

# 2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Azerbaijan

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Azerbaijan during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest and detention; transnational repression against individuals in another country; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, censorship, and serious restrictions on internet freedom; prohibiting independent trade unions or significant or systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association; and the significant presence of any of the worst forms of child labor.

The government did not take credible steps or action to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses. There was no reported progress on government investigations of alleged abuses committed by armed forces or individuals during hostilities in 2020.

Section 1.

## Life

### a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year. There were isolated reports of killings of incarcerated individuals by security officials, including police and prison guards.

Media reported Elvin Iskandarov died while in police custody in the city of Sumgait during the night of June 14-15. The victim's family alleged Iskandarov was killed by security officials inside City Police Station Number One and claimed there were numerous visible injuries on his body. His brothers, who were reportedly with him in overnight police custody, alleged they were beaten by officers along with Elvin. They claimed police officers struck the victim on the head multiple times and witnessed his condition deteriorate due to blows that caused him to fall to the ground. On July 18, in a response to a media inquiry, the Ministry of Internal Affairs claimed Iskandarov died from natural causes, specifically cirrhosis of the liver and a heart attack.

### b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

### c. War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity, and Evidence of Acts that May Constitute Genocide, or Conflict-Related Abuses

Complaints submitted by the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan to the European Court of Human Rights alleging the other side committed atrocities during 2016-20 fighting awaited the court's ruling, as did the Armenian government's claims regarding September 2022 fighting.

According to government officials, as of November 1, since 2020, 70 individuals died and 311 were injured by land mines in areas previously controlled by Armenian forces. Of the dead, 54 were civilians.

Work continued under the State Commission on Prisoners of War, Hostages, and Missing Persons to locate mass graves associated with previous rounds of fighting in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. As of December, officials reported having found the remains of at least 27 Azerbaijanis during the year in areas previously controlled by ethnic Armenian forces.

In a June 5 report that covered incidents since 2019, the UN Committee against Torture expressed concern regarding “reports of severe and grave violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law committed by Azerbaijani military forces against prisoners of war and other protected persons of Armenian ethnic or national origin.”

On September 27, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions, and the special rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of nonrecurrence publicized a joint communication they had submitted to the government on July 29 expressing concern regarding the alleged enforced disappearance of 23 Armenian soldiers and one civilian following their captivity by Azerbaijani forces in Zangilan in 2020. The government did not respond during the year.

On November 11, Freedom House published a report alleging the government acted upon a comprehensive, methodically implemented strategy to empty Nagorno-Karabakh of its ethnic Armenian population between 2020 and 2023, subjecting the population in Nagorno-Karabakh to attacks, intimidation, deprivation of basic rights and adequate living conditions, and forced displacement. The report recommended parties “continue pursuing international legal avenues to seek accountability measures and remedies...includ[ing] ongoing efforts at the International Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights.” According to media reports, only 15 ethnic Armenian residents remained in Nagorno-Karabakh as of October 24. The government permitted the International Committee of the Red Cross to complete monthly welfare checks on these residents. Caucasus Heritage Watch reported on the destruction of cultural heritage sites, including the St. John the Baptist Church and the Ghazanchetsots Cemetery in Shusha. A report by researchers, investigators, and citizen-journalists’ organization Bellingcat from September showed satellite and social media images from Khankendi of numerous high piles of debris from what it alleged were ransacked apartment buildings and civilian homes.

Section 2.

## Liberty

### a. Freedom of the Press

While the constitution and law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, and specifically prohibited press censorship, the government habitually violated these rights. The government limited freedom of expression and media independence. Journalists, editors, and independent bloggers faced intimidation and at times were beaten and imprisoned. In addition, there were suspicious acts of violence against individuals associated with the press and other media outside the country. The government imposed restrictions on journalists

under the media law, and authorities pressured media outlets, journalists, bloggers, and activists in the country and in exile, as well as their relatives, to refrain from criticizing the government.

There were significant restrictions on freedom of expression in the country. The government repressed or attempted to intimidate persons it considered political opponents or critics. Observers noted the incarceration of such persons raised concerns regarding authorities' abuse of the judicial system to punish dissent.

### **Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure**

Journalists, due to their reporting, were subjected to violence, harassment or intimidation by authorities or those acting on behalf of authorities, both online and offline. Police occasionally used force and other methods against journalists and bloggers to prevent their professional activities and limit press freedom. Throughout the year, government-owned and progovernment outlets dominated broadcast and print media. A limited number of independent and semi-independent media outlets operating solely online – and often inaccessible for internet users in the country due to government blocking – expressed a wider variety of views on government policies, but authorities pressured, harassed, or detained representatives of many of them in various ways for doing so. Local observers reported journalists from independent media outlets were subjected to harassment and cyberattacks. Independent media continued to call on the government to conduct an effective investigation of the high-profile 2005 killing of journalist Elmar Huseynov.

The government routinely arrested independent journalists, especially those critical of government officials or investigating corruption. Sevinj Vagifgizi, editor in chief of *Abzas Media*, was detained in November 2023 and charged with smuggling foreign funds. Observers asserted she was targeted because of her anti-corruption investigations. During her detention, Vagifgizi was reportedly prevented from speaking to her family allegedly because she reported to media the abuse and violence against other women in the Baku Pretrial Detention Center Number One on June 7. On September 7, the government extended the pretrial detention of six journalists, including Vagifgizi, who were charged with currency smuggling in connection with a judicial case against *Abzas Media*, emblematic of a broader crackdown on independent media. As of year's end, Vagifgizi remained in prison.

Between November 2023 and November, authorities arrested at least 40 independent journalists and civil society activists. There were credible reports of physical abuse of journalists and civil society activists in custody.

### **Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups**

Most media outlets practiced self-censorship and avoided topics considered politically sensitive due to fear of government retaliation. The National Radio and Television Council required local, privately owned television and radio stations to not rebroadcast complete news programs of foreign origin. Foreign radio stations were generally banned from direct broadcast.

Banned since 2009, most foreign media outlets remained prohibited from broadcasting on FM radio frequencies. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), whose website had been blocked since 2017, faced two criminal charges for alleged tax violations from 2014 and criminal defamation charges from 2017. In contrast, the Russian service Sputnik, also originally prohibited from broadcasting in 2009, was allowed to freely broadcast news.

Authorities exerted pressure on major media rights organizations and independent media outlets outside the country, as well as on individuals in the country associated with those outlets. Blocking of press websites, restricted visas, and outright bans for journalists critical of the country's human rights record continued for foreign outlets and foreign journalists.

The government, including the Media Development Agency, imposed controls on media, particularly through the implementation of the 2022 media law. Under the law, in order to register, journalists were required to have higher education, a work contract with a registered outlet, and no criminal record. Outlets were required to have an Azerbaijani founder, submit a complete list of employees, and publish at least 20 daily articles. Most local media outlets relied on the patronage of individuals close to the government or the Media Development Agency for income. Those not benefiting from such support experienced financial difficulties, such as problems paying wages, taxes, and periodic court fines.

The government used civil and criminal laws to restrict public discussion and retaliate against journalists, critics, and political opponents. Libel and slander were criminal offenses. The law provided for substantial fines and up to three years' imprisonment for persons convicted of libel or slander. Conviction of insulting the president was punishable by up to two years' corrective labor or up to three years' imprisonment. Libel and slander laws were routinely used to silence government critics, including accredited journalists and bloggers.

On August 9, authorities criminally charged opposition Popular Front Party chairperson Ali Karimli, charges critics asserted were based on fabricated accusations intended to weaken the party and stifle political opposition. Karimli maintained these charges were part of a broader effort to silence dissent and remove key figures challenging the government's control.

International news websites and independent websites critical of the government were blocked during the year; many had been blocked for several years. Authorities blocked the websites of RFE/RL; the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project; domestic media outlets including *Abzas*, *Azadliq*, *Toplum*, *Bastainfo*, *Criminal*, *Top Xeber*, *Fia*, *Monitortv*, *Xural*, *Az24saat*, *Anaxaber*, *Gununsesi*, and *Argument.az*; and the Germany-based media outlet Meydan TV.

Activists asserted authorities conducted cyberattacks and used other measures and proxies to disrupt internet television programs.

The government required internet service providers to be licensed and to have formal agreements with the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and High Technologies and imposed criminal penalties for certain types of content online.

The government monitored internet communications of civil society activists. Activists reported being harassed by police and forced to delete critical Facebook posts under threat of physical abuse. Activists were frequently questioned, detained, and sentenced to administrative detention for posting criticism of government actions and commenting on human rights abuses online.

International organizations and domestic observers asserted the government used bots or trolls to manipulate social media discourse. Those accounts believed to be coordinated by the government pressured internet platforms and tech companies to restrict content and often harassed and intimidated online users critical of government policy.

Freedom House's annual *Freedom on the Net* survey asserted that internet freedom in the country "plummeted further" due to widespread arrests of activists and independent journalists, increased self-censorship, and government manipulation of the information space. It also noted the government blocked numerous independent and opposition websites, forced activists to remove content, rejected the applications of several independent media outlets to join the media registry during implementation of the 2022 media law, and prosecuted activists for online criticism of the government.

## **b. Worker Rights**

### **Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining**

The law provided for the right of workers to form and join independent trade unions and engage in collective bargaining, provided an organization had at least seven employees. Uniformed military, police, and managerial staff were prohibited from joining unions. Virtually all unions were members of the government-affiliated Azerbaijan Trade Unions Confederation (ATUC). ATUC unions covered the majority of public-sector entities, and workers were required to contribute 1 to 2 percent of their salaries for union dues. Many workers asserted ATUC unions did little to protect workers' interests or negotiate on their behalf, and that many workers were not aware of ATUC-negotiated collective bargaining agreements. Few independent trade unions existed outside ATUC, and those that did were unable to register with the government.

Collective bargaining agreements were often treated as formalities and were not enforced. Although labor law applied to all workers and enterprises, the government could negotiate bilateral agreements that effectively exempted multinational enterprises from worker protections. Production-sharing agreements in the oil and gas sector superseded domestic law and often did not include provisions for employee participation in a trade union. While the law prohibited employers from impeding the collective bargaining process, employers allegedly engaged in activities that undercut the effectiveness of collective bargaining, such as subcontracting and using short-term employment agreements. Employers frequently relied on one-year contracts, which left employees vulnerable and less willing to advocate for their rights.

The law provided most private-sector workers the right to conduct legal strikes but prohibited civil servants from striking. The law prohibited antiunion discrimination against trade unions and labor activists and required the reinstatement of workers fired for union activity. The law also prohibited retribution against strikers, such as dismissal or replacement. Striking workers convicted of disrupting public transportation, however, could be sentenced to up to three years in prison.

There were no legal restrictions on freedom of association or collective bargaining. The government did not effectively enforce laws related to freedom of association, the right to strike, or collective bargaining. Penalties for violations were less than those under other laws involving denial of civil rights. Penalties were rarely applied against violators. Administrative and judicial procedures were subject to lengthy delays and appeals. Both local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) claimed workers in most industries were largely unaware of their rights and afraid of retribution if they exercised those rights or initiated complaints. This was especially true for workers in the public sector.

Labor activists and workers attempting to organize on behalf of independent contractors, particularly food delivery workers, faced harassment. Government authorities did not investigate allegations of harassment or hold perpetrators accountable. Labor activists from the independent Trade Union Confederation Workers Desk, including Afiyaddin Mammadov, Mohyaddin Orujov, Aykhan Israfilov, and Elvin Mustafayev, remained imprisoned since an August 2023 food delivery workers' strike. On January 31, Elvin Mustafayev was sentenced to three years' imprisonment, while the others remained in pretrial detention, awaiting court verdicts as of November 5. According to certain NGOs, authorities brought unrelated criminal charges against these individuals to suppress their activism and silence dissent within the labor movement.

## **Forced or Compulsory Labor**

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## **Acceptable Work Conditions**

### **Wage and Hour Laws**

The law provided for a minimum wage for all sectors. The national minimum wage was higher than the poverty income level (minimum living standard).

The law provided for a 40-hour workweek. Workers in hazardous occupations could not work more than 36 hours per week. International companies generally provided premium compensation for overtime. There was no prohibition on excessive compulsory overtime. Employer abuse of wage, hour, and overtime laws was reportedly widespread, including accounts of employees paid for contractually stipulated eight-hour workdays but allegedly forced to work as many as 15 hours.

### **Occupational Safety and Health**

Occupational safety and health (OSH) standards were generally appropriate for the main industries. The owner or employer of a business was responsible for complying with workplace safety and health standards. Employers reportedly were known to ignore them. The government responded to workers' OSH complaints but did not proactively identify unsafe conditions. Workers could not remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardy to their employment. Failure to provide acceptable conditions of work in the construction and oil and gas sectors, particularly employers' failure to provide appropriate protective and safety equipment, was a problem.

### **Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement**

The government did not effectively enforce minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. The Ministry of Labor and Social Protection was responsible for enforcing minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. Penalties for violations were less than those for similar crimes such as fraud or negligence. Penalties were sometimes applied if the government became aware of a violation. The number of inspectors was insufficient to enforce compliance, and inspectors did not have the authority to conduct onsite inspections, whether routine or unannounced. Inspectors could conduct desk reviews of labor law compliance in response to complaints and initiate sanctions for violations detected through this process. The government began a moratorium on scheduled and unannounced labor inspections in 2015 to combat corruption and stimulate business, which continued through the year. Although inspectors were permitted to request information from employers and employees to investigate complaints, complaint response often did not include worksite inspections. The government acted to prevent violations against vulnerable groups in the same manner it responded to violations against other segments of the population. Inspectors did not maintain confidentiality during an investigation, leaving workers who filed complaints vulnerable to retaliation by their employer.

Local human rights groups, including the Oil Workers' Rights Defense Organization, an NGO dedicated to protecting worker rights in the petroleum sector, asserted employers, particularly foreign oil companies, did not always treat foreign and domestic workers equally. Domestic employees of foreign oil companies reportedly often received lower pay and allegedly worked without contracts or private health-care insurance. Some domestic employees of foreign oil companies reported violations of labor law, noting nonpayment for overtime work and vacations.

According to most estimates, the informal sector accounted for 30 to 40 percent of the economy, especially in the service and construction sectors. Informal workers were covered by wage, hour, and OSH laws and inspections, although these laws were commonly ignored.

## **c. Disappearance and Abduction**

### **Disappearance**

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, approximately 4,000 Azerbaijanis and 1,000 Armenians remained unaccounted for since the 1990s due to conflicts. The State Committee on the Captive and Missing reported 3,959 Azerbaijanis were registered as missing as a result of fighting in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the 1990s, as well as six service members missing from 2020 fighting.

### **Prolonged Detention without Charges**

Although the law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of persons to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court, the government generally did not observe these requirements.

According to the law, detainees were required to appear before a judge within 48 hours of arrest and be charged with a crime. This right was respected. The judge could release the detainee or issue a warrant placing the detainee either in pretrial detention or under house arrest. Authorities at times detained individuals for longer than 48 hours without warrants. The initial 48-hour arrest period could be extended to 96 hours under extenuating circumstances. During pretrial detention or house arrest, the Prosecutor General's Office was required to complete its investigation. Pretrial detention was limited to three months but could be extended by a judge up to 18 months, depending on the alleged crime and the needs of the investigation. There were reports of detainees not being informed promptly of the charges against them.

Local human rights organizations reported authorities often made arrests based on spurious charges. Police periodically detained opposition and other activists on administrative charges, such as insubordination to police, and subsequently took them to local courts where judges convicted and sentenced them to periods of administrative detention ranging from 10 to 30 days. Local and international NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch criticized the government for arresting individuals exercising their fundamental rights and noted authorities frequently fabricated charges against those individuals. Lengthy pretrial detention was a significant problem, particularly in cases involving political figures and activists who claimed it was used as a tool for political repression. Detainees often faced prolonged detention periods, sometimes equaling or even exceeding the maximum possible term of 18 months. Several factors contributed to delays in bringing cases to trial or release, including slow judicial processes and the government's use of politically motivated charges and pretrial detention as a means to suppress dissent.

Repeated extension of pretrial detentions and delayed court trials were common. Sometimes authorities claimed to have evidence of crimes early in proceedings but later failed to produce such evidence. Defendants, lawyers, and families complained investigations never occurred.

While the law provided for access to an attorney from the time of detention, there were numerous reports authorities frequently denied detainees prompt access to a defense attorney of their choice in both politically motivated and routine cases. The law provided detained individuals the right to contact relatives and have a confidential meeting with their lawyers immediately following detention. Authorities occasionally restricted visits and withheld information regarding detainees. Suspects were occasionally detained incommunicado. Days sometimes passed before families could obtain information regarding detained relatives.

In one notable example, in December 2023, prominent opposition leader and government critic Tofiq Yagublu was arrested on charges of fraud, falsification, and illegal production of official documents. NGOs asserted his arrest was arbitrary due to a lack of substantial evidence. According to these NGOs, Yagublu was detained without proper judicial authorization, held for an extended period before being formally charged, and faced restricted access to legal counsel. Yagublu's family noted he was held incommunicado for significant periods, preventing contact with his family and legal representatives. Yagublu remained detained at year's end.

### **d. Violations in Religious Freedom**

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

## e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3.

# Security of the Person

## a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

While the constitution and criminal code prohibited such practices and provided for penalties of up to 10 years' imprisonment, there were multiple credible allegations of torture and other abuses. Most mistreatment took place while detainees were in police custody, where authorities reportedly used abusive methods to coerce confessions. Authorities reportedly denied detainees timely access to family, independent lawyers, or independent medical care.

In a June 5 report titled *Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Azerbaijan*, the UN Committee against Torture stated it was "alarmed by widespread and persistent reports of the routine use of torture and mistreatment in the State party, most notably by members of the State Security Service and by personnel of the Main Department for Combating Organized Crime of the Ministry of Internal Affairs." The UN committee further reported that "detained individuals appear to be frequently beaten by law enforcement officials with the aim of extracting confessions... allegations include the use of electric shocks, beatings on the soles of the feet (falaka), binding with ropes in contorted positions, simulated suffocation, extraction of fingernails, and sexual violence as a means of torture."

The July 3 publication of a 2022 report by the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) on the country raised concerns regarding allegations of severe acts of mistreatment and torture by police officers. In conjunction with the report's release, a statement by the CPT noted authorities refused to cooperate with the committee. The report stated torture and other forms of physical mistreatment by police and other law enforcement agencies, corruption in the entire law enforcement system, and impunity were systemic and endemic. During the year, observers reported the government took no action in response to the CPT reports on visits the CPT conducted to the country in 2020 and 2022.

During the year there were numerous credible allegations of mistreatment and abuse conducted by authorities at the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Main Department for Combating Organized Crime, at district police stations, and at detention facilities of the penitentiary service.

Ulvi Hasanli, editor in chief of the domestic independent media outlet *Abzas Media*, claimed he witnessed and documented instances of abuse of prisoners and corruption at Baku Detention Center Number One during his year of detention ending in November. His report alleged various forms of mistreatment, including severe physical beatings of inmates with truncheons and wooden sticks, the hanging of prisoners from iron bars, the handcuffing of prisoners in painful positions, and verbal abuse. He stated detainees routinely faced threats of reprisals against relatives and further criminal prosecution. Hasanli asserted conditions in the detention center were "degrading and inhuman." Hasanli's wife, Rubaba Gulyeva, asserted on October 4 that he was subjected to inhuman treatment after publishing his report. She detailed several incidents, including a September 7 encounter when a prison guard allegedly struck and slammed him against the wall while he tried to greet his

detained colleague, Sevinj Vagifgizi. During a September 13 meeting with his wife, Hasanli reportedly displayed bruises on his back.

Impunity for abuse was a significant problem in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Penitentiary Service.

According to the Armenian government, Azerbaijan held 23 ethnic Armenians in various detention facilities, including eight detainees who were former “officials” from Nagorno-Karabakh. On June 13, an international human rights lawyer for one of the detainees submitted an appeal to the UN special rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment alleging denial of water for more than two days, being forced to stand for “extended periods of time,” being subjected to sleep deprivation, and lack of access to his lawyer, among other abuses during his April hunger strike. On December 11, RFE/RL quoted the lawyer as stating authorities had denied him permission to visit the country to see his client.

## **b. Protection of Children**

### **Child Labor**

See the Department of Labor’s *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

### **Child Marriage**

Child marriage was a problem. The legal minimum age for marriage was 18. The law established substantial fines or imprisonment for up to four years for the crime of forced marriage with an underage child. The government enforced the law effectively. In addition to civil marriages, there were religious marriage contracts which were not recognized by the state. Women who married under the terms of religious marriage contracts were not subject to government oversight and were not entitled to recognition of status in case of divorce.

Throughout the year, the State Committee for Family, Women, and Children Affairs organized events for the prevention of early marriages. A number of local NGOs were active in raising awareness and provided support to women from vulnerable groups, especially those in rural areas.

## **c. Protection to Refugees**

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers as well as other persons of concern.

### **Provision of First Asylum**

The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had a system for providing protection to refugees.

## **d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement**

A 2020 Stanford University and Hebrew University of Jerusalem joint study estimated there were 7,200 to 20,000 Jews in the country, while Jewish community leaders estimated the number as between 15,000 to more than 25,000.

There were no reports of antisemitic incidents.

## **e. Instances of Transnational Repression**

There were reports the government engaged in acts of transnational repression.

### **Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, or Violence or Threats of Violence**

There were credible allegations the government used violence or threats of violence against individuals in other countries as politically motivated reprisal. Human rights groups alleged the government used paid “trolls” on social media platforms to threaten exiled activists with physical violence, as well as to send threatening electronic messages.

Masked individuals fatally attacked Vidadi Iskandarov, a prominent political emigrant, in his apartment in Mulhouse, France. They stabbed him multiple times, leading to his death on October 2. On October 3, Amnesty International urged French authorities to consider all possible motives for his killing, including his criticism of the Azerbaijani government, and emphasized the need to protect exiled activists from such violent acts and ensure that those responsible were brought to justice in fair trials.

### **Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, or Coercion**

There were indications the government might have engaged in politically motivated surveillance outside the country. There were reports dissidents and journalists who lived outside the country suffered digital harassment. Family members who remained in the country alleged they were often subjected to intimidation.

### **Misuse of International Law Enforcement Tools**

There were credible reports the government misused or attempted to misuse international law enforcement tools for politically motivated purposes against specific individuals located outside the country.

On July 17, Afgan Sadigov, a self-exiled Azerbaijani journalist, was prevented from traveling from Tbilisi to Turkey with his family and was reportedly told by Georgian authorities that he could travel only to Azerbaijan. Georgian authorities arrested him on August 4 based on a request from Azerbaijan, where he was wanted for alleged “extortion” and issuing “threats.” On August 5, Amnesty International publicly urged Georgia not to extradite him to Azerbaijan, citing concerns regarding human rights violations including torture, arbitrary incarceration, and an unfair trial. Sadigov was previously arrested in 2020 on extortion charges and sentenced to seven years in prison. He was released by presidential pardon after serving two years and 15 days. In December 2023, Sadigov travelled to Georgia for medical treatment and decided to stay after his family members in Azerbaijan allegedly received threats by law enforcement authorities. At year’s end, Sadigov remained wanted in Azerbaijan.