

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	310
Land:	Aserbajdsjan
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom on the Net 2021 – Azerbaijan
Udgivet:	21. september 2021
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	19. januar 2022

Document #2060894

Freedom House

Freedom on the Net 2021 - Azerbaijan

NOT FREE

35

/ 100

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LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

38 / 100 Not Free

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free)

Overview

Internet freedom in Azerbaijan deteriorated during the coverage period. The state remains in control of the information and communication technology (ICT) sector, which was evident in its decision to throttle access to the internet and block social media platforms for 46 days during the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Infrastructural challenges, which saw little to no improvement, kept internet connections of low quality and out of reach for many. Those who voice dissent online can expect prosecution if they reside in Azerbaijan, and risk intimidation from authorities and progovernment trolls if abroad. During the coverage period, scores of activists were prosecuted over online criticism of the government's policies, antiwar sentiment, and other activism. Independent journalists continued to face persecution by law enforcement and the State Security Service.

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. Between September 27 and November 10, Azerbaijani and Armenian forces engaged in military operations over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh territory, with the Azerbaijani government ultimately reclaiming control over much of the area previously held by ethnic Armenian forces allied with the government in Yerevan. During the 44-day war, the government of Azerbaijan deliberately cut off access to much of the internet, saying the actions were necessary to prevent the spread of Armenian provocations online. However, government websites and online news platforms affiliated with the government were accessible, aside from a brief disruption.

Key Developments, June 1, 2020 - May 31, 2021

- During the military conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, the government of Azerbaijan disrupted internet access across the country, blocking social media platforms and throttling the internet (see A3 and B1).
- The government used technology from Sandvine, Inc. to prevent the population from live streaming on social media platforms (see B1).
- The most recent internet measurements indicate continuous blocking of key opposition and independent news websites, including 24saat.org, Abzas.net, *Azadliq*, Azadliq Radio (the Azerbaijan language service for RFE/RL), Gununsesi, Kanal 13 TV, and Meydan TV (see B1).
- The government declared martial law on September 27, 2020, with the approval of Parliament, which granted it greater authority to disrupt communications and suspend online media outlets (see A3, B3, and C1).
- Polad Aslanov, editor of the online news websites Press.az and Xeberman, was sentenced to 16 years in jail for “high treason,” purportedly for selling state secrets to Iran (see C3).
- Azerbaijani civil society faced a coordinated digital attack, in which many activists and journalists lost access to their Facebook profiles (see C8).

A Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts**Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet 4 / connections? 6**

Poor ICT infrastructure and state ICT monopolies are key obstacles 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, as well as slow connection speeds.

Although internet speed in Azerbaijan improved over the past year, it continues to lag behind other countries.³ The government’s Strategic Roadmap for Telecommunication and Information Technology Development sought to increase the average fixed-broadband speed to 20 Mbps by 2020,⁴ and according to the internet-metrics company Ookla, this goal was achieved as the average reached 23.6 Mbps in January 2021.⁵ However, in 2019–20 the broadband-research company Cable recorded the mean broadband download speed in Azerbaijan at just 4.89 Mbps.⁶

According to the 2021 Inclusive Internet Index, Azerbaijan is home to 19.3 fixed-broadband internet subscriptions per 100 people, and 107 mobile-phone subscriptions per 100 people.⁷

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.⁸

According to the *Mobile Economy Russia & CIS Report*—released in 2020 by GSMA, a London-based industry group representing mobile operators worldwide—Azerbaijan is expected to join the 5G network by 2023.⁹ In November 2019, Azercell piloted 5G services in Baku’s city center for a short time.¹⁰ In December 2019, Azercell and Sweden-based Ericsson signed a three-year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) planning the joint deployment of 5G projects, trials, and use cases in Azerbaijan. According to the MoU, Azercell plans to extend the pilot zone, offering the service beyond the city center.¹¹ In June 2020, the Ministry for Transportation, Communication, and High Technologies (MTCHT) acknowledged that 5G was not currently in use in Azerbaijan. No further explanation was provided by the ministry about the road map to introduce 5G in Azerbaijan.¹²

Users mainly access the internet via mobile devices, followed by home, work, and Wi-Fi hotspot connections.¹³ In 2017, MTCHT initiated a plan to establish free Wi-Fi hotspots in public parks and around central locations in Baku.¹⁴ In 2019, Wi-Fi hotspots had been installed in some 20 parks.¹⁵ In June 2020, Azerbaijan Railways announced plans to introduce Wi-Fi access on all internal train routes.¹⁶

Users report regular connectivity problems. Some claim 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.¹⁷ Others claim that ISPs intentionally throttle connections in compliance with government requests (see A3).¹⁸ Osman Gunduz of the Azerbaijan Internet Forum noted that bandwidth designated for a single user is often divided and sold to multiple users.¹⁹ He also attributed the lack of fast internet access in the country to the lack of competition.²⁰

Widespread internet blackouts have also occurred every few years in Azerbaijan.

A2 0-3 pts**Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the 1 / population for geographical, social, or other reasons? 3**

Internet access is somewhat expensive relative to monthly incomes, and Azerbaijan continues to lag behind neighboring countries where faster connections are available at comparatively lower costs. Given the extent to which the ICT sector is controlled by the state, the MTCHT—not the market—sets prices.²¹ For example, in May 2019, backbone provider Delta Telecom announced a 70 percent discount on its services, but downstream ISPs did not cut their prices accordingly, on the alleged instructions of the MTCHT.²²

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit’s 2021 Inclusive Internet Index, the monthly cost of a fixed internet connection is 1.7 percent of gross national income (GNI) per capita, while the cost of a mobile data plan offering 1 GB per month is .7 percent of GNI per capita.²³ Price data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) put the monthly cost of a fixed internet connection at 1.54 percent of GNI per capita in 2020, and the cost of a mobile data plan offering 1.5 GB per month at 0.92 percent of GNI per capita that year.²⁴ In 2020, Azerbaijan’s GNI per capita was the equivalent of \$4,450, per the World Bank.²⁵ Official statistics indicate that the average prices of “communications services” and “internet services” increased from 2018 to 2020.²⁶

In Azerbaijan, there is a digital divide in terms of geography. According to the official figures from 2019, household internet access rates were 74.9 percent in rural areas, and 82.7 percent in urban areas.²⁷ Despite government pledges, ICT infrastructure beyond Baku is neglected, and the capital is the overwhelming beneficiary of state investment in ICT.²⁸ The rural-urban divide became even more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic as Azerbaijan adopted distance learning on March 3, 2020. Students, families, and teachers alike complained of inadequate infrastructure, lack of available personal devices at home, and expensive internet.²⁹

According to official figures from 2018, younger people are much more likely to be internet users than older people.³⁰ and wealthier families are much more likely to own computers than poorer families.³¹ Moreover, there is a gendered dimension to inequalities in internet access: the gap between internet use among men and women is 12 percent, according to the 2021 Inclusive Internet Index.³² Low ICT literacy also remains a problem.

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of 3 / restricting connectivity? 6

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 3 because the government throttled access to the internet and blocked access to major social media platforms for 46 days during the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The government exercises control over internet infrastructure. During the coverage period, authorities intentionally restricted connectivity for 46 days, which was Azerbaijan’s longest network disruption to date.

On September 27, the day full-scale war erupted between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh, the 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).³³

The MTCHT did not mention the duration of the outage or which services would be blocked in the country until October 12 when Gunel Gozalova, a spokesperson for the MTCHT, stated that the ministry was restricting the internet “simply to prevent unwanted, unverified, war-related content on social networks” (see B3).³⁴ In a November 11 statement, the MTCHT announced the lifting of restrictions on internet access effective the following day.³⁵ Throughout the 46-day period, Azerbaijani internet providers and telecom companies shared no information on how they intended to handle these government orders. Some companies informed their clients that their websites and mobile applications would not be accessible if a virtual private network (VPN) was in active use on the user’s device.³⁶ During the network disruption, mobile operators and the Special State Security Service encouraged Azerbaijan citizens to refrain from using VPN services at all times when trying to access social media platforms, citing user privacy as a reason.³⁷ There are no restrictions on VPN use in the country otherwise.

Beginning in April 2020, Ali Karimli, leader of the opposition Popular Front party, and his family experienced a prolonged fixed- and mobile-internet outage, which continued through the coverage period.³⁸ The outage appeared to be a targeted, individualized disruption. On January 18, 2021, Karimli and his spouse, Samara Seyidova, said they were taking the case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) after having received no response from domestic courts, but in June 2021 they had yet to hear if the case would be accepted.³⁹

Previous disruptions were reported by opposition activists who complained about connectivity issues in the hours before opposition rallies were set to begin. Residents in the vicinity of these rallies have also experienced connectivity issues for the duration of these events. Local ISPs argue that the disruptions are directly connected to the number and density of users gathered in one place. Technology analyst and current Azerbaijan Internet Forum president Osman Gunduz says this practice is a violation of existing laws and that if a rally is authorized, all relevant actors including government agencies and ISPs, should ensure uninterrupted connectivity.⁴⁰

However, the political opposition is often denied authorization to hold rallies. As a result, unsanctioned rallies are common. Regardless of a rally’s legality, though, the authorities can arbitrarily disrupt connectivity, according to Zohrab Ismayil, director of the Public Association for Assistance to Free Economy, a local nongovernmental organization (NGO). At the government’s request, ISPs will cut off connectivity at any location, as an informal condition of doing business in the country.⁴¹

The MTCHT 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.⁴² President Ilham Aliyev declared martial law for the entire territory of Azerbaijan on September 27, 2020 (see C1), with the approval of Parliament. The designation, which came into effect on September 28, enabled the MTCHT in coordination with military authorities to restrict individuals’ and legal entities’ connection to the general telecommunication networks. It further granted the MTCHT the authority to disconnect telephone lines from the network and suspend provision of internet services for the purpose of meeting the needs of military authorities. Martial law was ultimately lifted on December 11, 2020.⁴³

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.⁴⁴ 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).⁴⁵

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers? 2 / 6

The ICT market in Azerbaijan is fairly concentrated in the hands of the government. The absence of regulatory reform also inhibits the development of the sector, though the government’s Strategic Roadmap for Telecommunication and Information Technology Development calls for the removal of the commercial authority currently exercised by the MTCHT.⁴⁶

The fixed-line broadband market lacks equality between operators. Many ISPs are present in the market, including three state-owned providers: Aztelekom, Baktelecom (BTC), and AzDataCom.⁴⁷ According to the Asian Development Bank, state-owned companies ultimately control about 50 percent of the market.⁴⁸ In addition to being state owned, Aztelekom, the largest ISP operating outside Baku, has ownership ties to the family of President Ilham Aliyev.

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.⁴⁹ Bakcell and Azerfon follow behind, self-reporting 3 million⁵⁰ and 2.3 million⁵¹ subscribers, respectively. Both Azercell and Azerfon are connected to the Aliyev family.⁵² and in 2018, the government formally assumed ownership of Azercell.⁵³ Bakcell is privately held by businessman Nasib Hasanov.

Mobile operators must obtain a technical license from the government in order to do business.⁵⁴ These licenses are issued for a period of 10 years. There is no licensing regime for other ISPs,⁵⁵ but they must register with the MTCHT. If they fail to do so, they will face fines. Some providers have raised concerns with the MTCHT over the lack of transparency in the registration process, as well as the sensitivity of the information they must submit as part of it. The MTCHT claims that registration is carried out in accordance with the law, and has dismissed concerns about improper data retention.⁵⁶

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a 0 / free, fair, and independent manner? **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 MTCHT, whose leadership is beholden to Aliyev. The former Ministry of Communications and High Technologies was dissolved in 2017 and merged with the Ministry of Transport, creating the MTCHT.⁵⁷

Local civil society groups like the Azerbaijan Internet Forum have been critical of the MTCHT’s stewardship of the ICT sector. Osman Gunduz argues that the MTCHT has abused its regulatory and commercial powers to stymie private business, to the detriment of the ICT sector.⁵⁸

B Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, 2 / particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? **6**

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 to reflect the impact of the 46-day blocking of major social media platforms during the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

During the coverage period, the government restricted access to a number of social media sites and it continued to restrict access to additional websites, particularly those associated with the opposition or those that investigate politically sensitive topics such as official corruption.⁵⁹

On September 26, the MTHCT blocked access to Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, LinkedIn, Twitter, Zoom and Skype during the Nagorno-Karabakh war, with the blockage lasting 46 days.⁶⁰ The government justified the action as a means “to prevent unwanted, unverified, war-related content on social networks.”⁶¹ According to reporting from Bloomberg, Sandvine Inc., a Canada-based company backed by a US-based private equity firm, worked with the Azerbaijani government—namely, the government-controlled backbone provider Delta Telecom—to “urgently” install Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) technology to block live streaming to YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. Since at least March 2017, the government has used DPI technology to block websites.⁶²

According to the most recent measurements conducted by the Open Observatory for Network Interference (OONI), at least nine websites present signs of blocking as of April 2021. They include online news sites Azerbaijan Saadi, 24saat.org, Abzas.net, *Azadliq*, Azadliq Radio (the Azerbaijan language service for RFE/RL), Gununesi,⁶³ Kanal 13 TV, Meydan TV, as well as the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP).⁶⁴

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.⁶⁵ 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.”⁶⁶ A ruling in the MTCHT’s favor may legally oblige Facebook and other companies to prevent Azerbaijani users from seeing content from these websites.⁶⁷ 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.

Ahead of the February 2020 snap parliamentary elections, local news website Yuksəliş Naminə was blocked after publishing stories highlighting corruption in the city of Sumgayit.⁶⁸ Reportedly, independent news website Basta, which was previously restricted in July 2018, was also blocked.⁶⁹

In April 2019, a court in Baku upheld a decision to block Meydan TV, which is based in Berlin, Germany. Meydan TV was first blocked in 2017, on the grounds that its stories were “detrimental to the interests of the state.”⁷⁰

In April 2019, the government restricted access to Arqument.az, but it was accessible during the coverage period. The outlet was previously blocked in August 2018,⁷¹ along with Az24saat.org, Monitortv.info, and Xural.com, but it had won a rare reprieve from a judge.⁷² The order to block the websites came after the outlets’ editors refused to take down stories that allegedly defamed public officials.⁷³

Gununesi.info, a website operated by former political prisoner Parviz Hashimli, was previously blocked in August 2018.⁷⁴ Hashimli was stopped that month at the Azerbaijan-Georgia border while traveling with his father. He was informed that he was subject to a travel ban, and police interrogated him over 10 articles published on his website. In August 2019, Hashimli’s travel ban was lifted. In December 2019, Sweden-based NGO Qurium reported that the website remained blocked by means of DPI.⁷⁵

In 2018, Bakcell rolled out a free roaming email service for corporate users, relying on Sandvine’s technology, allowing Bakcell to “get a more detailed view of network traffic,” and “limit malicious or unwanted traffic for subscribers.”⁷⁶ The same year, Qurium media identified that at least one of the internet protocol (IP) addresses engaged in blocking of websites in Azerbaijan was linked to Bestcomp Group, a Baku-based supplier of DPI technology.⁷⁷

Throughout the coverage period, all government websites and online news platforms affiliated with the government were accessible, and their social media accounts as well as Telegram channels worked—aside from a brief disruption during the Nagorno-Karabakh war.⁷⁸

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 2021, the police questioned Elmir Abbasov, an activist with civic movement NIDA, over a Facebook post in which where he criticized President Aliyev over the economy’s dependence on hydrocarbons. Abbasov was told to remove the post, which he did. According to Azerbaijan Internet Watch, another journalist, whose name was withheld to protect their safety, said that they were also told to delete a Facebook post describing an instance of police corruption.⁷⁹

Authorities pressured users to remove online content related to the COVID-19 pandemic that painted the government in an unfavorable light. In March 2020, Amina Mammadova, a reporter for online news website Toplum TV, was questioned by the police sharing a friend’s Facebook post claiming that bribes could be paid to escape pandemic-related quarantine measures. She unshared the post.⁸⁰ Also in March 2020, Facebook user Bakhtiyar Mammadli was forced by the police to remove a post about movement restrictions in Baku that he claimed was a joke.⁸¹ Opposition figure Rza Safarsoy was instructed to remove a Facebook post highlighting the lack of state support for unemployed people during the pandemic in April 2020.⁸² That month, police in the city of Shirvan asked Kanal24.az journalist Ibrahim Vazirov to delete several video reports; they detained him when he refused to do so.⁸³ Similarly, a member of the opposition Azerbaijan Democracy and Welfare Movement was jailed for 15 days after refusing to remove Facebook posts criticizing the government’s response to the pandemic.⁸⁴

In February 2020, graphic designer Rasul Hasanov was detained after sharing a video edited to show Azerbaijani riot police outside the Central Election Commission (CEC) performing a traditional dance (The riot police had been called in to cordon off the CEC’s headquarters as defeated candidates and their supporters gathered outside demanding annulment of the February 2020 snap parliamentary vote). Police removed the video from his Facebook profile against his will as they questioned him. Afterwards, he was released.⁸⁵

In December 2019, rapper Parviz Guluzade (known by his stage name Paster) was sentenced to 30 days in administrative detention shortly after he posted a music video on YouTube for a song mentioning Pasha Bank, which belongs to the president’s two daughters. The video was removed, and Paster served 30 days in administrative detention.⁸⁶ Mehman Huseynov, a popular blogger and former political prisoner, was beaten after staging a protest rally in support of Paster on December 27, 2019.⁸⁷

In May 2019, Ali Mammadov, an Azerbaijani dissident living in Germany, was coerced into deleting antigovernment Facebook posts after Azerbaijani police threatened to detain a family member who was still living in the country.⁸⁸

Content from Azerbaijani users is frequently removed or restricted. Toward the end of 2019, online news websites Arqument.az and Anaxeber.info reported that their websites’ URLs had been banned by Facebook without prior notification; thus, links to these websites could not be shared on the platform. Similarly, Meydan TV, was not notified when photos and videos the outlet shared from protests in Baku in October 2019 were removed from Facebook. Arqument.az and Anaxeber.info’s URLs were later unbanned (Facebook claimed it had banned them by

mistake), while none of Meydan TV’s deleted content was restored.⁸⁹ Similarly, Komanda.az was banned by Facebook without prior notification in May 2020. Following an intervention, the website’s URL was permitted again. The government did not ask Facebook to remove any content in the second half of 2020.⁹⁰

Between July 2020 and December 2020, Twitter received 16 removal requests from the government, complying with 57 percent of them.⁹¹ Google received 9 takedown requests (on defamation, hate speech, fraud, copyright, privacy, and national security grounds from the government in the second half of 2020, and complied with 27.3 percent of them.⁹²

In March 2020, several videos on the YouTube channel of the news outlet Azadliq were blocked in response to falsified takedown requests. Similarly, videos were removed from France-based journalist Natig Adilov’s YouTube channel. The international NGO Access Now helped both parties recover their videos. In December 2019 and January 2020, a YouTube channel run by Shakir Zade, an activist living abroad, was disabled three times by government-backed media outlets that misused the platform’s copyright infringement reporting mechanism.⁹³ In 2019, the government targeted the YouTube channels of AzadSoz and HamamTimes in this way.⁹⁴

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, 1 / or an independent appeals process? 4

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.⁹⁵ There is no meaningful avenue for appeal, and no information on the total number of websites blocked at any given time. Under Article 13.3.6 of the Law on Information, Informatization, and Information Protection, the MTCHT is required to maintain a list of court-approved blocks on websites,⁹⁶ but the ministry is currently in violation of this provision.⁹⁷

During the 46-day throttling of the internet and blocking of social media platforms in 2020, Gunel Gozalova, a spokesperson for the MTCHT, stated that the government had blocked access to these websites “simply to prevent unwanted, unverified, war-related content on social networks,” more than two weeks after the blocking was initiated (see A3).⁹⁸

Additionally, the Martial Law (see A3 and C1), which took effect from September to December 2020, allowed the government to restrict or suspend the activities of mass media, including online media.⁹⁹

In January 2021, President Aliyev signed a decree “on deepening media reforms in the republic of Azerbaijan,” which transferred the authority of the State Support Fund for Mass Media Development to the newly established Azerbaijani Agency for Media Development (AAMD). The AAMD will have the 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). Critics are concerned that the agency could further inhibit the work of independent and opposition media platforms. Under the decree, the government also began drafting a new law on media.¹⁰⁰

Recent legislative changes have further codified the state’s power to compel a website owner to take down certain information. In March 2020, amid the COVID-19 outbreak, the parliament amended the Law on Information, Informatization, and Information Protection to expand the definition of “prohibited information” to encompass false information endangering human life and health, as well as “causing significant property damage; mass violation of public safety; disruption of life support facilities, financial, transport, communications, industrial, energy and social infrastructure facilities; or leading to other socially dangerous consequences.”¹⁰¹

In December 2017, amendments were approved that empower authorities to “restrict access” to “prohibited information” on the internet or otherwise impose fines for distributing such content.¹⁰² In March 2017, the Law on Information, Informatization, and Information Protection was amended to define “prohibited information” 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.¹⁰³ This change also empowered the MTCHT 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.¹⁰⁴ 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.¹⁰⁵

ISPs are immune from intermediary liability. However, they assume liability if they ignore court orders to block specific web resources.¹⁰⁶

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).

In June 2020, speaking at a parliament session, member of the New Azerbaijan Party (YAP), Siyavush Novruz, said Azerbaijan should create its own mechanism to control social media platforms.¹⁰⁷

B4 0-4 pts

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

The long-running government crackdown against independent and opposition media, combined with arrests of online political activists, 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. Mehman Aliyev, the director of Azerbaijan's independent in-country wire service, the Turan Information Agency, says self-censorship is pervasive and comes from fear of retribution.^{[108](#)}

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, which has sometimes proven effective in changing the course of official decision-making (see B8).^{[109](#)}

B5 0-4 pts**Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful 1 / actors to advance a particular political interest? 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, in violation of the Law on Mass Media and the Code of Professional Ethics for Journalists.^{[110](#)} 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, ostensibly written by grateful citizens.^{[111](#)}

Similarly, during the military conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, much of the media landscape in Azerbaijan was dominated by positive coverage of the government and, specifically, the president. Footage widely circulated online both by government sources and government-affiliated media showed destruction of Armenia's military equipment and Azerbaijani soldiers marching in formation, followed by patriotic text, as well as celebrations by viewers in the country and outside.^{[112](#)}

Government officials and institutions, notably the MTCHT, pressure independent and opposition online outlets, editors, and journalists to remove specific content (see B2). Often this content pertains to social grievances or government officials' involvement in illegal activities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, watchdog NGO Reporters Without Borders (RSF) observed that journalists were “under pressure just to use the official information provided by the special COVID-19 unit that the government created.” The NGO also noted that ordinary social media users were warned not to share “fake news.”^{[113](#)}

Progovernment commentators, including automated bots, continue to distort discussions online. For example, an investigation published by the *Guardian* in April 2021 demonstrated how Facebook allowed a troll network linked to YAP, the ruling party, 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 Azerbaijan Popular Front party (APFP).^{[114](#)}

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.^{[115](#)} MikroskopMedia, an online platform based in the Latvian capital, Riga, was targeted in a similar way when it posted content on Facebook that was critical of the Azerbaijan's government.^{[116](#)} In all of these examples, accounts appeared to be Facebook profiles, but were 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.

Such content manipulation efforts were pioneered by the presidential adviser Ali Hasanov, known as the “King of Trolls.” This trend continued even after Hasanov was dismissed from his job in November 2019.^{[117](#)} During snap parliamentary elections held in February 2020, monitors observed that “progovernment bots and trolls were active in comment sections.”^{[118](#)} Prominent activists are often harassed by trolls, as are independent and opposition journalists (see C7).^{[119](#)} A July 2019 report from the Index on Censorship observed that “the comments sections of YouTube videos posted to OsmanqiziTV, MeydanTV, and other critical channels are full of comments from people with fake names and accounts. These comments often contain threats, insults, inane arguments, or praise for the ruling regime.”^{[120](#)}

The AAMD, which was created following a January 2021 decree from President Aliyev, will play an active role in funding the media and “implementing projects that are important for the state and society” (see B3). Critics are concerned that the AAMD will attempt to exert control over the media, just as its predecessor, the State Support Fund for Mass Media Development, did over the last decade.^{[121](#)}

B6 0-3 pts**Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users' ability to publish content 0 / online? 3**

The limits imposed on independent or opposition media make it difficult for them to attract advertising to sustain their work. The 2019 IREX Media Sustainability Index found that most independent or opposition media “do not consider advertising due to existing political pressures.”^{[122](#)} 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.”¹²³

Laws regulating foreign funding of 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 which is convicted of defamation twice in one year.¹²⁴ In 2014, he approved amendments to the Law on Grants that had also limited civil society.¹²⁵ Requirements for receiving grants are now so complicated that they have prevented a number of online outlets from continuing to operate.

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability? 2 / 4

The online information landscape in Azerbaijan lacks diversity, in large part due to the government’s practice of blocking independent news websites. Many outlets that have not been blocked are owned by state entities or by private figures with close ties to government leadership, and they generally produce progovernment content. The existence of these outlets is contingent upon remaining in the leadership’s good graces. For example, after presidential adviser Ali Hasanov fell into disfavor, several progovernment publications linked to him were closed down or transferred to other parties.¹²⁶ The head of the Turan Information Agency, Mehman Aliyev, has observed that Azerbaijan’s independent media have struggled to stay afloat since the 1990s. According to IREX’s 2019 Media Stability Index, “alternative, independent broadcast TV and websites cannot directly air in Azerbaijan.”¹²⁷

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 4 / political and social issues? 6

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.”¹²⁸

Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in Azerbaijan, ordinary users on Facebook and WhatsApp began to demand that the Ministry of Education respond to the growing crisis. Some started an online petition asking the ministry to close schools, which it did; the closures were extended through March 2021.¹²⁹

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. Thanks, in part, to this evidence, results at some 100 precincts were cancelled. However, the CEC still failed to ensure that the overall balloting was fair and transparently conducted.¹³⁰

Connectivity issues, including the 46-day throttling of the internet and blocking of major social media platforms in 2020, hampered efforts by the political opposition to plan rallies and efforts by journalists to cover them (See A3).

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 1 / lacks independence? 6

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because the implementation of martial law for four months in 2020 placed restrictions on online media, as well as due to the general erosion of rights for internet users.

The right to freedom of expression is guaranteed in the constitution,¹³¹ 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 and other fundamental rights, both offline and online.

Amendments to the Law on the Status of the Armed Forces that were approved in 2017 provided additional legal grounds for censorship,¹³² restricting journalists’ ability to report on matters related to the military.¹³³ At the outbreak of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2020, President Ilham Aliyev declared martial law, which granted the government further authority to restrict access to the internet and suspend mass media, including online media. The designation lasted from September to 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 in some cases very heavy sentences, for legitimate speech including criticism of the security forces, president, or other leaders; exposing poor governance or corruption; and

posting information perceived by authorities as antigovernment, such as information about the COVID-19 pandemic counter to the government’s preferred narrative. Authorities also used the pandemic as a pretext to persecute opponents, claiming various opposition figures who are active online had violated quarantine rules or disobeyed police. The lack of an independent judiciary leaves users facing prosecutions for online speech with few realistic avenues for 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.¹³⁴ In 2013, general provisions on defamation and insult were expanded to include criminal liability for online content.¹³⁵ Article 147.1 of the criminal code criminalizes the “dissemination, in...a publicly displayed internet information resource, of knowingly false information discrediting the honor and dignity of a person or damaging his or her reputation.”¹³⁶ Punishments can include 1,000 to 1,500 manat (\$590 to \$880) in fines, 240 to 480 hours of community service, up to one year of corrective labor, or up to six months in jail. According to Article 147.2, falsely “accusing [someone] of having committed a serious or especially serious crime” may result in corrective labor for up to two years or imprisonment for up to three years.¹³⁷

Article 148 of the criminal code similarly criminalizes “deliberate humiliation of the honor and dignity of a person, expressed in an obscene manner...through a publicly displayed internet information resource.”¹³⁸ Punishments can include fines of 300 to 1,000 manat (\$180 to \$590), 240 to 480 hours of community service, up to one year of corrective labor, or imprisonment for up to six months. 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.¹³⁹

Also 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.¹⁴⁰ Falsely accusing the president of “having committed a serious or especially serious crime” online may result in a five-year prison sentence.¹⁴¹ In 2017, the fines associated with these offenses were increased.¹⁴²

Under the code of administrative offenses, individuals, officials, and legal entities can be fined for publishing “prohibited information.”¹⁴³ 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.”¹⁴⁴

Since 2013, the code of administrative offenses has allowed courts to hold individuals in administrative detention for up to 90 days.¹⁴⁵ 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, used “quarantine rules” related to COVID-19 as an excuse to detain journalists and activists, falsely charged members of the political opposition, and detained critics of the military conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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 April 2021, blogger Aslan Gurbanov, who regularly wrote about the Talysh people, was sentenced to seven years in prison¹⁴⁶ on charges of overthrowing the government and incitement of national, religious, and social hatred.¹⁴⁷ Gurbanov was initially arrested in July 2020 and held in pretrial detention for four months.
- In April 2021, the police arrested an individual from Gushchu village after he posted a TikTok accusing the police of taking bribes. He was beaten at the station and placed in administrative detention for ten days.¹⁴⁸
- In March 2021, Elchin Hasanzade, a blogger, and Ibrahim Salamov, an actor and social media activist, were each sentenced to eight months in prison on libel and insult charges under articles 147 and 148 of the criminal code, after criticizing Mingachevir city officials in their posts online.¹⁴⁹
- In March 2021, member of the NIDA civic movement Elmir Abbasov was sentenced to 30 days in administrative detention over a Facebook post that criticized the president (see B2). Abbasov was accused of illegal drug possession, which the activist and his lawyer refuted.¹⁵⁰
- In February 2021, the court denied the appeal of Elchin Mammad, editor of the online opposition newspaper Yukselis Namine, who had been sentenced to four years in prison on theft and illegal possession of weapons charges. Mammad was arrested in March 2020 after publishing a critical report on human rights situation in Azerbaijan. The website has been offline since his arrest. ¹⁵¹

- In February 2021, editor of *anews.az*, Zaur Gambarov, was sentenced to three-and-a-half years on hooliganism charges. Gambarov was accused of throwing a chair at the deputy director of the State Social Protection Fund of Gadabay Region, but he and his family refute the accusation, claiming Gambarov was arrested over his reporting about corruption in Gadabay. In March 2021, the sentence was commuted and instead, Gambarov will serve one year and two months on house arrest. He had already been detained for five months. [152](#)
- In December 2020, freelance journalist Nurlan Gahramanli was questioned at the Baku City Police Department over alleged extortion charges. During the questioning, Gahramanli was accused of blackmailing a man on Instagram. The journalist denied the allegations, saying the government was likely behind the blackmail as they had confiscated his phone during an earlier detention in October. In an official statement, the Interior Ministry denied Gahramanli's claims and said he was questioned due to complaints submitted by “many citizens” who were unhappy about Gahramanli's friendly conversations with Armenians on social media platforms. [153](#)
- 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. [154](#) 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, authorities filed additional charges against him, accusing him of threatening to kill one of his employees. [155](#)
- In November 2020, Afgan Sadygov, a journalist and editor of online news site *Azel TV*, was sentenced to seven years on charges of extortion. Sadygov was arrested in May 2020 after authorities claimed he received a bribe from an official in exchange for withholding a story about the official. NGOs, including the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) have claimed these charges are “fabricated.” [156](#)
- In September 2020, Ikram Rahimov, editor of the online news website *Realik*, was released on parole after he was sentenced to five-and-a-half years in jail in June 2019 when a court found him guilty of extorting individuals by threatening to publish libelous articles about them on his website. [157](#) According to CPJ, the politically motivated sentence was meant to punish Rahimov for an editorial criticizing Azerbaijan's media regulator. [158](#)
- In June 2020, Agdam district court sentenced Anar Mammadov, a journalist and editor of *Criminal.az* website, to one year of correctional labor on charges of insult and slander under articles 147 and 148 of the criminal code for his reporting on the assassination of the mayor of Ganja. The court also ruled that 20 percent of the journalist's income would be withheld by the state. [159](#) Mammadov was also charged with defamation in January 2020 at the behest of Baku-based businesswoman; although these charges were eventually dropped. [160](#)
- In June 2020, Tazakh Miralamli, a journalist with *Azadliq* newspaper, was sentenced to one year of house arrest on hooliganism charges for an altercation with “an alleged blogger” that RSF claimed was working on behalf of authorities in February. Miralamli was previously detained in April 2020 after he interviewed Ali Karimli, the leader of the opposition. [161](#)
- In June 2020, Elshan Teymurov, a prominent TikTok user, was sentenced to two months for drug possession. Teymurov claimed that the sentence came in retaliation for a 2019 YouTube video in which he had recited a verse on police violence, and which circulated again in June 2020 after he had initially removed the video in 2019. [162](#)

According to an independent study conducted by Turan News Agency, *Azerbaijani Media in 2020*, at least 130 incidents against media and journalists were documented in 2020. Though not all related to online journalism, in at least 15 cases, journalists with press credentials were prosecuted for having violated quarantine rules or were prevented from performing their professional activities. [163](#) By the end of May 2020, at least three journalists—Natig Isbatov, Mirshahib Rahiloglu, and Ibrahim Vazirov, all of whom work online—had each served between 25 and 30 days in jail. [164](#) Journalist Saadat Jahangir, who works with opposition newspaper *Azadliq*, was interrogated by police in May 2020. [165](#) Jahangir was previously fined for violating quarantine rules. Sevinc Sadigova, Journalist with *Azel TV*, was detained in April 2020 but released after receiving a warning.

In March 2021, Nicat Ibrahim was sentenced to one year and three months in prison for allegedly spreading coronavirus, which violates Article 139.1.1 of the criminal code concerning the violation of anti-epidemic, sanitary hygienic, or quarantine regime. [166](#) In June 2020, he was held in pretrial detention for three months. On the day of his arrest, Ibrahim had announced on Facebook that he would be traveling to the office of the president, where he would call for Aliyev's resignation.

The government also seized upon the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext for repressing Azerbaijan's political opposition. In a March 2020 speech, President Aliyev vowed to prevent “anti-Azerbaijani forces, the fifth column, and national traitors to take advantage of this situation to commit various provocations.” [167](#) Subsequently, the pace of arrests and prosecutions of individuals affiliated with the political opposition increased.

Dozens of members of the opposition Popular Front party were arrested and detained for their online activities, with some receiving short stints in administrative detention for allegedly violating quarantine measures or disobeying the police. [168](#) In July 2020, member of an opposition Popular Front part Gachay Gafarov was sentenced to 15 days in administrative detention for allegedly disobeying police. Party headquarters refuted the claims, arguing instead that Gafarov was reprimanded for his social media posts in which he was critical of the police. Several other members of

the Popular Front party were detained in in the summer of 2020. In July 2020 Alikhan Rahjabli was detained because of his critical social media posts. Likewise, Faig Rashidov was sentenced to ten days in administrative detention for placing online information otherwise banned according to Article 388.1 of the code of administrative offenses.^{[169](#)}

In June 2020, Ceyhun Mammadli, a member of opposition party Masavat, was fined for disobeying police. Party members believed the allegations were untrue and that Mammadli was fined because of his criticism online.^{[170](#)} A resident of Goychay District, Ahliman Aliyev, was sentenced to 15 days of administrative detention for what he claims was his criticism online of the local officials, including the district head Mehdi Salimzade.^{[171](#)}

The government also targeted critics of the military conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. For example, Giyas Ibrahimov was detained by security services over antiwar statements made online in September 2020, and again in October. Also in October 2020, activist Narmin Shahmarzade was questioned at the state prosecutor’s office over a statement of peace she signed alongside hundreds of other signatories.^{[172](#)} In July 2020, prior to the war, former defense minister Rahim Gaziyeu was held in pretrial detention for four months on the grounds of spreading provocations online with the purpose of weakening the country’s defense capabilities, provoking riots, and making open calls to seize the state power. Gaziyeu was released to house arrest in September 2020.^{[173](#)}

During the 44-day war, the State Security Service also questioned at least five activists over antiwar statements posted online (see C5).^{[174](#)}

In September 2020, several Azerbaijani exiled dissidents popular for their online activism from abroad were formally charged in Azerbaijan with disobeying authorities and calling for mass rallies, and threatened with Interpol search warrants.^{[175](#)}

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.^{[176](#)} Mobile operators are required to limit service to any unregistered devices.

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, authorities gain access to encrypted accounts and devices in practice through intimidation or torture.

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

During the coverage period time, the throttling of the internet also prevented some users from using secure communication apps and VPNs.

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users’ right to privacy? 1 / 6

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.^{[177](#)}

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, ^{[178](#)} 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 May 2020, this system was wound down, but it was later reintroduced when the country’s COVID-19 caseload began to increase.^{[179](#)}

In June 2020, the government rolled out a mandatory health care app called e-TEBIB. Test results for COVID-19 were made available exclusively through e-TEBIB. The app’s user agreement stated that personal data would be retained for a month and then destroyed, but failed to specify the government institutions that can access this data and how long those institutions would store it.^{[180](#)} In July 2020, changes were made to the applications terms and agreements, which stated that personal information may be transferred to third parties only under necessary circumstances and within the existing legal framework—again failing to explicitly specify which government institution would have access to this information.^{[181](#)}

Beyond the scope of this report’s coverage period, in July 2021, a sprawling investigative initiative led by Forbidden Stories, a non-profit that aims to publish journalists facing threats, concluded that the Pegasus software, produced by the Israeli cybersurveillance company NSO Group, had been used against journalists and activists in countries around the world, including Azerbaijan.^{[182](#)} Reporters with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (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 OCCRP’s Khadija Ismayilova, appearing on the list.”^{[183](#)}

In December 2019, a report by the NGO Qurium indicated that the government may be using Find Face facial-recognition technology. In its analysis, Qurium identified an AzerTelecom server running the software.^{[184](#)}

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 users on Facebook.^{[185](#)} 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.^{[186](#)}

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 some \$3 million.^{[187](#)} The government has begun using the equipment’s DPI capabilities (see B1).

In 2015, leaked documents from the Italian surveillance company Hacking Team showed that the Azerbaijani government was a client.^{[188](#)} Citizen Lab had reported in 2014 that the government was using RCS (Remote Control System) spyware sold by Hacking Team.^{[189](#)} RCS allows anyone with access to activate a targeted device’s camera and microphone and to steal videos, photos, documents, contact lists, or emails. It has been used by governments around the world to spy on dissidents.

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.^{[190](#)} 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, 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).^{[191](#)}

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.^{[192](#)} It is not clear whether the law is enforced or respected in practice.

C6 0-6 pts

**Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies 1 /
infringe on users’ right to privacy? 6**

The Ministry of Communications requires all telecommunications companies to make their equipment and facilities available to the State Security Service.^{[193](#)} 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 Popular Front party, began to experience a prolonged fixed and mobile internet outage, which also affected his family (see A3).^{[194](#)} 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, in an interview, member of parliament Zahid Oruc suggested that Karimli simply get a new SIM card.^{[195](#)}

During this time, Karimli’s WhatsApp and Telegram accounts were also reportedly hijacked; Popular Front member Fuad Gahramanli accused Azercell of diverting Karimli’s two-factor authentication codes to progovernment hackers.^{[196](#)} Azercell denied the charge.^{[197](#)}

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. Media law expert Alasgar Mammadli noted that according to Article 39 of the Law on Communication, the service providers are obliged to provide government institutions with any requested subscriber data.^{[198](#)}

C7 0-5 pts

**Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other 2 /
actor in relation to their online activities? 5**

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 April 2021, comedy blogger Fuad Rasulzadeh was beaten after he made a comment mocking a soldier who died during the military conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Rasulzadeh had also recently made satirical comments about the president.^{[199](#)}

In January 2021, Sadar Asgarov, a resident of Mingachevir city, was beaten by police over Facebook posts criticizing local government officials. The Mingachevi police arrived at his door claiming to be from the city’s employment center. Once he left his house, he was beaten by three men and taken to the police station in a van. At the police station, the deputy police chief slapped him, confiscated his phone, and deleted his social media platforms. He was also forced to make an apology, which the police filmed; eventually he was let go after being fined. [200](#)

In November 2020, Latif Mammadov was questioned and threatened as a result of his antiwar activism. The officers grabbed Mammadov by the collar and threatened to kill his parents unless he stopped his online activism. [201](#)

In October 2020, a group of peace activists were targeted online by a Facebook page called Pinochet Airlines over their criticism of the ongoing military action in Nagorno-Karabakh. The page, which was eventually taken down by Facebook, shared pictures of the activists and called for public action against them. On Twitter, some users called for the execution of “no war” activists. [202](#)

During the coverage period, a number of women also experienced harassment or had personal photos of them leaked on the internet, including a spate of attacks around International Women’s Day. In March 2021, Narmin Sharmarzadeh, a prominent activist who had previously been arrested, had her account hacked and the attackers posted pornographic videos. She speculated that the attackers might have been trying to delete a Facebook event she was hosting in support of International Women’s Day. Though the videos were ultimately deleted from Facebook, they were shared on Telegram as well. [203](#) In the same month, an intimate video of Gunel Hasanli, the daughter of opposition figure Jamil Hasanli, was released. Likewise, the sister of blogger Mahammad Mirzali also had an intimate video leaked online in March, which she said pushed her to the brink of suicide. [204](#) In June 2020, Amina Rustamzade, the wife of former political prisoner Ilkin Rustamzade, attempted suicide after being harassed in April 2020 by pseudonymous social media users who shared revealing photos of her on Facebook and Instagram without her consent. Before she attempted suicide, Rustamzade had received a message from a Facebook user who threatened that “what happened earlier will happen again.” [205](#)

The government also uses travel bans to stymie prominent critics, and authorities pressure lawyers who represent defendants in freedom-of-expression cases. [206](#)

In order to suppress dissidents in exile, the government regularly intimidates dissidents’ relatives who remain in Azerbaijan.

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to 0 / widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack? **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 February and March 2021, a number of women activists had their accounts hacked. In February, personal information obtained from hacked accounts belonging to Gulnara Mehdiyeva, one of the founders of the feminist movement in Azerbaijan, were leaked to discredit her ahead of International Women’s Day 2021. [207](#) In March 2021, Narmin Sharmarzadeh, also had her Facebook account hacked (see C7). Azerbaijan Internet Watch traced an IP address linked to these attacks to the Ministry of Interior and the MTCHT. Additionally, Azerbaijan Internet Watch speculated that the telecommunications companies could have been complicit because many of those who experienced hacks had set up two-factor authentication, but did not receive SMS messages when their accounts were breached. [208](#) In March 2020, ahead of International Women’s Day, members of a feminist movement and LGBT+ rights activists, including Mehdiyeva, were targeted in the aftermath of an unsanctioned rally organized to mark the day. Her social media accounts, email, and Telegram app were hacked. Additionally, the attacker removed her from several women’s rights-oriented Facebook pages she was administering. The Facebook groups were also compromised, suspended, or deactivated. Minority Magazine, Azerbaijan’s first digital magazine focusing on LGBT+ rights, and Nefes LGBT Azerbaijan Alliance were also targeted. Both groups lost years’ worth of content as a result. [209](#)

In September 2020, a Facebook page affiliated with Bastinfo.com, an opposition online news platform, was hacked. The page lost approximately 5,000 followers and content shared since 2017. [210](#)

In September 2020, Rustam Ismayilbeyli, an activist advocating for fair education in Azerbaijan, was blackmailed online. Ismayilbeyli was arrested earlier in July for protesting outside the Ministry of Education and sentenced to 15 days of administrative detention. His social media accounts, email, and cloud were compromised during his time in detention. He also received two messages via Facebook from accounts posing as a State Security Service employee. The message stated unless he cooperated with the authorities, they would leak personal information and intimate pictures of him and his girlfriend. The same month, Ismayilbeyli reported an attempted break-in to his Telegram account, but it was not compromised. [211](#)

In June 2020, numerous figures in Azerbaijani civil society were targeted in an apparently coordinated digital attack. Targets included human rights lawyer Intigam Aliyev, the opposition group D18, freelance journalist Aysel Umudova, student activist Rustam Ismayilbeyli, and freelance journalist Fatima Movlamli, all of whom said their Facebook pages had been attacked. In September 2020, Nigar Hezi, an opposition activist, also experienced a break-in attempt into her Facebook profile. [212](#)

In June 2020, Berlin-based Meydan TV had its social media account targeted, ultimately losing two years’ worth of content on Facebook and two months’ worth of content on Instagram.²¹³ In the same month, online news outlet Arqument.az had its Facebook page hacked. As a result, the page lost 12,000 followers, and all its posts on the platform through March 2020 were removed.²¹⁴

For three days in May 2020, the website of Turan News Agency was subject to DDoS attacks.²¹⁵

In May 2020, four videos from a private Zoom call among members of the opposition National Council were leaked online.²¹⁶ In each of the videos, various members of the National Council criticized certain opposition groups and voiced antigay insults about one US-based Azerbaijani journalist.²¹⁷ The call’s participants described the leaks as a cybercrime, alluding to the use of NSO Group’s Pegasus software, and demanding a full investigation. Azerbaijani officials dismissed the allegations.²¹⁸

In January 2020, perpetrators targeted Azerbaijani civil society in a coordinated phishing attack. At the time, Qurium traced the malware to the same entity behind a DDoS attack on the online news website Criminal.az.²¹⁹ At least two online news websites, Azadliq and HamamTimes, were targeted with WeTransfer links.²²⁰ On January 11, 2020, a larger group of civil society figures received WeTransfer links purportedly from Roberto Fasino, a Council of Europe official, containing malware. The actor behind these phishing attempts appeared to be using Facebook as a vector for infecting targets.

Footnotes

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ecoi.net summary:

Report on digital media and
internet freedom (reporting period
June 2020 - May 2021)

Country:

Azerbaijan

Source:

[Freedom House](#)

Original link:

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-net/2021>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

21 September 2021

Document ID:

2060894

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

