deputy minister of the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport, about 700 settlements do not have access to the internet at all. ¹³ When there are connectivity problems, people have claimed that internet service providers (ISPs) cut off connections because they cannot accommodate high demand. Providers say this is not the case, often blaming disruptions on “prophylactic work” carried out on servers. ¹⁴ Others claim that ISPs intentionally throttle connections in compliance with government requests (see A3). ¹⁵ Osman Gunduz of the Azerbaijan Internet Forum noted that bandwidth designated for a single user is often divided and sold to multiple users. ¹⁶

While widespread internet blackouts previously occurred every few years in Azerbaijan, no blackouts were documented during the reporting period.

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons?

1/3

Internet access is somewhat expensive relative to monthly incomes. Given the extent to which the ICT sector is controlled by the state, the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport—not the market—sets prices. **17**

Price data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) put the monthly cost of a 5 GB fixed internet connection at 1.7 percent of gross national income (GNI) per capita and a 2 GB mobile internet connection at 1.7 percent of GNI per capita in 2021, **18** Official statistics indicate that the average prices of “communications services” and “internet services” increased from 2018 to 2021. **19**

In Azerbaijan, there is a digital divide in terms of geography. According to the official figures from 2021, household internet access rates were 81.6 percent in rural areas, and 87.5 percent in urban areas. **20** Despite government pledges, ICT infrastructure beyond Baku is neglected, and the capital is the overwhelming beneficiary of state investment in ICT. **21** A report released in March 2021 by the World Bank notes that there is a “20 percentage point gap between rural and urban households in fixed internet penetration,” which results from issues with infrastructure and digital literacy outside of the city. **22** Independent media reports confirm accessibility challenges, especially in remote villages. **23**

In January 2022, Ministry of Digital Development and Transport Deputy Minister Rustamov promised to provide broadband internet access to 150,000 households. **24** In addition, in an effort to increase the availability and quality of communication services, the state-owned telecom provider AzTelekom began building Gigabyte Passive Optical Network (GPON) technology in several villages. **25** However, according to Aztelekom’s website, this technology is currently only in use in the Absheron peninsula. **26**

The introduction of 5G technology could also impose additional costs on users. The average fee for a 5G-supporting mobile device on the market starts at 600

manat (\$353) for Androids and 1,600 manat (\$941) for iOS-operated mobile phones. ²⁷ As of January 2022, the minimum wage in Azerbaijan was 300 manat (\$176) per month, according to official data released in December 2021. ²⁸

There is a gendered dimension to inequalities in internet access: the gap in internet use between men and women is 12 percent, according to the 2021 Inclusive Internet Index. ²⁹

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity?

4/6

Score Change: The score improved from 3 to 4 because the government did not throttle access to the internet or block access to major social media platforms as it did during the previous coverage period.

The government exercises control over internet infrastructure and has previously throttled access to the internet.

On September 27, 2020, the day that full-scale war erupted between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Ministry for Transportation, Communication, and High Technologies (MTCHT) throttled mobile and fixed-line broadband internet across Azerbaijan and blocked a number of social media platforms and websites, including Facebook, WhatsApp, and Skype. The action lasted 46 days—Azerbaijan’s longest internet disruption to date (See B1). The MTCHT did not mention the duration of the outage or which services would be blocked in the country until October 12. ³⁰ In a November 11 statement, the MTCHT announced the lifting of restrictions on internet access, effective the following day. ³¹

Since April 2020, Ali Karimli, leader of the opposition Azerbaijan Popular Front party (APFP), and his family have experienced a prolonged fixed- and mobile-internet outage, which continued through the coverage period. ³² The outage appeared to be a targeted, individualized disruption. In January 2021, Karimli and his spouse, Samara Seyidova, said that they were taking the case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) after having received no response from domestic courts. The ECtHR has not yet announced if the case will be heard. ³³

Opposition activists and nearby residents have reported experiencing connectivity issues in the hours before formally and informally held opposition rallies. According to Ali Karimli, internet disruptions were reported in May 2022 during his visit to the home of activist Agil Maharram, a member of the APFP who had recently been released from jail. According to Karimli's personal account, connectivity disruptions prevented him from broadcasting the event live. Online television channels at the scene were reportedly only able to upload the videos after leaving the premises. **34**

The Ministry of Digital Development and Transport holds significant shares in a number of leading ISPs, and the government is authorized to instruct companies to cut internet service under broadly defined circumstances. **35** In September 2020, President Ilham Aliyev declared martial law for the entire territory of Azerbaijan (see C1) as a result of the war with Armenia, with the approval of Parliament. The designation enabled the ministry—in coordination with military authorities—to restrict individuals' and legal entities' connection to the general telecommunication networks. It further granted the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport's predecessor, the MTCHT, the authority to disconnect telephone lines from the network and suspend the provision of internet services to meet the needs of the military authorities. Martial law was lifted on December 11, 2020. **36**

Wholesale access to international gateways is maintained by companies with close ties to the government. Only two ISPs, AzerTelecom and Delta Telecom, are licensed to connect to international internet traffic. **37** Delta Telecom owns the internet backbone and is the main distributor of traffic to other ISPs. It controls the country's sole internet exchange point (IXP). **38**

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers?	2 / 6
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The ICT market in Azerbaijan is fairly concentrated in the hands of the government. The absence of regulatory reform also inhibits the sector's development, though the government's Strategic Roadmap for Telecommunication and Information Technology Development calls for the

removal of the commercial authority currently exercised by the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport. **39**

Many ISPs are present in the market, including three state-owned providers: Aztelekom, Baktelecom (BTC), and AzDataCom. **40** As of 2019, state-owned companies ultimately controlled about 50 percent of the market. **41** Additionally, the ownership of Aztelekom, the largest ISP operating outside Baku, is linked to President Ilham Aliyev's family. In January 2022, Deputy Minister of Digital Development and Transport Rustamov said that the ministry had plans to merge Baktelecom and Aztelekom; however, no specific dates were announced. Rustamov claimed the merger may help provide more households with broadband internet access. **42**

There are three major players in Azerbaijan's mobile service market: Azercell, Azerfon (operating under the brand "Nar"), and Bakcell. Azercell is the leading mobile service provider, with a market share of about 49 percent. **43** Bakcell and Azerfon follow behind, self-reporting 3 million **44** and 2.3 million **45** subscribers, respectively. Both Azercell and Azerfon are connected to the Aliyev family, **46** and in 2018, the government formally assumed ownership of Azercell. **47** Bakcell is privately held by NEQSOL, a holding company owned by businessman Nasib Hasanov.

Mobile operators must obtain a technical license from the government in order to do business. **48** These licenses are issued for a period of 10 years. There is no licensing regime for other ISPs, **49** but they must register with the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport. If they fail to do so, they will face fines. Some providers have raised concerns with the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport over the lack of transparency in the registration process, as well as the sensitivity of the information they must submit to register. The ministry's predecessor, the MTCHT, claimed that registration was carried out in accordance with the law, and dismissed concerns about improper data retention. **50**

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner?

0 / 4

The government has a major role in controlling the ICT sector through state-owned companies and government institutions. Service providers are regulated by the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport, whose leadership is beholden to Aliyev. The ministry has undergone major changes in recent years, including in 2017, when the former Ministry of Communications and High Technologies was dissolved and merged with the Ministry of Transport, creating the MTCHT. In 2021, the MTCHT was renamed the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport. ⁵¹ However, these changes have not had an impact on the overall quality of internet services across the country.

Local civil society groups like the Azerbaijan Internet Forum have been critical of the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport's stewardship of the ICT sector. Osman Gunduz argues that the ministry has abused its regulatory and commercial powers to stymie private business, to the detriment of the ICT sector. ⁵²

B. Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?	3/6
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Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 because social media platforms were not blocked during the coverage period, as they were in the fall of 2020.

During the coverage period, the government did not restrict access to any social media platforms, but continued to restrict access to websites, particularly those associated with the opposition or those that investigate politically sensitive topics, such as official corruption. ⁵³

The state continues to rely on deep packet inspection (DPI) technology to block content online. During the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, the Azerbaijani government—namely, the government-controlled backbone provider, Delta Telecom, worked with Sandvine Inc., a Canada-based company backed by a US-based private equity firm, to “urgently” install DPI technology to block livestreaming to YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. ⁵⁴ During the conflict, the

MTCHT blocked access to Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, LinkedIn, Twitter, Zoom, and Skype for 46 days. **55**

In March 2022, access to several Russian government and media websites was throttled, reportedly including through virtual private networks (VPNs). Other websites, such as Russian state news agency RIA Novosti and Tass.ru, were periodically accessible. The Ministry of Digital Development and Transportation failed to provide an explanation for the blocking of these websites. **56** As of June 2022, websites for the Russian president, Kremlin.ru, and Sputnik.ru were temporary inaccessible. The Ministry also issued a statement saying that RIA Novosti was blocked because it had run a story that defamed Azerbaijan. **57**

In October 2021, the Azerbaijani government blocked access to six pro-Iran websites—Deyerler (Values), Maide (Blessings), Ahlibeyt (Prophet’s Household), Ehlibet (Prophet’s Household), Shia, and Islaminsesi (Voice of Islam)—that the state claimed were promoting Iranian and religious propaganda, following a rift in diplomatic relations between the two countries. According to Facebook user Elchin Alioglu, access to religious video series on YouTube were also blocked. **58** As of May 2022, the websites and YouTube content remain blocked, with the exception of one website, aylibeyt.az.

According to the most recent measurements conducted by the Open Observatory for Network Interference (OONI), at least 10 websites present signs of blocking as of March 2022. They include online news sites Azerbaycansati.tv, 24saat.org, Abzas.net, Azadliq.info, Azadliq Radio (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s [RFE/RL’s] Azerbaijani language service), Gununsesi, **59** Kanal 13 (online) TV, Meydan TV, as well as the websites for the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and RFE/RL. **60** In violation of the Law on Information, Informatization, and Protection of Information, the government has not made available a list of websites that have been blocked. **61**

In May 2020, investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova reported that the MTCHT was seeking court approval to restrict users’ ability to access news websites already blocked in the country (namely, the newspaper *Azadliq*, Azadliq Radio, Meydan TV, and Turan TV) via Facebook, other social media platforms, and VPNs. **62** These websites were initially blocked in March 2017 for allegedly threatening national security and hosting content that promoted “violence, hatred, or

extremism” and “violated privacy or constituted slander.” ⁶³ A ruling in the MTCHT’s favor may legally oblige Facebook and other companies to prevent Azerbaijani users from seeing content from these websites. ⁶⁴ The authorities could also instruct ISPs to block these websites’ social media profiles, which would practically entail blocking entire social media platforms. During the coverage period, no steps were taken in this direction.

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?

2 / 4

During the coverage period, authorities continued using threats and other forms of pressure to force the removal of online content.

In January 2022, Facebook user Namig Aliyev was found guilty of violating the Law on Information, Informatization, and Protection of Information for failing to remove a post about a Yeniavaz.com article exposing the Prosecutor’s Office for failing to investigate an attack on a veteran political activist (see C3). The following month, Yeniavaz.com was fined 1,500 manat (\$882) for failing to remove comments on a Facebook post that concerned the conduct of the Prosecutor’s Office in response to the attack, which was allegedly carried out by members of the office. ⁶⁵

In January 2022, journalist Fikret Ibishbeyli, who writes under the name Fikret Faramazoglu, was accused of disseminating prohibited information on the internet. Faramazoglu was fined a total of AZN500 (\$294) for “disseminating forbidden information on the internet” after a judge alleged that an article Faramazoglu published on Jamaz.info had caused “confusion” and “fear.” ⁶⁶

In December 2021, Sakhatvat Mammad, a journalist writing for online news outlet Yenicag.az, was fined for publishing an investigative article about the Azerbaijani army, which contained information deemed prohibited under the Law on Information, Informatization, and Protection of Information. Mammad was forced to remove his post and fined a total of 500 manat (\$294). ⁶⁷

In December, two websites, Olke.az and Manevr.az, were fined a total of 1,500 manat (\$882) for violating Article 388.1 of the Code of Administrative Offenses. **68**

According to Twitter's Transparency report, Twitter received two removal requests between January and December 2021 and complied with one of them.

69 Google received a record 24 content takedown requests from the government between January and December 2021 (on copyright defamation, hate speech, religious offense, government criticism, privacy, and national security grounds). Google removed 6 percent of the content covered in the 21 takedown requests in the first half of 2021, and 92.9 percent of the content covered in the 3 requests in the latter half of the year. **70** Facebook restricted one piece of content in response to a government request in 2021. **71**

In March 2022, several videos on news outlet Azad Soz's YouTube channel were flagged by the platform in response to falsified takedown requests. An international nongovernmental organization (NGO), Access Now, helped Azad Soz to recover the videos. Azad Soz's YouTube channel was previously targeted in 2019. **72**

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, or an independent appeals process?	1 / 4
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Decisions to block websites or otherwise censor the internet in Azerbaijan are arbitrary and politicized, clearly targeting independent and opposition-affiliated news websites that are critical of the government. Court approval is not required before officially blocking a website, but it must be sought after the fact. Observers have noted that the courts are not independent and are unlikely to provide genuine oversight. **73** There is no meaningful avenue for appeal, and no information on the total number of websites blocked at any given time, despite the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport's obligation to maintain a list of court-approved website blocks under Article 13.3.6 of the Law on Information, Informatization, and Protection of Information. **74** The law, alongside the Law on Media (see B6), regulates what constitutes prohibited information on the internet and the liability for violating these requirements. **75**

In December 2021, the parliament passed a new Law on Media, which President Ilham Aliyev enacted in February 2022. The restrictive measures of the law, combined with the Azerbaijani Agency for Media Development's (AAMD's) broad powers, raised concerns that the work of independent and opposition media platforms will be inhibited. ⁷⁶ The law consolidates government oversight and control over the media environment and journalistic activity, making it easier to punish media platforms and journalists (see B6). The law also forbids news outlets and individuals from publishing content about a crime committed by a person in the absence of a court decision. As such, journalists may face sanctions for publishing or disseminating information on corruption allegedly committed by government officials, even if these cases are already known to the public.

In January 2021, President Aliyev signed a decree "on deepening media reforms in the republic of Azerbaijan," which transferred the authority of the now-defunct State Support Fund for Mass Media Development to the newly established AAMD. The decree grants the AAMD authority to "take measures to protect state and commercial secrets" and to alert authorities when it detects a violation of the restrictive Code of Administrative Offenses (see C2).

Additionally, authorities have the power to "restrict access" to "prohibited information" on the internet or otherwise impose fines for distributing such content. ⁷⁷ "Prohibited information" is defined as content that, among other things, promotes extremism, separatism, or terrorism; calls for public disorder; constitutes a state secret; conveys hate speech; insults or defames; violates copyright; glorifies suicide; or contains information related to illegal drugs, gambling, weaponry, or pornography. ⁷⁸ The Ministry of Digital Development and Transportation is also empowered to block "prohibited information" when a website owner fails to remove it within eight hours of receiving notification.

Content that reveals personal information without consent may be subject to removal under Articles 5.7 and 7.2 of the Law on Personal Data. ⁷⁹ A written demand from the individual concerned, a court, or the executive branch is required. Authorities can also remove online content in cases of defamation. ⁸⁰

In February 2022, the Ministry of Justice was instructed to draft a new legal document outlining measures for violating the Law on Media. As of June 2022, the draft bill had not been submitted or made public. ⁸¹

ISPs are immune from intermediary liability. However, they assume liability if they ignore court orders to block specific web resources. **82**

Policies that govern whether content about or from Azerbaijan is removed from popular, privately owned social media platforms—especially Facebook and YouTube—are opaque. They sometimes lead to the removal of content protected under international human rights standards (see B2).

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship?
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2 / 4

The long-running government crackdown against independent and opposition media, combined with arrests of online political activists and increasingly restrictive laws, has significantly limited the space for free expression. Some bloggers and journalists have resorted to self-censorship, especially if they are employed by state or progovernment media.

Self-censorship is pervasive even among ordinary social media users, who are aware that they may face criminal charges for their expression online. However, users can and do criticize government policies on social media platforms. **83**

According to the new media law (see B3 and B6), it is illegal to publish content concerning a criminal case that has yet to be ruled on in court, which could facilitate self-censorship.

In December 2021, the Prosecutor's Office issued a public statement urging media entities and users of social networks to refrain from sharing what the office described as inaccurate and distorted information. **84**

During the coverage period, the Prosecutor's Office continued to take measures against the dissemination of prohibited information on the Internet issuing warnings, and administrative offenses. **85**

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political

1 / 4

The government attempts to tightly control the online information landscape, limiting the public's access to unfavorable news. Many online outlets spread progovernment propaganda. ⁸⁶ This tendency was on full display during the COVID-19 pandemic, as progovernment online outlets blanketed the Azerbaijani internet with letters praising the leadership of President Ilham Aliyev. ⁸⁷ Similarly, during the military conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, footage widely circulated online both by government sources and government-affiliated media showed the destruction of Armenia's military equipment, followed by patriotic text and celebrations by viewers. ⁸⁸

Progovernment commentators, including automated bots, continue to distort discussions online. The September 2021 trial against the executive director of the former State Media Support Fund, Vugar Safarli, shed further light on the state's use of Facebook trolls to target those who criticize the authorities. Namely, the trial revealed that these trolls were deployed with the knowledge of the former presidential advisor and the former head of the presidential administration. Safarli confessed that the trolls were employed unofficially. In an interview with Azadliq Radio, an anonymous individual who worked as a troll reported that each troll operated a large number of fake profiles. Prewritten comments were sent to the trolls each day. According to the former troll, they were also given instructions to create content on various topics for publication on progovernment media platforms. ⁸⁹

Meta's first quarter Adversarial Threat Report revealed that actors linked to the Ministry of Internal Affairs ran pages critical of activists and opposition figures and tried to gain access to their accounts (see C8). ⁹⁰

Additionally, a September 2021 investigation conducted by Azerbaijan Internet Watch revealed that 549 fake Facebook accounts had targeted a Facebook post shared by Azadliq Radio, posting comments that claimed the outlet was biased and publishing false information. The post, drawn by political cartoonist Gunduz Aghayev, addressed the rising cost of fuel in the country. ⁹¹

In April 2021, the *Guardian* published a report demonstrating how Facebook allowed a troll network linked to the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) to return

to the platform. The network, which was initially removed in October 2020 after former Facebook researcher Sophie Zhang informed company executives about its existence in August 2019, used Facebook to target news outlets Azad Soz, Mikroskop Media, Radio Free Europe, and Abzas.net, and political opposition parties, including the APFP. ⁹²

In March 2021, another investigation revealed how Berlin-based independent news platform Meydan TV was targeted by hundreds of Facebook accounts that accused the news outlet of distributing pro-Armenian propaganda after it had posted a call for applications for a media literacy project. ⁹³ MikroskopMedia, a Latvia-based online platform, was targeted in a similar way when it posted content on Facebook that was critical of the Azerbaijan's government. ⁹⁴ In each case, accounts that appeared to be Facebook profiles were actually fake pages used to dilute the content shared by these platforms and to attempt to create a perception of trust in and support for the government of Azerbaijan.

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users' ability to publish content online?

0/3

The limits imposed on independent or opposition media make it difficult for them to attract advertising to sustain their work. The 2021 IREX Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) found that “Advertising is politicized and fully controlled... criticism and advertising are mutually exclusive: The more criticism of the government that is published, the less advertising revenue that is received.” ⁹⁵ Companies are reluctant to support these outlets due to the risk that they will lose their business licenses or face other reprisals from the government. Election monitors from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) reported that they were informed “about harassment of advertisers who sponsor private media.” ⁹⁶

The new media law enacted in February 2022 places further requirements on outlets or individuals who wish to establish an online media outlet (see B3 and C7). Article 14 of the media law lists 14 requirements that both online and offline media must meet when the content in question is published. For instance, Article 14.1.6 authorizes the state to consider any impugned statement or general criticism as

an “immoral lexical [swearing] words of expressions” without clarifying what these words are. While the law does not require individuals or outlets to obtain permission to establish an online media platform, it does require that permission be obtained seven days prior to the publication or dissemination of the relevant media content. In addition, the law stipulates that content must meet the requirements of the Law on Protection of Children and Harmful Information and the Law on Information, Informatization, and Protection of Information.

Article 62.4 of the new media law requires online media focused on religious content to receive approval from the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations prior to launching. The new law also calls for a unified media registry system for all online media outlets, journalists working for online platforms, and freelance journalists (see C4). The registry is managed by the Media Development Agency. All online platforms must apply to the register within six months of starting work. To qualify as an online media platform, the platform must publish a minimum of 20 articles per day. The owner of the platform must be a citizen of Azerbaijan permanently residing in the country. If the founder is an entity, then 75 percent of the capital must belong to a citizen of Azerbaijan permanently residing in the country. **97**

Further restrictions in the new law include requiring individuals intending to launch an online media platform to possess a clean criminal record and no political or religious affiliations. Individual journalists who want to register must have a degree in higher education, while staff journalists must have an employment contract and freelance journalists are required to have at least one civil contract with a registered media outlet. If approved, media platforms are issued certificates and journalists are issued press cards. Online media platforms that fail to register with the state will be denied recognition as mass media, and will be unable to hire journalists. Journalists employed by unregistered online media platforms will be denied official registration and will therefore be unable to receive official press cards.

Laws regulating foreign funding for NGOs have made it easier for the government to target local civic groups and media outlets that receive grants from outside sources. In 2015, President Aliyev signed amendments to the Law on Mass Media that allow courts to order the closure of any media outlet that receives foreign funding or is convicted of defamation twice in one year. **98** Amendments passed

in 2014 to the Law on Grants complicated the process for receiving grants, preventing a number of online outlets from continuing to operate. ⁹⁹

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability?	2/4
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The online information landscape in Azerbaijan lacks diversity, in large part due to both the government's practice of blocking independent news websites (see B1) and the close ties between certain outlets and government leadership (see B5). According to IREX's 2019 Media Stability Index, "alternative, independent broadcast TV and websites cannot directly air in Azerbaijan." ¹⁰⁰

Though social media platforms such as Facebook do provide a platform for free expression—including for some marginalized or suppressed populations, such as LGBT+ people—the ability of internet users to produce and disseminate uncensored content online is undermined by persistent government pressure. Azerbaijani internet users can and do access blocked websites through VPNs.

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users' ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues?	4/6
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Activists have continued to use social media to disseminate information and organize advocacy campaigns and rallies. Consequently, the government has indicated that it is interested in regulating platforms, with one lawmaker describing social media as an instrument for "moral terrorism." ¹⁰¹

During the coverage period, activists organized several protests online. In May 2022, a rally in Baku called for the end to impunity for crimes against government critics, political activists, and journalists. ¹⁰² In December 2021, another protest organized by activists called for the release of Saleh Rustamli, a political prisoner jailed in 2018. ¹⁰³ The same month, journalists staged protests outside the parliament building in protest of the new media law. ¹⁰⁴ In August 2021, a group of women staged a silent protest outside the Ministry of the Interior to raise

awareness of the increasing rate of domestic abuse reported in the country (see C7). ¹⁰⁵

Facebook and YouTube were widely used during the February 2020 snap parliamentary elections to document electoral violations. As a result, Central Election Commission (CEC) head Mazahir Panahov announced that the institution would take into account all of the evidence shared on social media platforms when evaluating the results of the voting. Results at some 100 precincts were later canceled due in part to such evidence.

C. Violations of User Rights

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence?

1/6

The right to freedom of expression is guaranteed in the constitution, ¹⁰⁶ and Azerbaijan is a signatory to international agreements including the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) that protect users' rights. However, the government frequently fails to uphold freedom of expression guarantees online.

Amendments to the Law on the Status of the Armed Forces that were approved in 2017 provided additional legal grounds for censorship, ¹⁰⁷ restricting journalists' ability to report on matters related to the military. ¹⁰⁸ At the outbreak of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2020, President Ilham Aliyev declared martial law, increasing the government's authority to restrict internet access and suspend mass media, including online media until the designation was lifted in December 2020 (see A3 and B3).

In practice, the rights of journalists and other users to express themselves freely online are diminishing. Recent years have seen a slew of detentions, prosecutions, and harsh prison sentences imposed on people for criticizing the security forces, president, or other leaders and exposing poor governance and corruption. The

lack of an independent judiciary leaves users facing prosecution for online speech with few realistic avenues of recourse.

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?

2 / 4

A host of problematic laws allow users to be punished for speech and other online activities that are protected under international human rights standards. These laws are often used.

Libel charges are commonly used against government critics, and the courts have confirmed that libel laws apply to social media posts. ¹⁰⁹ In 2013, general provisions on defamation and insult were expanded to include criminal liability for online content. ¹¹⁰ Articles 147.1 and 148 of the criminal code criminalize the deliberate dissemination of false online content that harms someone's honor or reputation ¹¹¹ and "obscene" ¹¹² expressions of content humiliating to one's dignity, respectively. Respective fines for such transgressions range from 1,000 to 1,500 manat (\$590 to \$880) and 300 to 1,000 manat (\$180 to \$590), while potential punishments under both articles include 240 to 480 hours of community service, up to one year of corrective labor, or up to six months in jail. ¹¹³ A 2016 amendment to Article 148 criminalized insults disseminated online using fake "usernames, profiles, or accounts" with 1,000 to 1,500 manat (\$590 to \$880) in fines, 360 to 480 hours of community service, up to two years of corrective labor, or imprisonment for up to one year. ¹¹⁴

In 2016, changes to Article 323 of the criminal code introduced a maximum prison sentence of two years for defaming the president in mass media, which include social media. Defaming the president through fake "usernames, profiles, or accounts" may result in a three-year prison sentence. ¹¹⁵ Falsely accusing the president of "having committed a serious or especially serious crime" online may result in a five-year prison sentence. ¹¹⁶ In 2017, the fines associated with these offenses were increased. ¹¹⁷

The Law on Information, Informatization, and Protection of Information was adopted in 1998, amended in 2017, and again in 2020. It grants broad powers to

the state authorities for deciding what constitutes prohibited material. There is no unified list of what the state defines as prohibited information, though the definition was amended to include “false information” in 2020. The law forbids users from sharing such “prohibited information” on information telecommunication networks. ¹¹⁸

Under the code of administrative offenses, individuals, officials, and legal entities can be fined for publishing “prohibited information.” ¹¹⁹ In March 2020, the code of administrative offenses was amended such that individuals and officials can face up to one month of administrative detention for publishing “prohibited information.” ¹²⁰ Article 388.1 includes steep fines and up to one month of administrative detention for users and owners of websites “or information resources” who post “prohibited” information on telecommunication networks. ¹²¹

Since 2013, the code of administrative offenses has allowed courts to hold individuals in administrative detention for up to 90 days. ¹²² Administrative detention, which can be imposed for offenses such as disorderly conduct, has been used to punish activists and journalists.

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?

1/6

Users, especially activists, bloggers, journalists, and members of the political opposition, are often prosecuted on trumped-up charges for their online activities. During the coverage period, the government detained and sentenced journalists and bloggers for criticizing officials. In some cases, those who criticized officials were falsely accused of using drugs or “hooliganism” as a pretext for their arrest.

A number of reporters, bloggers, and activists remain in prison, bound by suspended sentences or subject to other legal restrictions. These include the following individuals:

In May 2022, Razi Humbatov, a member of the religious movement “Muslim Unity,” was sentenced to six years in prison. ¹²³ In July 2021, police kidnapped Humbatov

and later charged him with drug possession. A Facebook post shared by the movement, “Muslim Unity” said that Humbatov was arrested because of his social media posts, in which he often criticized the authorities. Shortly before his arrest, Humbatov wrote, “Ilham Aliyev these people don’t love you.” Humbatov claimed that he was tortured during his detention (see C7). **124**

In May 2022, Razi Alishov, a political activist and member of the opposition APFP, was sentenced to two months in pretrial detention on drug possession charges under Article 234.2 of the Criminal Code. The APFP said Alishov’s arrest and detention were political. According to the party, Alishov often exposed fake social media accounts deployed by the state against the APFP. He faces up to 12 years in prison. **125** The same month, former political prisoner and blogger Rashad Ramazanov was arrested and sentenced to four months in pretrial detention on drug charges. In 2013, he was sentenced to nine years in prison and was pardoned by President Aliyev in 2019. **126**

Eyvaz Yakhyaoglu, a blogger who regularly wrote about human rights violations in Shirvan, was accused of disobeying the police and sentenced to 28 days in administrative detention in May 2022. **127**

In March 2022, Shahin Hajiyev, a Ganja resident and chess teacher, was arrested by the police on charges of drug possession. If found guilty, he faces between 5 and 12 years of jail time. **128** Hajiyev has been reprimanded for his criticism of the government over social media twice before, receiving 25 days in administrative detention in January 2021 and 30 days in March 2021. Both times, Hajiyev was sentenced on the grounds of disobeying police. **129**

In January 2022, blogger Jalil Zabitov, a member of the Democracy 1918 movement, was sentenced to 25 days in administrative detention on charges of disobeying police. Zabitov took to Facebook, where he often shares his opinion on issues in the Yardimli administrative district, to discuss recent protests. In July 2021, Zabitov was detained by the police over his social media posts criticizing the government. The police warned him to stop criticizing the government online. **130** Zabitov was also sentenced to five months in prison in May 2020 on similar grounds, although he was officially charged with hooliganism. **131**

In January 2022, Namig Aliyev was sentenced to 30 days in administrative detention for making a post about an article, published by news website Yeniavaz.com (see B2), that exposed the Prosecutor's Office for failing to investigate an attack against a veteran political activist in which Prosecutor's Office employees were implicated. **132**

In December 2021, four citizens were questioned by the Prosecutor's Office for allegedly disseminating biased information on social networks. All four were released with a warning that, if these posts continued, they would face more stringent measures. **133**

Police kidnapped and later arrested regional blogger Sameddin Mammadov in November 2021. Mammadov was accused of "hooliganism" and inflicting intentional bodily harm on a man who alleged that Mammadov, Mammadov's son, and his nephew had beaten him. Mammadov is known for exposing local problems on Facebook. Later that month, the regional court sentenced Mammadov to two years and eight months in prison. His son, Nahid Mammadov, and his nephew, Elsever Mammadov, were also charged, and given suspended sentences of two years in prison and one year and six months in prison, respectively. **134**

Also in November, a court in Baku sentenced political activist Agil Humbatov, who was accused of stabbing his neighbor, to ten years in prison on the grounds of Article 126.2.4 of the criminal code—intentionally causing harm with an intent to commit hooliganism. Humbatov, a member of opposition APFP, said the accusation was false and claimed that he was jailed for criticizing the government on Facebook. In a video posted prior to his arrest, the activist took to Facebook to share complaints about the lack of employment opportunities. Humbatov claimed that he was tortured during his detention (see C7). Humbatov was previously detained in 2019, and in 2020, when he confined to psychiatric care after criticizing the government online. **135**

In October 2021, journalist Anar Abdulla, was handed a 15-day administrative detention after making a Facebook post stating that administrative officials were deceiving President Aliyev and the people were paying the price. Police accused him of hooliganism and disobeying police. **136**

In July 2021, the police questioned Facebook user Rufat Aliyev over a comment about police collecting bribes from wedding organizers. Police demanded that Aliyev remove the post. He refused to remove the post, but was released. ¹³⁷

In April 2021, a resident of Nakchivan was arrested over a series of tweets posted in 2020. The tweets explicitly targeted the head of the Supreme Assembly of the Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan, Vasif Talibov. The resident, who was only identified by his initials, K.M., was charged under Article 148 of the criminal code—slander or insult using fake accounts on internet information services. He was sentenced to ten months’ imprisonment in June 2021. In October, the local city court reviewed the charges and amended K.M.’s sentence to a fine, which was waived due to the time K.M. had spent in custody.

In April 2021, blogger Aslan Gurbanov, who regularly wrote about the ethnic minority Talysh people, was sentenced to seven years in prison ¹³⁸ on charges of overthrowing the government and inciting national, religious, and social hatred. ¹³⁹ Gurbanov was initially arrested in July 2020 and held in pretrial detention for four months.

In November 2020, Polad Aslanov, editor of the online news websites Press.az and Xeberman, was sentenced to 16 years in jail for “high treason” under article 274 of the criminal code for purportedly selling state secrets to Iran. ¹⁴⁰ Initially arrested in June 2019, he denied the treason charges, insisting that he was being persecuted for his online criticism of the government. In December 2019, the authorities filed additional charges against him, accusing him of threatening to kill one of his employees. ¹⁴¹

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption?

3/4

The SIM cards, serial numbers, and phone numbers of all mobile phones in Azerbaijan must be registered. This requirement was introduced by the Cabinet of Ministers in 2011 without parliamentary approval. ¹⁴² Mobile operators are required to limit service to any unregistered devices. Mobile operators have also started linking SIM cards to Asan Imza, a government-launched mobile ID service, though it is not required. ¹⁴³

The use of encryption services is not prohibited, and many civil society activists rely on secure messaging applications to carry out their work. This, however, does not necessarily protect them from state-sponsored hacking (see C8). While no law specifically requires users to turn over decryption keys when they are arrested or detained, in practice, authorities gain access to encrypted accounts and devices through intimidation or torture.

The new media law establishes a unified media registry system, which is managed by the Media Development Agency for online media outlets, journalists, and freelancers (see B3 and B6). Online platforms must register within six months of beginning work. The measure applies to media platforms that post a minimum of 20 articles per day. **144**

For several years, members of parliament have proposed introducing the compulsory use of national IDs when registering with social media platforms and posting comments, but this has yet to be approved.

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' right to privacy?	1/6
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State surveillance is pervasive, though the exact extent to which security agencies monitor ICT activity or track users remains unclear. The government is believed to make use of Russia's System for Operative Investigative Measures (SORM), in part because at least one Russian company involved in the manufacture of SORM-compliant interception hardware has done business with Azerbaijani authorities.

145

In July 2021, a sprawling investigative initiative led by Forbidden Stories, a nonprofit that aims to publish the work of journalists facing threats, concluded that the Pegasus spyware produced by the NSO Group, an Israeli cybersurveillance company, had been used against journalists and activists in countries around the world, including Azerbaijan. **146** Reporters with the OCCRP, which was among the groups working on the project, found some 250 potential targets in Azerbaijan, the majority of which were "dissidents, activists, journalists, and opposition politicians." It added that "journalists came under particular pressure, with dozens

of prominent names, including the OCCRP’s Khadija Ismayilova, appearing on the list.” **147**

In January 2021, the government lifted the system for enforcing quarantine measures that required residents to receive permission from the police via short-message service (SMS) to leave their homes, **148** which was originally introduced in April 2020. Failing to produce permission when asked by a police officer would result in a fine of 100 to 200 manat (\$58 to \$117) and up to one month of administrative detention.

In October 2018, Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reported that Israel’s Verint Systems had sold surveillance equipment and software to the Azerbaijani government, and local police later used it to identify the sexual orientation of Facebook users. **149** The timing of the transaction overlapped with an unprecedented crackdown on LGBT+ people in Azerbaijan in September 2017 and a number of seemingly random detentions and arrests. **150**

An April 2018 report by Qurium revealed that the Azerbaijani government had purchased specialized security equipment from the Israeli company Allot Communications in 2015 for around \$3 million. **151** The government has begun using the equipment’s DPI capabilities to facilitate website blocking (see B1).

The Law on Operative-Search Activity (Article 10, Section IV) authorizes law enforcement agencies to conduct surveillance without a court order in cases where it is regarded as necessary to prevent serious crimes against individuals or especially dangerous crimes against the state. **152** The vaguely written provision leaves the law open to abuse. It has long been believed that the State Security Service and the Ministry of Internal Affairs monitor the communications of certain individuals, especially foreigners, prominent political activists, and business figures. During the military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, the State Security Service closely monitored online discussions and called into questioning those who were critical of the war. At least five activists were questioned over antiwar statements posted online (see C3). **153**

C6 o-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users’ right to privacy?

1/6

The Ministry of Communications requires all telecommunications companies to make their equipment and facilities available to the State Security Service. ¹⁵⁴ Mobile service providers are known to surrender the content of users' conversations without a court order.

In April 2020, Ali Karimli, leader of the opposition APFP, began to experience a prolonged fixed and mobile internet outage, which also affected his family (see A3). ¹⁵⁵ The outage appeared to be a targeted, individualized disruption. Amid the outage, Karimli, his supporters, and journalists had difficulty getting in contact with his ISP and his mobile operator, Azercell. Karimli later sued these companies, along with several government institutions, but a court dismissed the suit. He also sent his router to be inspected by a repair service, only to never hear from the company. Meanwhile, member of parliament Zahid Oruc suggested in an interview that Karimli simply get a new SIM card. ¹⁵⁶

During this time, Karimli's WhatsApp and Telegram accounts were also reportedly hijacked; APFP member Fuad Gahramanli accused Azercell of diverting Karimli's two-factor authentication codes to progovernment hackers. ¹⁵⁷ Azercell denied the charge. ¹⁵⁸

In January 2019, the government shut down mobile internet and phone service during a political rally; later, scores of attendees were questioned by police based on location data taken from their mobile devices. Many took to social media platforms to accuse mobile service providers of disclosing the names, phone numbers, and location data of subscribers who attended the rally. When Azadliq Radio inquired about these accusations, mobile companies cited the need to comply with certain legislation. Under Article 39 of the Law on Communication, the service providers are obliged to provide government institutions with any requested subscriber data. ¹⁵⁹

The 2010 personal data law regulates the collection, processing, and protection of personal data—that is, an individual's name, date of birth, racial or ethnic background, religion, family, health status, and criminal record—as well as issues related to the cross-border transfer of personal data. ¹⁶⁰ It is not clear whether the law is enforced or respected in practice.

Campaigns of extralegal intimidation by authorities against perceived political opponents are common, and there are credible reports of such figures having been tortured while in state custody.

In March 2022, political activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu was physically attacked by the police, who broke his car windows and beat him while he was detained. In September 2021, Hajiyeu said he was threatened by Baku Police Chief Alekper Ismayilov over a Facebook post in which Hajiyeu criticized several government institutions and officials, including Interior Minister Vilayat Eyvazov, for failing to respond to his submitted complaints. ¹⁶¹

In December 2021, police attacked Nargiz Absamalova, a journalist for Abzas.net, as they attempted to expel journalists from a protest over the new media law (see B3, B6, B8, and C4). Absamalova reported that one of her bones was broken by the attack. ¹⁶² In August 2021, Absamalova and Ulviyaa Ali, an independent journalist who frequently writes for online publications, were attacked and harassed by police at a protest demanding the police be held accountable for urging femicide victim Sevinj Maharramova to return to her abusive husband, who murdered her upon her return. ¹⁶³

Agil Humbatov, who was sentenced to ten years in prison in November 2021 (see C3), alleged that he was beaten by police, including while he was in detention, and threatened with rape during his August 2021 arrest. Humbatov regularly criticized the government online. ¹⁶⁴

In September 2021, freelance journalist and LGBT+ activist Avaz Hafizli was beaten by local security guards while covering a story about a newly opened restaurant. Hafizli was also targeted the same month in a video by blogger Sevinj Huseynova who openly called for violence against him as well as other members of Azerbaijan's transgender community. Hafizli was killed by his cousin in February 2022 due to his sexual orientation. ¹⁶⁵

Harassment is also prevalent in Azerbaijan's online environment. In March 2022, two groups—one on Instagram, the other on Telegram—were reported to the

respective platforms for targeting members of the LGBT+ community and spreading hate and violence.

In the past, several women activists and journalists experienced harassment or had personal photos of them leaked on the internet, including a spate of attacks around International Women's Day. **166**

The government also uses travel bans to stymie prominent critics, and authorities pressure lawyers who represent defendants in freedom-of-expression cases. **167**

In order to suppress dissidents in exile, the government regularly intimidates dissidents' relatives who remain in Azerbaijan. In May 2022, Tural Sadigli, an exiled blogger and the founder of online news channel Azad Soz, accused the Azerbaijani government of sending four men to kill him at his home in Germany for his work exposing corruption in President Ilham Aliyev's administration. Previously, Sadigli had also reported that Azad Soz's YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok accounts were subjected to targeted content removal requests. **168**

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack?

0/3

Opposition news websites and activists continued to be targeted by cyberattacks, ranging from distributed denial of services (DDoS) attacks to spear-phishing attempts that are believed to be state-sponsored.

In June 2022, after the coverage period, Ali Karimli, the leader of the APFP (see A3 and C6), said the online YouTube channel where he was invited to speak was subject to cyberattacks. As a result, the channel, Toplum TV, had to stop the live broadcast halfway through. **169**

In April 2022, Meta reported that a network linked to the Ministry of Internal Affairs had employed compromised websites and malware in an effort to obtain personal information about a range of targets including activists, opposition figures, and journalists. The campaign operated across several platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube (see B5). **170**

Between February and March 2022, there was an uptick in the number of digital attacks targeting civil society activists. Beginning in February 2022, political activist Abulfaz Gurbanli lost access to his Gmail and Facebook accounts. In addition to denying Gurbanli access to his accounts, the attacker managed to delete all of the content on the multiple Facebook pages run by the activist.

Gurbanli was among scores of civil society activists whose phones were targeted by Pegasus last year. In February, Gurbanli noticed that his mobile device was remotely reset while connected to a charger, causing him to lose access to his accounts, including the Google authenticator app. Gurbanli also was subject to a phishing attack. A forensic investigation carried out by Azerbaijan Internet Watch and Qurium showed that the link in the message sent to Gurbanli via WhatsApp contained a virus—a RAR compressed file in Google Drive that deployed a malware that enabled a backdoor into the user's device. Gurbanli was targeted shortly after a progovernment media outlet accused him of organizing color revolutions in Azerbaijan. **171**

Hackers also attempted to compromise the Facebook and Telegram accounts of two lawyers. According to one of the lawyers, his mobile device received numerous calls and text messages from unknown numbers during the month of February. An attempt to hack into the Facebook account of feminist activist Narmin Shahmarzade was also documented. **172**

In November 2021, independent online television channel Toplum TV had its Facebook page hacked. Hackers deleted video content, page likes, and changed the name of the page. The page was eventually recovered. In September 2021, Toplum TV's Facebook page lost 16,000 followers. Attempts to get the platform to respond to the incident reportedly went unanswered. **173**

In September 2021, veteran political activist Tofig Yagublu's Facebook profile was compromised. However, he quickly regained access to his account. The same month, a Facebook account belonging to Naila Balayeva, the editor of online news site Anews.az, was compromised, and the email address and phone number associated with the account were changed. Though Balayeva later regained access to the accounts, she suspects someone else is using the account in tandem, as some of the content she posts continued to be removed. Balayeva has been

targeted previously, including in 2020, when several Facebook pages affiliated with Anews.az were hacked. **174**

Also in September 2021, Azerbaijani academic and economist Gubad Ibadoglu lost access to his Facebook profile and page simultaneously. While he regained access to both accounts, Ibadoglu received a notification informing him that the password reset for his page and profile were made using his own device, signaling the possibility that Ibadoglu's computer was compromised. **175**

In August 2021, another veteran political activist, Isa Gambar, lost access to his Facebook and Instagram accounts, and was unable to regain access for six months. **176**

Also in August, the website of HamamTimes, an online news platform, was hacked, and all of its content was deleted. The outlet later regained access to the website and restored its content. **177**

In July 2021, a number of Azerbaijani civil society activists were targeted in a phishing attack via email. The sender, posing as international human rights NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW), sent an email with an attachment that said, "Human Rights Invoice Form Document – 2021.docx." Qurium Media and Azerbaijan Internet Watch investigated the forensics of the attachment, which showed that the email contained a link to malware capable of recording video through the webcam, executing Windows commands on the backend, and extracting and uploading files from the target's device. **178** A similar email purporting to be from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) encouraged civil society members to apply for a Pegasus Grant. **179**

Footnotes

- 1** "Why Internet is expensive in Azerbaijan? [in Azerbaijani]," Qaynarinfo, September 4, 2019, <https://qaynarinfo.az/az/azerbaycanda-internet-niye-bahadir-sebeb/>; "Ministry: '...It is possible there are complains about internet quality' [in Azerbaijani]," RFE/RL, September 3, 2018, <https://www.azadliq.org/a/nazirlik-internetin-keyfiyy%C9%99til%C9%99-....>
- 2** Economist Impact, "The Inclusive Internet Index: Azerbaijan: Availability: Usage: Internet users," April 2021, <https://theinclusiveinternet.eiu.com/explore/countries/performance/avai...>

- 3 “Global Speeds: Azerbaijan,” Speedtest Global Index, Ookla, accessed August 2022, <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index/azerbaijan#fixed>
- 4 International Telecommunications Union (ITU), “Statistics: Mobile Broadband Subscriptions, Fixed Broadband Subscriptions,” accessed September 2022, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.
- 5 GSMA, “The Mobile Economy, Russia and CIS 2020”, 2020, https://www.gsma.com/mobileeconomy/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/GSMA_Mobi...

More footnotes



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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

9/100 Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

37/100 Not Free

Freedom in the World Status

Not Free

Networks Restricted

Yes

Social Media Blocked

No

Websites Blocked

Yes

Pro-government Commentators

Yes

Users Arrested

Yes

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