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Country:	Azerbaijan
Year:	2017
Status:	Partly Free
Total Score:	58 (0 = Best, 100 = Worst)
Obstacles to Access:	13 (0 = Best, 25 = Worst)
Limits on Content:	20 (0 = Best, 35 = Worst)
Violations of User Rights:	25 (0 = Best, 40 = Worst)
Population:	9.8 million
Internet Penetration:	78.2 percent
Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:	Yes
Political/Social Content Blocked:	Yes
Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:	Yes
Press Freedom Status:	Not Free

Key Developments, June 2016-May 2017

- New legislation passed giving authorities wide discretion to block content online, and was swiftly used to block several independent online media outlets (See **Blocking and Filtering**).
- Azerbaijani human rights defenders were targeted in a spearphishing campaign, in attempts to install malware on their devices and track their online activity (see **Technical Attacks**)
- Multiple online journalists and social media users were detained for their online activity, with sentences of up to ten years in jail (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activity**)

Introduction:

Internet freedom declined in Azerbaijan in the past year after the government introduced new laws empowering authorities to block content in broad circumstances, while actors likely tied to the government targeted activists with malware attacks.

Authoritarian President Ilham Aliyev consolidated power in a constitutional referendum held in September 2016, while Azerbaijan's economy remained weak amid falling oil prices. The space for free expression online continued to shrink, with several independent online news outlets newly blocked. In a break from precedent, authorities were open about the censorship, relying on new legislation that gives authorities wide discretion to block content. Some of the same independent news websites were subject to sustained denial-of-service attacks prior to their blocking, likely initiated by a government ministry.

Many digital journalists and social media users faced legal sanctions for their activities online, and at least one activist was handed down a ten-year prison sentence for his Facebook posts. Authorities pressured exiled activists to cease their online activities by detaining and threatening relatives residing in Azerbaijan. Activists were also targeted with spearphishing attacks intended to compromise their digital security and privacy, likely initiated by the government.

Despite these limitations, the internet offered more opportunities for information-sharing and political dissent than traditional media outlets, many of which shut down or moved online as print publications were pressured to follow the government line. Azerbaijan netizens rely on Facebook as an important platform for publishing corruption investigations and discussion on the ongoing government clampdown, as well as daily grievances.

Obstacles to Access:

Internet access remains expensive for much of the population, with Azerbaijan lagging behind its neighbors on indicators such as internet speed and affordability. Temporary internet blackouts occur periodically, often due to problems with DeltaTelecom's infrastructure. Users continued experiencing difficulties with making international calls using platforms such as Skype and WhatsApp.

Availability and Ease of Access

Poor telecom infrastructure along with low information and communications technology (ICT) literacy, expensive computer equipment, and high tariffs for satellite connections remain key obstacles to ensuring greater internet access across the country. Internet in Azerbaijan remains expensive, though this does not translate into better quality or faster connections.

Osman Gunduz, head of the Azerbaijan Internet Forum, cites Azerbaijan's underdeveloped infrastructure as a key obstacle towards attaining greater access and higher connection speeds.^[1] The vast majority of connections in Azerbaijan are based on ADSL, with Wi-Fi, WiMAX, 3G, and 4G just starting to become widespread. Government efforts to upgrade the infrastructure through its "Fiber to Home" project have been slow. Internet access remains expensive relative to monthly incomes, and Azerbaijan continues to lag behind Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and other neighboring countries, where connections are available at comparatively low cost.

However, the average cost of mobile internet service has dropped significantly since 2011. By 2014, prices for mobile broadband were among the lowest in Central Asia. Despite this progress, the average household in Azerbaijan's lower income bracket (the bottom 40 percent of the total population by income) would need to spend 21 percent of their monthly disposable income to afford the cheapest mobile broadband package, and 28 percent for the cheapest fixed broadband package.

According to a recent survey, nearly 70 percent of households own a computer, though computer ownership is higher in urban areas than in rural areas. The majority of internet access takes place at home, followed by work places, internet cafes, and Wi-Fi spots.^[2] In early 2017, the Ministry of

Communications and High Technologies followed through with a plan to roll out more free Wi-Fi spots in public areas around central locations in Baku.^[3]

Restrictions on Connectivity

The Ministry of Transport, Communication, and High Technologies (MTCHT) holds significant shares in a handful of leading internet service providers (ISPs), and the government is authorized to instruct companies to cut internet service under very broadly defined circumstances, including war, emergency situations, and national disasters. Wholesale access to international gateways is maintained by companies with close ties to the government. Only two operators, AzerTelecom and Delta Telecom, are licensed to connect international IP traffic.

Delta Telecom owns the internet backbone and is the main distributor of traffic to other ISPs. It controls Azerbaijan's only Internet Exchange Point (IXP), and charges the same amount for local and international traffic. The company is a transit operator of Azerbaijan's segment of the Europe Persia Express Gateway (EPEC) and has external fiber-optic connections with Russia (via TransTelecom) and Turkey (via RosTelecom). AzerTelecom has a fiber-optic cable network covering all major regions, including the autonomous republic of Nakhchivan.

Temporary internet blackouts have occurred every few years in Azerbaijan. On August 2, 2016, some users experienced problems establishing an internet connection for several hours. The outage was variously reported as a result of problems with Delta-Telecom's infrastructure or as a result of debts owed by smaller providers to Delta Telecom.^[4] Previously, Azerbaijan experienced a nationwide internet blackout lasting six hours in November 2015, which the MCHT said was caused by fire damage to a Delta Telecom data center cable.^[5] Akamai reported that traffic dropped below 10 percent during the outage, and connectivity remained poor for four days.^[6]

Users have continued reporting problems with making and receiving international voice calls on WhatsApp, Facebook, and Skype. Neither the government nor ISPs have provided a satisfactory explanation as to why these services are limited.^[7]

ICT Market

The ICT market in Azerbaijan is fairly concentrated. The fixed broadband market is still in its emerging phase, with little equality between operators. The lack of regulatory reform also inhibits development of the sector. Over 50 ISPs are present in the market, including three state-owned providers: AzTelekomnet, BakInternet and Azdatakom. State-owned companies ultimately control over 56 percent of the market.^[8]

The market base is split along geographical lines, with BTCPA (Baku Telephone Communications Production Association) serving the capital. AzTelekomnet, the largest ISP operating outside Baku, has ownership ties to the MTCHT; its shareholders include Azerfon, which has links to the president's daughters.

Azercell is still the leading mobile service provider despite its overall market share falling from 50 percent to 40 percent. Bakcell and Azerfon follow behind, maintaining a steady market share of 33 and 25 percent respectively. Like Azerfon, Azercell has been found to have connections with President Aliyev's daughters.

Regulatory Bodies

The government of Azerbaijan has a major role in controlling the ICT sector through state-owned companies and government institutions. ISPs are regulated by the newly reformed Ministry of

Transport, Communication, and High Technologies (MTCHT), which lacks independence. The former Ministry of Communications and High Technologies (MCHT), was dissolved in February 2017 and merged with the Ministry of Transport, creating the MTCHT.^[9]

Limits on Content:

Several independent online outlets were newly blocked during this coverage period, after recent legislative amendments empowered authorities to block content without first obtaining a court order. Trolls are active online, and targeted digital outlets in the lead-up to the constitutional referendum.

Blocking and Filtering

In previous years, the government refrained from extensive blocking or filtering of online content, relying on legal, economic, and social pressures to discourage critical media coverage or political activism. The past year, however, saw more websites restricted.

In May 2017, authorities blocked the websites of *Azadliq* (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Azerbaijan), *Azadliq Daily*, *Meydan TV*, *Turan TV*, and *Azerbaijani Saadi*. A court in Baku upheld the blocking, finding that the outlets promoted violence, hatred, or extremism, violated privacy or constituted slander." Shortly before the outlets were blocked, *Azadliq* had published reports investigating the financial affairs of President Ilham Aliyev and his inner circle.^[10]

The blockings came after the parliament passed legislative amendments to the law on Information, Informatization, and Protection of Information in March 2017. The amendments allow the authorities to block access to a website if it contains prohibited information posing a danger to the state or society, and when the website owner failed to remove the content within eight hours of receiving notification (see "Content Removal"). Court approval is not required before blocking a website, but must be sought after the fact. Observers have noted that the courts are not independent and are unlikely to provide a genuine oversight mechanism.^[11]

The state prosecutor claimed that the blocked websites posed a threat to Azerbaijan's national security. Some of the websites affected by the court order were inaccessible as of March 2017,^[12] and an investigation by VirtualRoad, a secure hosting service, indicated that Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) was used to interfere with access to the sites during that period.^[13] Critical online news outlet *Abzas* was also blocked in March 2017, though no explanation was offered by the authorities.^[14]

Some of the websites affected by the court order were also subject to throttling between November and December 2016. *Azadliq* (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Azerbaijan), *Voice of America*, and *Meydan TV* all reported loading and speed issues during this period. VirtualRoad's investigation confirmed that these websites had been subject to artificially engineered bandwidth throttling on six separate occasions between November and December 2016.^[15]

The government continued targeting outlets that expose corruption within the ruling family. In September 2017, authorities blocked access to the website of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) after the organization published a damning report, "The Azerbaijan Laundromat," implicating the government in various money laundering and lobbying schemes.^[16]

Decisions to block websites are arbitrary, clearly targeting independent outlets that are critical of the government. There is no genuine avenue for appeal, and no information on the total number of websites blocked or throttled at any given time.

Content Removal

While authorities previously relied on pressure tactics to ensure the removal of unwanted content, recent legislative amendments have codified the state's power to compel a website owner to take down certain information.

Amendments to the law on Information, Informatization, and Protection of Information compel website owners to take down "prohibited information" if warned by authorities. If the authorities deem that the content poses a danger to state or society and the website owner fails to comply with the order within eight hours, a government representative can immediately block the website. This process was applied to the five websites ordered blocked in May 2017 (see "Blocking and Filtering").^[17]

Authorities continued using threats and pressure to force the removal of content. After exiled rapper Jamal Ali posted a song on YouTube fiercely critical of the authorities in December 2016, quickly going viral with over 100,000 views, Ali's close family members still residing in Azerbaijan were arrested. The police threatened the family that unless Ali took down the video, members of his extended family would lose their jobs and face arrest. Ali ultimately took down the video, fearing further repercussions for his family.^[18]

In the wake of the failed July 2016 coup attempt in regional ally Turkey, and subsequent accusations against Gulenist actors of masterminding the coup, the authorities cracked down on Gulenist associations across Azerbaijan, including shutting down the Gulen-linked Zaman Azerbaijan newspaper and associated news website.^[19]

Content revealing personal information without consent may be subject to removal under Articles 5.7 and 7.2 of the Law on Personal Data. 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.

Media, Diversity and Content Manipulation

The ongoing government crackdown against independent and opposition media outlets – in addition to arrests of online activists – has significantly limited the space for free expression in Azerbaijan. Some online journalists, commentators, and ordinary internet users have resorted to self-censorship, especially if they are employed by state media outlets or progovernment platforms. Others have left the country out of fear of persecution.

Though social media such as Facebook and blogging platforms provide a platform for free expression, the ability of online bloggers and activists to produce and disseminate controversial content online is undermined by government pressure. Self-censorship is pervasive among social media users, who are aware that they may face criminal charges for their expression online. Rahim Hajiyevev, former editor-in-chief of the now-defunct opposition newspaper *Azadliq*, has said that the number people who have faced arrest for their activities online discourages social media users from expressing themselves freely.^[20]

The vast majority of existing online media outlets publish news in favor of the government due to the owners' strong ties to government officials. The head of Turan Information Agency, Mehman Aliyev, has said that Azerbaijan's independent media has struggled to stay afloat since the 1990s. According to Aliyev, the majority of media outlets in Azerbaijan are government-controlled and government-funded. Many outlets spread state propaganda, in violation of the Law on Mass Media and the Journalism Code of Ethics.^[21] Yet in January 2016, the Prosecutor's office issued a warning that it was monitoring internet-based outlets, and several had violated the mass media law

by sharing incorrect information on nationwide protests following a currency devaluation.^[22] The limits imposed on independent or opposition media outlets make it difficult for them to attract advertising to sustain their work. Companies are reluctant to support them for fear of losing their business license or other reprisals from the government.

Laws regulating foreign funding of NGOs have made it easier for the government to target local organizations and media outlets that receive grants from outside sources. In February 2014, President Aliyev approved amendments to the law on grants, further limiting civil society. In February 2015, Aliyev signed amendments to the mass media law that allow courts to order the closure of any media outlet that receives foreign funding or that is convicted of defamation twice in one year. Requirements for receiving grants are now so complicated that they prevented a number of online media outlets from continuing their work. *Mediaforum*, Obyektiv TV, Channel 13, and *Zerkalo/Ayna* have all ceased operations because of the new restrictions. The past year saw the closure of remaining independent media outlets like the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Azerbaijani service and the websites of local non-governmental organizations.

Commercial pressures separately resulted in the closure of online news and tabloid outlets in 2015, including three websites operated by APA Holding (*kulis.az*, *ailem.az*, and *avtolent.az*), and three from the Daily Telegraph group (*kult.az*, *izvestiya.az*, and *tabloid.az*). These closures were not political in nature, but they illustrate the financial pressures affecting online media.^[23]

Political trolling continues to distort discussions online, mostly led by the ruling party's youth group operating in networks online. A leak revealed messages exchanged between members of the youth group coordinating an ambush ahead of the constitutional referendum of September 2016, which was heavily criticized by civil society as a step towards strengthening the power of the president.^[24] Members of the group chat encouraged one another to target the comment sections of independent outlets such as *Meydan TV*, which was live streaming protests against the referendum, while also urging members not to mention details that would give them away as affiliated with Yeni Azerbaijan, the ruling party.^[25]

Digital Activism

Activists continue to use social media platforms to disseminate information and organize campaigns, though the impact is fairly limited.

After two young activists were sentenced to ten years in jail in October 2016 for spraying graffiti on a statue of the late President Heydar Aliyev, the activist community launched an online poster campaign calling for their release. Supporters from all around Azerbaijan and the world posted photos of themselves holding posters raising awareness of the sentencing and calling for the activists' release.^[26]

Violations of User Rights:

Authorities continue to prosecute and arrest online activists and journalists as a means of stifling dissent and activism, and target remaining independent online media outlets with bogus criminal charges. The families of exiled dissidents were arrested in attempt to pressure their relatives to cease their online activity. Law enforcement have broad powers to conduct surveillance, and can often proceed without obtaining a court order.

Legal Environment

While the right to freedom of expression is guaranteed in the constitution and Azerbaijan is a signatory to binding international agreements, including the International Covenant for Civil and

Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights, the government frequently fails to protect the right to freedom of expression, both offline and online.

Libel is the most common criminal charge used against journalists, and the Azerbaijani courts have previously confirmed that libel laws apply to social media.^[27] In November 2016, two legislative amendments came into force increasing penalties for online defamation and insult. Article 148(1) of the Criminal Code imposes a maximum penalty of one year in prison for posting slander or insult while using a fake identity on an internet information resource. Article 323(1) introduces a maximum penalty of three years in prison for smearing or humiliating the honor and dignity of the president in mass media, which includes social media.^[28] Aggravated defamation carries a maximum penalty of up to three years in prison. Furthermore, it is now possible for the Prosecutor and the Ministry of Interior to initiate an investigation based on content posted on Facebook.

Recent legislative amendments increased the maximum duration of administrative detentions from 15 days to 3 months. Administrative detentions, which can be issued for charges such as disorderly conduct, have been used to punish activists and journalists.

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Online activists and journalists are most often prosecuted based on trumped up charges, including drug possession, hooliganism, and, more recently, treason, tax evasion, abuse of authority, and embezzlement. Many administrators, editors of online news outlets, and bloggers in Azerbaijan remain in jail for their online reporting. In some cases, authorities have also harassed activists' family members.

The following activists and journalists were charged, investigated, arrested, or sentenced during the coverage period for their online activities:

- On May 2, 2017, Aziz Garashoglu, manager of an online TV channel Kanal 13, was arrested and sentenced to 30 days of administrative detention for resisting police, an offence under article 535.1 of the Administrative Code.^[29]
- Afghan Sadigov, editor-in-chief of online news TV portal Azel.tv, was sentenced in January 2017 to two-and-a-half years in prison for hooliganism. Sadigov had been reporting on poor infrastructure in the Jalilabad region of Azerbaijan prior to his arrest, and insists that the charges were orchestrated to punish him for his critical reporting.^[30]
- Amid heightened police activity in the village of Nardaran around the one-year anniversary of the clashes between law enforcement and residents resulting in four civilian deaths, Facebook user Faig Shahbazov was detained on November 26, 2016 for publishing critical posts about local authorities. Shahbazov was sentenced to 30 days administrative arrest,^[31] though additional charges were later brought for illegal arms possession.^[32]
- Zamin Haji, a journalist with the opposition newspaper *Yeni Musavat*, was summoned to a Baku police station in November 2016 over a Facebook post in which he condemned the authorities' failure to solve four prominent murder cases, including the murders of journalist Elmar Huseynov in 2005, and writer Rafiq Tagi in 2011. Haji was advised to cease publishing such posts, and was released after questioning.^[33]
- Fuad Gahramanli, deputy chair of the Whole Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, was sentenced to ten years in prison in January 2017 for his Facebook posts in which he criticized the government and condemned the November 2015 crackdown in Nardaran.^[34] Gahramanli

was charged under Article 281 of the Criminal Code (making antigovernment statements) and 283 (instilling national, religious, and racial hatred). Furthermore, those who "liked" his posts were called in to testify. On March 15, 2016, Gahramanli was further charged with inciting mass disorder (Article 220.2).

- Teymur Kerimov, a journalist working for the Kanal 13 website, was detained in Barda in November 2016. Kerimov had been working on a report on water supply problems in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. After ten hours of interrogation, Kerimov was released.^[35]
- Editor-in-chief of online news outlet *Realliq*, Ikram Rahimov, was sentenced to one year in prison in November 2016. Rahimov had been charged with libel after publishing stories in the opposition news website *Hurriyet* alleging extortion by city officials and tax evasion by a local mall.^[36] Rahimov was released on March 1, 2017, and his sentence was replaced with 9 months of community work.^[37]
- In March 2017, blogger and journalist Mehman Huseynov was sentenced to two years in prison for committing slander against police officers. The charges refer to Huseynov's earlier arrest in January 2017, after which he said that police beat and mistreated him (see "Intimidation and Violence"). Huseynov has been repeatedly targeted by authorities over the years for his critical reporting, documenting corruption and other abuses by the authorities. Huseynov was also the editor-in-chief of SANCAQ, an online socio-political magazine with around 300,000 followers.^[38]
- Rahim Valiyev, a youth activist member of the NIDA civic movement, was detained in January 2017. Police instructed Valiyev to delete his Facebook posts that criticized a speech delivered by President Ilham Aliyev's on the topic of economic development in Azerbaijan. After Valiyev declined to comply, he was sentenced to 30 days administrative arrest, and was released on February 15, 2017.^[39]
- The authorities have increasingly targeted activists living in exile by detaining their family members still residing in Azerbaijan. In February 2017, twelve family members of Ordukhan Teymurkhan, an Azerbaijani blogger living in Europe, were detained by local police on vague hooliganism charges. On the same day, Teymurkhan had participated in a protest in Cologne calling for the release of political prisoners. After his family members were arrested, Teymurkhan received a call from Azerbaijani police, informing him of the arrests and demanding that he remove his Facebook account and cease his political activities in exchange for his relatives' release. Most relatives were released the following day, though two were held in administrative detention for 30 days. It is unclear whether Teymurkhan ultimately removed his Facebook page.^[40]

Several bloggers, online journalists, and social media users remain in imprisoned from previous years, serving lengthy prison sentences.

- Araz Guliyev, former editor and writer for the religious website *Xeber44*, is serving an eight year sentence after being arrested in 2012 and convicted of various offences including insulting the national flag of Azerbaijan and inciting religious and ethnic hatred.^[41] Guliyev's lawyer stated in October 2017 that his client had been tortured in prison.
- Ilkin Rustamzade is serving an eight year sentence for hooliganism and inciting a riot after participating in a "Harlem Shake" YouTube video. Rustamzade was arrested in 2013 and was known for his criticism of the government through the Free Youth Organization.^[42]

- Nijat Aliyev remains in prison after being arrested in 2012, serving a ten year sentence for drug possession and illegal distribution of religious material. Aliyev was the editor-in-chief of news website *Azadxeber* ("free news").^[43]
- Rashad Ramazanov is currently serving a nine year prison sentence after being arrested in May 2013 on drug charges. Ramazanov had worked as a blogger and activist who frequently criticized the government online.^[44]

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

It is unclear to what extent security agencies monitor ICT activity or track user data in Azerbaijan, though the experience of activists and bloggers who are detained by the authorities suggests that extensive online surveillance is highly likely. Most internet users do not have licenses for the software on their computers, which leaves them vulnerable to security threats such as viruses and other malicious programs that could be implanted to monitor their activity.

While the law explicitly prohibits the arbitrary invasion of privacy, and court orders are required for the surveillance of private communications, the Law on Operative-Search Activity (Article 10, Section IV) authorizes law enforcement agencies to conduct surveillance without a court order in cases regarded as necessary "to prevent serious crimes against the person or especially dangerous crimes against the state." The unclear parameters for what constitutes preventive action leaves the law open to abuse. As such, it has long been believed that the Ministry of National Security and Ministry of Internal Affairs monitor the phone and internet communications of certain individuals, especially foreigners, known activists, and business figures.

Rashid Hajili, the director of the Media Rights Institute, reports that the internet is heavily monitored by the government. The Ministry of Communications requires all telecom companies to make available their equipment and special facilities to the National Security Service (formerly Ministry of National Security). Mobile companies are known to surrender the content of users' phone conversations without a court order. For example, a mobile phone operator provided the Ministry of Investigation with journalist Parviz Hashimli's communications, resulting in a prison sentence.^[45] He was released in a March 2016 prisoner amnesty.

In February 2014, Citizen Lab reported that Azerbaijan, along with 20 other governments, is suspected of using RCS (Remote Control System) spyware sold by the intelligence technology and surveillance company Hacking Team. RCS spyware allows anyone with access to activate a computer's webcam and microphone and steal videos, documents, contact lists, emails, or photos. The spyware has been used by governments around the world to spy on dissidents. In July 2015, leaked documents from Hacking Team revealed that the government of Azerbaijan was also a client.

All mobile phones in Azerbaijan must be registered, including the SIM card, phone serial number, and mobile network number. This requirement was introduced by the Cabinet of Ministers in December 2011 – without parliamentary approval. Mobile service providers are required to limit service to any unregistered devices.

In August 2015, MCHT said it will require some social media and instant messaging services, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype, and Viber, to obtain a license in order to operate in Azerbaijan, though it appears that little progress has been made towards enforcing this.

The personal data law regulates the collection, processing, and protection of personal data (name, surname, patronymic, date of birth, racial or ethnic background, religion, family, health and

criminal record), the formation of the section of personal data in the national information space, as well as issues related to the cross-border transfer of personal data.

Intimidation and Violence

Most harassment against online activists manifests in the form of arrests, detentions, and interrogations. The government of Azerbaijan also uses travel bans against activists and human rights defenders, as in the case of Mehman Huseynov.^[46] Physical attacks and threats of violence against internet users have also become increasingly common in Azerbaijan.

In early 2017, Afgan Mukhtarli, an exiled Azerbaijani journalist who had previously worked for online outlet Meydan TV, was abducted from Georgia by unknown kidnappers, forcibly brought across the border into Azerbaijan, and severely beaten.^[47]

Independent blogger Mehman Huseynov says he was tortured by unknown assailants who later transpired to be plain-clothed policemen. Huseynov says the men forcibly pushed him into a car in January 2017, placing a bag over his head, and driving him around for several hours. According to Huseynov, he received electric shocks while in the car, and later lost consciousness after arriving at the police station. Huseynov was charged with disobeying police, though the court ordered his release after issuing a small fine.^[48]

Emin Mili, the founder of Meydan TV, received death threats from Azerbaijan's Minister of Youth and Sport in relation to his website's critical coverage of the European Games.^[49] Freelance journalists reporting for Meydan TV from within Azerbaijan have also faced harassment by authorities. In September 2015, Meydan TV reporters Izolda Aghayeva, Natiq Javadli, and Javid Abdullayev were questioned by the Serious Crimes Investigation Department of the General Prosecutor's Office regarding their coverage of protests in Mingachevir the previous month. However, the majority of the questioning concerned the activities of Meydan TV.^[50]

Independent journalists and activists are often the targets of intimidation campaigns involving the use of illicitly obtained intimate footage and images, as was famously the case with investigative journalist, Khadija Ismayilova.^[51] In June 2016, Arastun Orujlu, an employee of the Ministry of National Security claimed that the former Minister of National Security was in possession of over 2,500 sex videos depicting Azerbaijani men and women.^[52]

Technical Attacks

Opposition news websites continued to be subject to cyberattacks, resulting in temporary shutdowns. Individual activists have been targeted in spearphishing attacks, the purpose of which was to gain access to their personal information.

A March 2017 Amnesty report reveals that many activists and human rights defenders were the targets of spearphishing attacks, with strong indications that these attacks came from the government. Rasul Jafarov, lawyer and human rights defender, reported that his colleagues received emails from an address that strongly resembled his own around October 2016. The emails contained an attachment that appeared consistent with Jafarov's work, titled "The Political Prisoner List," though, once opened, the attachment would infect the recipient's computer with crude malware intended to gather as much information as possible from the recipient's device. In a similar tactic, fake Facebook accounts purporting to belong to well-known Azerbaijani dissidents targeted the Facebook pages of critical outlets. In one such case, the administrator online outlet Kanal 13's Facebook page opened an attachment sent via Facebook messenger purporting to be a draft article written by writer Saday Shekerli. Once the attachment was downloaded, the attacker was able to gain access to the Facebook administrator's private communications for approximately

a week. Additionally, several activists received a fake email purportedly from the US embassy, which contained similar malware. Other activists, including human rights defender Elshan Hasanov, have reported that their social media accounts were hacked, taken over, and used to spread messages to contacts.^[53]

Several independent online outlets, including *Abzas* and *Azadliq*, were targeted with denial-of-service attacks in January 2017. *Abzas* was forced offline for five days until the website was migrated to VirtualRoad's secure hosting infrastructure. Forensic investigations conducted by VirtualRoad indicate that the attack originated from the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and High Technologies.^[54]

Notes:

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2 Ministry of Communications and High Technologies, "Azərbaycan hər 100 nəfərə düşən internet istifadəçilərinin sayına görə dünya orta göstəricisini 1.8 dəfə qabaqlayır," [Azerbaijan above average for number of internet users per 100 people by 1.8] June 15, 2015,

3 "First 'Public WiFi' hotspot given to use on Boulevard", ICTnews.az, March 18, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2rR2iDY>

4 "What is happening on Azerbaijan's Internet", Sputnik.az, August 2, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2qT3CJ9>; "What is happening on Azerbaijan's Internet", xeberler.az, August 4, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2qe6uNB>.

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8 Azerbaijan Republic Ministry of Communications and High Technologies, ISPs list, <http://bit.ly/2qSPz6x>.

9 "Azerbaijan sets up a Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies", apa.az, February 13, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2qhyz5T>

10 "Azerbaijani court orders block on RFE/RL website," *RFE/RL*, May 12, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-rferl-service-website-court-orders-blocked/28482679.html>.

11 ; IFRS, "Government blocks access to azadliq.info and azadliq.org websites in Azerbaijan" March 27, 2017, <https://www.irfs.org/news-feed/government-blocks-access-to-azadliq-info-and-azadliq-org-websites-in-azerbaijan/>; RSF "Online censorship rounds off Aliyev's control of Azerbaijani media" May 3, 2017, <https://rsf.org/en/news/online-censorship-rounds-aliyevs-control-azerbaijani-media>.

12 "Azerbaijan: government escalates hacking campaign against dissidents," *Eurasianet*, March 30, 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/83041>.

13 "Deep Packet Inspection and Internet censorship in Azerbaijan," Qurium, April 1, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2qSV3hw>

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